

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**  
**FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**School of Humanities**

**Contesting Voices: Authenticity, Performance and Identity  
in Contemporary British Poetry**

by

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ABSTRACT  
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This thesis examines the importance attributed to voice in contemporary British poetics. It considers how self-reflexive engagements with voice negotiate prominent debates about form, politics, and identity. Focusing on the work of nine poets from the 1970s to the twenty-first century, the thesis contests the lingering critical dichotomy between an avant-garde attack of the unified lyric voice and literary expressions of marginalised voices. It argues that while a formally disruptive aesthetic often aims to complicate representation and the idea of a stable identity, this does not prevent it from expressing silenced histories and unofficial voices effectively.

Analysing the different investments made in voice both as a trope and as a technology of the text, the thesis proposes a more complex relation between voice and experimentalism than is sometimes assumed in existing critical narratives. While voice is a much invoked term, its precise meanings and implications to different poets remains under-theorised. A consideration of these meanings foregrounds the diversity of poetic practices and critiques inherent in contemporary innovative work. Poetic engagements with voice as a signifier for authoriality, authenticity and selfhood, alongside the more literal voice of performance are all examined, and these are framed within shifting narratives of Britishness. The thesis argues that the intense preoccupation with the meanings of voice is partly a poetic response to new forms of political power and an articulation of changing models of gendered, sexual, class, and diasporic identities in Britain over the last three decades. It also suggests that thematic and formal explorations of voice are a way of assessing the current status and communicative potential of poetry, and of proposing new ways of claiming a public.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, VICTORIA SHEPPARD, declare that the thesis entitled  
Contesting Voices: Authenticity, Performance and Identity in Contemporary British Poetry  
and the work presented in it are my own. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission

Signed: 

Date: 17 / 01 / 07

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## Introduction – Contesting Voice(s)

Writing in 1991, Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson distinguished between two radical impulses within contemporary poetry. Recent decades, they claimed, had seen the emergence of ‘a poetry of emotion, confession, plain speech, lived experience, recrimination’, a poetry which represents ‘the experience and anger ... of those whom the system marginalises.’ This is differentiated from another emergent poetic practice, that of ‘defamiliarisation which is calculated to frustrate the demand for communication’, a practice which explores ‘new ways of making language *resist*’. The difference between these poetries, both of which are opposed to the language of power, is conceived in terms of voice. The former represents ‘a poetry of the marginalised voice’, while the latter, ‘a poetry, which, by injecting the principles of the margin *into* the voice, torques or fractures the ‘sayable’ irremediably.’<sup>1</sup>

Easthope and Thompson here make explicit a division that has dominated accounts of contemporary British poetry. On the one hand is a poetry concerned with identity, which uses a relatively straightforward, realist aesthetic to demand the right to representation within the public space of the literary realm. On the other is a poetry more concerned with a politics of language and of representation itself than with the politics of identity, and which uses a formally disruptive aesthetic to explore the relation between language and ideology. While voice is used as a positive metonym for identity in the first type of poetry, it becomes something of a target in the critique of the unified expressive self in the second.

This PhD argues for the instability of this distinction between expressive and experimental poetries. It focuses on the relation between literary form and identity in contemporary British poetry, and the role of self-reflexive explorations of voice in configuring this. It analyses some of the diverse and overlapping ways in which recent poetry has engaged with voice, and argues that these moments serve to undermine rather than reinforce the expressive-experimental divide. Examining a range of poetry from the 1970s to the present day, my thesis considers how far different investments in voice are

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson ‘Afterword’ in Easthope and Thompson eds., *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 209-210



rather than transcending a concern with national culture, respond to changing notions of Britishness. In doing so it draws on cultural studies which have analysed shifts in British identity politics, alongside those which have examined the rise of the new right in the seventies and eighties and the racial and sexual politics of conservative populist discourse. My thesis uses this critical work to consider some of the ways in which national narratives have shaped the formal choices as well as the content of contemporary poetry. Michael Billig's theory of 'banal nationalism' is important for showing how national identity is not only articulated through the explicit 'waved flag' but also 'embedded in routines of life' and 'routinely familiar habits of language'; I want to suggest that it is often through linguistic, syntactic and other formal details that this poetry subtly responds to and critiques certain constructions of national identity.<sup>3</sup>

Starting with collections published in the mid 1970s, and ending with poetry and performances from the twenty-first century, this study centres upon the work of nine British-based poets. The chapters are arranged thematically so that each focuses on different understandings or association of voice, which include authoriality, interiority, authenticity, and orality. The relationship between voice, formal experimentation and identity is a continual thread throughout. It considers collections by Allen Fisher, Peter Reading, Iain Sinclair, Wendy Mulford, Denise Riley, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Akure Wall, Maggie O'Sullivan and Caroline Bergvall. While several of these poets are associated with the avant-gardism of what Eric Mottram labelled 'the British poetry revival' of the sixties and seventies, others, including Johnson, Reading, Wall and Bergvall are located within somewhat different poetic communities.<sup>4</sup> This particular selection of poets aims to demonstrate something of the diversity of experimental practices within contemporary British poetry. Rather than seeing it as part of a unified, monadic tradition, my thesis argues for a broader understanding of innovation in contemporary poetry, one that encompasses a range of different formalisms.

As well as a response to changes in national discourses, I also want to suggest that anxieties over the textual voice register an uncertainty about poetry's publics. Most of the

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 39, p. 93

<sup>4</sup> Eric Mottram 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75' in Peter Barry and Robert Hampson eds., *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 15-50 and Gillian Allnut, Fred D'Aguiar, Ken Edwards and Eric Mottram eds., *The New British Poetry 1968-1988* (London: Paladin, 1989)



poets considered here are self-conscious of poetry's potential marginalisation as a cultural force and resist its designation as a largely intimate art, a genre which, since the nineteenth century, has been gradually 'lyricized'.<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary poets attempt to develop new modes of authorial expression, and reflect on its relation to other cultural forms as a way of staking a claim for the relevance of poetry as a wider public force. As a result, an additional thread running through the works considered in this study is a rejection of poetry as a self-sufficient cultural form, and an emphasis instead on its interdependence with other discourses and artistic disciplines, ranging from the visual arts, performance and music to narrative and history. As my thesis will suggest, drawing on or collaborating with other genres, media or disciplines becomes a way of investigating how poetry 'speaks' to its audience, and of proposing new, synaesthetic modes of poetic address.

The rest of this introduction locates my study in relation to existing critical narratives of contemporary British poetry. It traces how these accounts have invoked voice to imply divisions between identity-based and formally experimental poetics, and how this reflects the contentious currency of voice within wider aesthetic and cultural discourses. It also outlines developing areas of research which enable new methodologies for approaching the textual and performed voice of contemporary poetry. Finally, I consider the relevance of recent critical work which has called for a retheorisation of avant-garde poetic practice to take into account national narratives and new modes of formal innovation.

## **1. Oppositional Voices: Heteroglossia and Silenced Traditions in Narratives of Contemporary British Poetry**

### **1.1 Coming to Voice as an Act of Resistance**

Within existing histories of postwar British poetry, allusions to voice are important for claiming a relation to poetic tradition, particularly to the legacy of Movement poetics. Declarations of the 'democratic voice' of recent British poetry have become a way of signalling a break with the kind of assumptions present in the work of poets such as

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<sup>5</sup> A term used by Virginia Jackson to describe this trajectory, in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)



Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie and D. J. Enright.<sup>6</sup> Thus in a 1996 study of poetry and postmodernism, Ian Gregson asserts that 'where the Movement poetic assumed that writers and readers were white, English middle-class males, contemporary poetry is acutely aware of voices that draw attention to their class, gender, nationality or race.'<sup>7</sup> Anthologists and critics are quick to point to the polyphony of voices and identity positions characterising contemporary British poetry, a Bakhtinian 'social heteroglossia' of vernaculars, in which 'the choice of a non standard dialect becomes a political decision.'<sup>8</sup> In many surveys of postwar poetry, then, voice is used to refer to the mimetic representation of spoken languages, or plural 'vernacular communities', which actively configure group identities.<sup>9</sup> This is evident in the two most sustained studies of voice in British poetry, Gregson's *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (1996) and Neil Roberts' *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry* (1999).<sup>10</sup> Gregson and Roberts draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the inherent dialogism of language, using concepts of addressivity and heteroglossia to interpret dramatic monologues and the 'colloquial vividness and variety' of the creoles and other spoken vernaculars characterising contemporary poetry. In their analyses of voice, these studies cover the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy, Paul Muldoon, Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney and Tony Harrison among others, focusing largely on poets published by the largest and most established publishing houses. In Gregson's case, an analysis of the dialogic tendency towards 'a conflating of voices and perspectives' in many 'mainstream' poets, is clearly

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<sup>6</sup> Poets who were first collected together in Robert Conquest ed., *New Lines* (London: Macmillan, 1956). 'The Democratic Voice' is the title of the introduction to Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford eds. *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. xix - xxxii. The editors argue that this is 'not intended to suggest that all post-war poets sound alike or speak with one intonation – quite the opposite. Continually, these poets display an awareness of inhabiting one voice that is among others, part of a vernacular community surrounded by further vernacular communities.' (pp. xxi-xxii)

<sup>7</sup> Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 5

<sup>8</sup> Michael Hulse, David Kennedy, and David Morley, 'Introduction' in Hulse, Kennedy and Morley eds., *The New Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), pp. 15-28, p. 19. The title consciously echoes that of a 1962 anthology, in which its editor, A. Alvarez launched an attack of the aesthetics and ideals of Movement poets, as first represented in Robert Conquest ed., *New Lines* (London: Macmillan, 1956). Alvarez attacked the complacency of these poets, arguing that in their work 'the concept of gentility still reigns supreme. And gentility is a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions or habits more or less decent and more or less controllable'. A. Alvarez, 'The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle', in Alvarez ed., *The New Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1962), pp. 21-32, p. 25

<sup>9</sup> Armitage and Crawford, 'The Democratic Voice' in *The Penguin Book of Poetry*, p. xxii

<sup>10</sup> Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry* (Harlow: Longman, 1999)



distinguished from the second half of his study, which considers the non-representational, defamiliarising techniques of those he terms 'retro-modernist poets', including Christopher Middleton, Roy Fisher, Veronica Forrest Thompson and Denise Riley.<sup>11</sup> As a result, both Roberts' and Gregson's substantial contributions to the study of voice in recent poetry, fall short of considering its role in more experimental, modernist-derived poetics.

In discussions of contemporary poetry, realist representations of spoken voices are often read for their entanglement with definitions or re-definitions of national identity. The break with the dominant poetic tradition of the fifties and sixties, which many anthologies of the nineties survey, rejects the narrow, nostalgic definition of Englishness, the 'stylised anglophilia' which Movement poetry seemed to embody.<sup>12</sup> The broadening out of the kind of voices which 'demand to be heard *as poetic*',<sup>13</sup> to encompass a wider range of class, gendered, sexual and diasporic identities, reflects changing definitions of Britishness, and the wider movements of Western identity politics. This is made particularly apparent in discussions of Caribbean and black British poetry. Edward Kamau Brathwaite's seminal *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984), for example, has highlighted the important relation between forms of spoken language, intercultural heritage, and the ways in which the nation is imagined and constructed. His coining of the term 'nation language' encapsulates this relation.<sup>14</sup> Through their engagement with the linguistic histories of colonisation, Brathwaite's poetic and historical works have foregrounded the politicised nature of spoken languages and the resistance of imposed poetic forms. Like

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<sup>11</sup> Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry*, p. 10 and p. 5. Gregson makes an explicit distinction between the poets considered in the first half of the book, which he terms mainstream, and the retro-modernists of the second half, whose work he reads using Viktor Shklovsky's concept of 'Estrangement'. The term 'retro-modernism' is used to describe poets who have allegiance to the Modernist tradition and who resisted the 'realist legacy of the Movement', but who are distinguished 'from postmodernists like John Ashbery' p. 1

<sup>12</sup> Richard Caddel and Peter Quintermain 'Introduction – A Fair Field Full of Folk' in Caddel and Quintermain eds., *OTHER British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), pp. xv – xxix, p. xxvi

<sup>13</sup> Easthope and Thompson 'Afterword', *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, p. 209

<sup>14</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984). Brathwaite argues that the structure of Nation Language embodies a historical-linguistic process whereby the Western African languages of imported slaves were submerged by the official language of the conquistador. But this submergence served an 'interculturative purpose' by continuing to influence the ways in which imperial languages were themselves spoken, an interaction which Caribbean literature increasingly takes on board/seeks to represent. p.7



Brathwaite's, other studies which cover black British poetry, including those by Dennis Walder and Mervyn Morris, focus on the mimetic representation of speech, and place British poets in the context of Caribbean traditions of nation language.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, as Walder, Fred D'Aguiar and David Dabydeen have discussed, the uses of speech became politicised in new ways in British poetry. Enoch Powell's and Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric of 'otherness' was one way in which racism became 'legitimated as the basis of an electoral appeal, specifically addressed to the popular white classes'.<sup>16</sup> Thus to write in creole in this period, argues Dabydeen, 'was to validate the experience of black people against the contempt and dehumanising dismissal of white people'.<sup>17</sup> British dub poetry of this period often served as a direct form of protest in response to public events, while at the same time the phonetic representations of non-'Standard English' critiqued an exclusionary construction of national identity that was dominating populist political discourse. At a time when language became a 'crusade for specific types of contemporary values' and new right educationalists were stressing more than ever the importance of teaching 'Standard English' in schools, alternative forms of language suggested new models of national identity.<sup>18</sup> As D'Aguiar concludes '[d]ub poetry, poetry influenced by calypso, reggae, jazz and blues rhythm, creole language and Standard English articulat[ed] for the first time the black experience in Britain have all changed what it means to be British'.<sup>19</sup>

In narratives of recent British poetry, then, the representations of vernacular communities are inextricably linked with the articulation of identity. This merges two

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis Walder, 'Caribbean and Black British Poetry', in Walder, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) pp. 116-151. Walder analyses the poetry of Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Linton Kwesi Johnson, James Berry and Grace Nichols. Mervyn Morris, *'Is English We Speaking' West Indian Literature: A Lecture*, delivered 21 October 1992 (London: The British Library, 1993). Here the use of speech and voice in the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Agard is considered alongside the poetry and novels of Samuel Selvon, Louise Bennett, Walcott and Brathwaite.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Racism and Reaction' *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain: Talks on Race Relations Broadcast by BBC TV (1978)* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), pp. 23-35, p. 29

<sup>17</sup> David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', in Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels eds., *The State of the Language: 1990 edition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), pp. 3-14, p. 8

<sup>18</sup> Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse: the Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 253. Crowley discusses the influence of educationalists John Rae and John Marenbon in the 1980s, and the role of John Honey's *The Language Trap: Race, Class and the 'Standard Language' Issue in British Schools* (1983) in debates over Standard English.

<sup>19</sup> Fred D'Aguiar, 'Have you been long? Black poetry in Britain' in Hampson and Barry eds., *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, pp. 51-71, p. 70



meanings of voice which have been important to contemporary poetry – as speech or dialect and as a kind of shorthand for a consciousness-raising aesthetic, which seeks to make public the personal experiences of marginalised groups. This is an aesthetic which has been central to identity politics more widely. Discourses associated with various Western social movements originating in the 1960s testify to the figurative power of voice. Movements such as Second Wave Feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, youth subcultures, student movements, and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, frequently drew on the rhetoric of making socially marginalised voices heard. The writings of black American feminist bell hooks exemplify this. She argues that the term ‘finding one’s voice’ as a metaphor for self-transformation ‘has been especially relevant for groups of women who have previously never had a public voice, women who are speaking and writing for the first time, including many women of colour.’ hooks enforces the power of this metaphor as a way of thinking about the transition from object to subject, acknowledging that the ‘feminist focus on finding a voice may sound clichéd at times’ but that ‘for women within oppressed groups ... coming to voice is an act of resistance.’<sup>20</sup>

Stuart Hall, a leading figure in black British cultural studies, also draws on tropes of speech to describe the ‘struggle to come into representation’, the importance of critiquing ‘the way blacks were positioned as the unspoken and invisible ‘other’ of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses’.<sup>21</sup> Transforming cultural representations has been a crucial aim across different identity movements. Hall describes the strategy for such a critique entailing ‘first the question of *access* to the rights of representation’ and secondly ‘the *contestation* of the marginality’, the presenting of positive images to oppose the stereotypical nature of existing representations.<sup>22</sup> Another key scholar in this field, Kobena Mercer, underlines the significance of hooks’ ‘coming to voice’ metaphor in this period, as a way of approaching ‘the analysis of subject

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<sup>20</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Black: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (London: Sheba, 1989), p. 12

<sup>21</sup> Stuart Hall ‘New Ethnicities’, *ICA Documents 1989*, pp. 27-31, p. 27

<sup>22</sup> Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, p. 27



formation in the broadest possible sense – in terms of democracy as a struggle over relations of representation.’<sup>23</sup>

Struggles over representation inform the self-conscious engagement with tropes of voice in feminist and diasporic literatures. Henry Louis Gates, for example, identifies a preoccupation with tropes of voicing, and particularly with the ‘talking book’, as a defining feature of the Afro-American literary tradition. The self-reflexive uses of such figures, from slave narratives of the eighteenth century, through to the literature of the Harlem renaissance, ‘represent the search of the black subject for a textual voice’.<sup>24</sup> There are certain overlaps here with the theme of speech in poetry allied with Second Wave Feminism, which also poeticises the process of coming into representation.<sup>25</sup> Inherent in such a process is a tension between collective and personal voices, and this is something shared by the cultural strategies of different social movements. The idea of a unified, public voice that would speak to and from a social collective, is embodied in the writing of American feminist Adrienne Rich, whose ‘dream of a common language’<sup>26</sup> was a search for appropriate ways of representing a shared ‘consciousness we are just coming into’.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the consciousness-raising aesthetic, an important part of women’s and other social movements, places value on the self and on individuality. The tension between the idea of forging a public voice of solidarity, based on shared experiences of marginalisation, and the valuing of personal voices of testimony, points to the ways in which the boundaries of public and private have been re-defined by social movements. As theories of counterpublics have highlighted, minority movements aim to ‘convince others that what in the past was not public in the sense of being a matter of

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<sup>23</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 295-6

<sup>24</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 169

<sup>25</sup> The final section of Diana Scott ed., *Bread and Roses: Women’s Poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (London: Virago, 1982), for example, is entitled ‘The Renaming’. It contains poetry from the Women’s Liberation Movement 1970-80, and contains several poems about the act of naming, the right of speech, while the subjects acting as muse show a breaking of the ‘severe constraints on what a ‘lady’ can safely say’, constraints imposed by moral and literary criticism. (p. 190)

<sup>26</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1978* (New York: WW Norton, 1978)

<sup>27</sup> Adrienne Rich ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision’ (1971), in Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 22-49, 35



common concern should now become so.’<sup>28</sup> Within literary criticism, figures of voice and speech offer a language for articulating this process.

## 1.2 Contesting the Lyric Voice

Identity politics have drawn on the trope of voice as a way of describing the empowerment of certain subjects, but in other areas, this relation between voice and the self has come under scrutiny. While Jacques Derrida debunked some of the philosophical assumptions regarding voice’s relation to subjectivity and writing, avant garde poetic communities in both Britain and America have critiqued the emphasis on voice and personality in dominant poetic modes. In accounts of British poetry, this is still used to summarise the divide between expressive and experimental strands of contemporary poetry. However, the distinction between these strands is undermined somewhat when both are seen as reactions to the ideals of Movement poetry.

Several anthologies and critical editions published in the 1980s and 1990s sought to map out alternative or radical poetic activity going on in Britain. They represent work which has often been neglected by prominent collections and poetic histories.

Anthologies such as *A Various Art* (1987), *The New British Poetry* (1989) *Floating Capital: New Poets from London* (1991), *Conductors of Chaos* (1996) and *OTHER British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (1999) have refuted Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison’s claim in their Penguin anthology, that the sixties and seventies was a time when ‘very little – in England at any rate – seemed to be happening’ in poetry.<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy Fraser ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’ in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* ed. Craig Calhoun (London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 109-142, p. 129. See also Michael Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Both Fraser and Warner question the perception of the bourgeois public sphere (as theorised by Jürgen Habermas) as abstract and disinterested, and the assumption that rational-critical debate goes beyond private interests. They argue that the public sphere can only be made more democratic by challenging existing definitions of public and private. Warner argues that ‘[c]ounterpublics of sex and gender are teaching us to recognize in newer and deeper ways how privacy is publicly constructed. They are testing our understanding of how private life can be made publicly relevant’ (p. 62)

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison, ‘Introduction’ in Motion and Morrison eds., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 11-20, p.11. Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville eds., *A Various Art* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987); Gillian Allnut, Fred D’Aguiar, Ken Edwards and Eric Mottram eds., *The New British Poetry 1968–1988* (London: Paladin, 1989); Robert Sheppard and Adrian Clarke eds., *Floating Capital: New Poets from London* (Connecticut: Potes and Poets, 1991); Iain Sinclair



collections are evidence of what Eric Mottram has labelled 'The British Poetry Revival', and include work by Tom Raworth, Bob Cobbing, Barry MacSweeney, Tom Pickard, Denise Riley, Maggie O'Sullivan, Bill Griffiths, and Allen Fisher among others.<sup>30</sup> Edited volumes such as Easthope and Thompson's *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (1991), Peter Barry and Robert Hampson's *New British Poetry: The Scope of the Possible* (1993), and James Acheson and Romana Huk's *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (1996) have provided critical reflection on areas of this poetry, considering its claims for a politics of form, and locating it in relation to American and European avant-gardes and art movements. These critical works have been significant in charting the kind of poetic activity largely ignored in the histories of Anthony Thwaite, Sean O'Brien and Neil Corcoran.<sup>31</sup>

Anthology editors, while reluctant to define this poetry in terms of any single school or aesthetic, have been more forthcoming in highlighting what it reacts against. Andrew Crozier's introduction to *A Various Art*, for example, is explicit in its attack of the 'pusillanimous set of conventions' endorsed by the Movement poets. His critique is particularly focused on the use of a guiding and authoritative voice, the way in which 'language was always to be grounded in the presence of a legitimating voice – and that voice took on an impersonally collective tone'.<sup>32</sup> Other critical accounts of experimental poetry since the 1960s register a similar suspicion of the declarative voice, with its assumptions of shared experiences and attitudes.<sup>33</sup> This is what Gregson terms the

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ed., *Conductors of Chaos* (London: Picador, 1996); Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain eds., *OTHER British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999)

<sup>30</sup> Eric Mottram 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75' in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, pp. 15-50. See also Allnut et al eds., *The New British Poetry*. The section of the anthology edited by Mottram, 'A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry', brings together many of the poets 'who began writing in the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and 1970s'. They are described as 'poets who resist limpet-clinging to past metrics, self-satisfied irony, the self-regarding ego and its iambic thuds' (pp. 131-133, p. 131)

<sup>31</sup> Modernist-influenced postwar poetry fails to get much of a mention in Anthony Thwaite's *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1995* (London: Longman, 1996) and Sean O'Brien's *The Deregulated Muse Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998). Neil Corcoran's *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993) does at least include one chapter on 'Varieties of Neo-Modernism', on Christopher Middleton, Roy Fisher, and J. H. Prynne, but he considers their experimentalism rare, suggesting their poetry is characterised by 'a readiness for an exploratory or experimental formal inventiveness not common in post-war British poetry.' (p. 164)

<sup>32</sup> Crozier, 'Introduction', Crozier and Longveille eds., *A Various Art*, pp. 11-14, p. 12

<sup>33</sup> In an analysis of declarative voices in modern poetry, David Trotter uses a particular type of Larkin poem as evidence, one which he has 'returned to so consistently and so successfully that it might be regarded as a genre in its own right. This type of poem tries to define the relation between the actions and



‘consensual assumption’ of the Movement, something the poets in the second half of his study radically oppose.<sup>34</sup> Robert Sheppard’s survey of poets of the sixties ‘who remain active at the radical edge of British poetry’ stresses their distance from the poems of Larkin and others in which ‘the common insistence upon the speaking voice strives to maintain the effect of a stable ego for the narrator, an individualised human personality.’<sup>35</sup> In a more recent article, Ken Edwards contrasts the lyric voice and a single point of view with ‘multiple viewpoints or foci’ and a ‘lack of authorial “presence”’ when describing the ‘fault-line running through contemporary British poetry, which separates ‘modernist-derived or avant-garde work ... and other poetries in English’.<sup>36</sup>

It is necessary here to contextualise this British poetic activity in relation to more international critical engagements with voice. Documenting the suspicion of voice has been a way of differentiating the ‘British Poetry Revival’ from a dominant mainstream. But the precise meanings of voice at stake here are often made only implicitly. It is being used in these discourses to signify something quite specific – a poetics of individualism and self-expression, with a strong sense of authorial presence. American discourses have been more explicit in their attack of voice, while in recent years there has also been a more reflexive self-critique of this stance. In the 1970s and 1980s, avant-garde poets in the United States also used a rejection of voice to mark out their poetic ideals. Steve McCafferey sums up an attitude shared by many associated with the so called ‘Language’ group of poets when he asserts that voice, ‘like the Freudian phallus, is to be understood less as a physical organ than [as] an ideologically saturated signified fundamentally complicit with the logocentric tradition’.<sup>37</sup> McCafferey here draws on Jacques Derrida’s critique of logocentrism – the emphasis throughout the history of Western thought on the

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perceptions of a narrator, and the social and cultural significance of the events he witnesses; the relation in short, between the individual experience and shared meaning.’ Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p. 177

<sup>34</sup> Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p.1

<sup>35</sup> Robert Sheppard, ‘British Poetry and Its Discontents’, in Bart Moore Gilbert and John Seed eds., *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 160-180, p. 161, pp. 162-164. Sheppard looks at the work of Roy Fisher, Lee Harwood, Bob Cobbing and Tom Raworth

<sup>36</sup> Ken Edwards ‘The Two Poetries’, *Angelaki*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2000), pp. 25-37, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Steve McCafferey, in K. David Jackson, Eric Vos, and Johanna Drucker eds., *Experimental – Visual - Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry since the 1960s* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 370-380, p. 372



logos, the word or founding principle. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida argued that the philosophical tendency to privilege voice and speech over writing has been central to this metaphysics of presence. Assuming an 'absolute proximity of voice and being', thinkers since Plato and Aristotle through to Rousseau, Levi-Strauss and Saussure have viewed writing as secondary and derivative, reduced to 'the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originarily spoken language'.<sup>38</sup> By identifying moments of contradiction within these writers' polarised treatment of speech and writing, Derrida undermined the validity of any such opposition. This deconstructive reading is used to argue that voice is no closer to the signified, no less a technical construction than writing. The perception of writing as derivative in fact makes it a more effective model of language than speech, leading Derrida to claim that language is first writing.<sup>39</sup>

But while Derrida takes issue with a vast history of Western philosophy, the poetic attack on voice and the illusion of self-presence responds to a specific Anglo-American literary tradition which, since the Romantics, has strived for a poetry of natural speech. Marjorie Perloff, a leading scholar in the field of American avant-garde poetics, has mapped a gradual shift from poetry's concern with 'natural speech' towards 'radical artifice', and 'toward poetry as making or praxis rather than poetry as impassioned speech, as self-expression'.<sup>40</sup> The importance of simulating natural or common speech for Wordsworth, Yeats and Eliot, gave way in America in the 1950s and 1960s to a concern with the physiological voice of the poet, and the use of the breath as a unit of poetic measurement, as exemplified in Charles Olson's theory of 'Projective Verse'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) p. 12 and p. 29. Derrida focuses on Plato's works on speech and writing in more depth in the essay 'Plato's Pharmacy' (1972), reproduced in Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated into English by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) pp. 61-84

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 37. 'Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist in reversing it, of making violence innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing.'

<sup>40</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 3 and p. 45

<sup>41</sup> Charles Olson 'Projective Verse', in Donald Allen ed., *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 286-297. Allen's was the major anthology of this generation of poets, often subsequently referred to as the 'New American' poets. It included poetry by Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Michael McClure, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, many of whom were influenced by William Carlos Williams



However, this quest for a 'poetics of unmediated statement', as Michael Davidson characterises it, was rejected by several American poets of the seventies and eighties, including Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman and Bob Perelman.<sup>42</sup> In the introduction to the anthology *In The American Tree*, Ron Silliman identifies Robert Grenier's 1971 pronouncement 'I HATE SPEECH', as a defining moment of Language poetry.<sup>43</sup> These poets make use of denaturalising techniques, which avoid the illusion of natural speech and stress the constructed nature of poetry. As Perloff argues, '[t]he emphasis on the word rather than on the object behind it or the vision beyond it' and 'the new emphasis on the poetic medium as *constructed* and *rule-governed* calls into question the primacy of natural speech, spontaneous rhythms, and what Eliot called "common intercourse".'<sup>44</sup> In early Language writings in particular, 'voice' was often used metonymically to refer to a sanctification of 'the natural look' of poetry. In a 1976 essay, Charles Bernstein equates voice with a poem's 'directness, its authenticity, its artlessness, its sincerity, its personal expressiveness' and appeals to voice (such as 'finding one's voice') were seen to encourage a reductive search for the persona or personality behind the poem.<sup>45</sup> This critique is developed in Jed Rasula's later, full-length study of the 'canonizing assumptions (and compulsions) that have fabricated an image of American poetry since World War II'. Foremost among these assumptions, argues Rasula, is 'the enshrinement of the self-expressive subject'.<sup>46</sup> Too much poetry, he

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Davidson, "'Skewed by Design": From Act to Speech Act in Language Writing', in Christopher Beach ed., *Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), pp. 70-76, p. 76

<sup>43</sup> Ron Silliman, 'Language, Realism, Poetry', in Silliman ed., *In The American Tree* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), pp. xv-xxii, p. xv. This anthology was significant in bringing together several of the poets who had previously been published in magazines such as *This* edited by Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten, and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, which ran between 1978 and 1980. 'I HATE SPEECH' comes from Grenier's 'On Speech', first published in the first edition of *This*, 1971.

<sup>44</sup> Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, p. 47

<sup>45</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Stray Straws and Straw Men' (1976), in Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), pp. 40-49, pp. 41-42. Bob Perelman, in suggesting some of the shared values of Language poets, also uses 'voice' to describe the naturalisation of the stable subject. Aims include 'breaking with the automatism of the poetic 'I' and its naturalized voice; foregrounding textuality and formal devices; using or alluding to Marxist or poststructuralist theory in order to open the present to critique and change.' *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 12-13

<sup>46</sup> Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects 1940-1990* (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), p. 4



suggests, has equated authenticity with subjectivity, and central to this has been the role of voice, 'the medium delegated to poetry as the primal signature of selfhood.'<sup>47</sup>

The attack on a poetry of the self, made most explicitly in American avant-garde discourse, but also significant in the definition of British experimentalism, seems to directly oppose the poetics of consciousness-raising. In both cases, voice becomes a heavily invested term. The sense of conflict between these positions is summarised by the black British experimental poet David Marriott, who argues that 'Grenier's dismissal of speech has a different ring entirely if one's speech has not been a privileged source of positionality and individuation but has been the source of an agonised attempt to make oneself HEARD'.<sup>48</sup> Romana Huk, whose critical work is sympathetic to radical poetic practices on both sides of the Atlantic, nonetheless acknowledges that at their worst, these practices have erased particular histories in favour of a 'new culturally specific, yet universalised, conception of (non)selfhood'.<sup>49</sup> What this thesis is particularly interested in are the points at which making oneself heard intersects with a suspicion of authenticity, natural expression and a coherent identity. The following section considers how moments of self-critique inherent in both these positions, along with developing research into performance, sound and technology, enable valuable new strategies for approaching the relation between voice, experimentalism and identity within contemporary poetry.

## 2. A Possibility Rather than an Essence: Reassessments of Voice

The contrast between identity-based and anti-lyrical poetry suggests the contentious status of voice in recent decades; competing investments have made it 'the site for a new

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<sup>47</sup> Rasula, *Wax Museum*, p. 38. He argues that the emphasis on the poet's voice is complicit with 'a cultural voice-over' (p. 48). Using the analogy of a museum's soundtrack-guide to exhibitions, the voice-over function, which book reviews, text books, prefaces and anthology introductions all contribute to, 'lays out guidelines' and 'co-ordinates the reader's attention.' 'Poetry's Voice-Over' in Adelaide Morris ed., *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) pp. 274-316, p. 279

<sup>48</sup> David Marriott, 'Signs Taken for Signifiers: Language Writing, Fetishism and Disavowal', in Romana Huk ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 338-346, p. 339

<sup>49</sup> Romana Huk 'The Progress of the Avant-garde: Reading/ Writing Race and Culture According to Universal Systems of Value', Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison eds., *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 2002), pp. 141-164, p. 149

sort of struggle in poetry'.<sup>50</sup> Yet to interpret these positions as mutually exclusive risks overlooking their innate complexity and self-critique. Identity politics have always been aware of the dangers of essentialism, and have engaged with theories of the constructed, contingent nature of the subject. At the same time, while it was initially dismissed, some discussions of avant-garde poetics have since gestured towards more productive and multiple understandings of voice and its value to contemporary poetry. This section briefly surveys these critical moments and their value to the aims of this thesis.

The work of Gates, Hall, Mercer and Denise Riley exemplifies this self-reflexive impulse within diasporic and feminist cultural discourses. For while they foreground the important metonymic power of voice as identity, they also reflect upon identity as unstable and fluid, and analyse the problems of searching for a collective voice. In this respect, Gates' use of scare quotes is telling when he talks of the importance of authors 'recording ... an "authentic" black voice'.<sup>51</sup> The caution with which he invokes authenticity is developed in his use of poststructuralist theory to interpret the category of 'race' as a linguistic construction, and his critique of critical discussions which defend black art forms from corruption by contemporary European and American theories.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile Mercer's account of 'the burden of representation' faced by many contemporary black artists, a burden equally applicable to artists from a range of disenfranchised groups, identifies some of the limitations of cultural appeals to a collective voice. His discussion of the constrained framework for black arts criticism is based on debates over black British film-making in the 1980s, particularly the critical reception of experimental black films. The problem with the theory of the social responsibility of the artist, he argues, is that it 'depends on the notion of the artist as racially "representative" in the sense of speaking on behalf of a supposedly homogenous and monolithic community.'<sup>53</sup> Just as Hall identifies a shift in cultural politics which marks the 'end of the essential black subject', Mercer seeks to make sense of postmodern

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<sup>50</sup> Romana Huk, 'Introduction', in Huk and James Acheson eds. *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 1-15, p. 4

<sup>51</sup> Gates, 'Writing, "Race," and the Difference It Makes' (1985), in Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 43-69, p. 63

<sup>52</sup> See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory Of African American Criticism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 'Writing, "Race", and the Difference it Makes', and 'Talking Black': Critical Signs of the Times' (1988) in *Loose Canons*, pp. 71-83

<sup>53</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 248



structures of feeling which entail the 'displacement of collective sources of membership and belonging'.<sup>54</sup> Yet theories of the unstable nature of social identities are also recognised for their empowering potential, as in the redefinition of 'black' in the 1960s, a 'signifier recuperated for a new politics of resistance'.<sup>55</sup>

The critical work of Denise Riley provides a pertinent example of feminism's engagement with fluctuating constructions of identity. As with Michel Foucault's history of the nineteenth-century construction of 'homosexuality', Riley's *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* questions the idea of a 'natural' identity.<sup>56</sup> Her analysis of the historic indeterminacy characterising 'women' demonstrates the strains put upon feminism. In emphasising 'that inherent shakiness of the designation 'women' which exists prior to both its revolutionary and conservative deployments', Riley's aim is 'far from being anti-feminist. On the contrary, it is to pin down this instability as the lot of feminism'.<sup>57</sup> What is particularly important about critiques like Riley's, Hall's and Mercer's is that, while being careful not to detract from the empowering aims of social movements, they reject notions of monolithic identities in favour of less stable models. Although these works do not directly involve poetic criticism, their engagement with a politics of representation suggests ways of approaching the intersection of expressive and experimental aspects within recent poetry.

In the United States, certain areas of poetry criticism have already taken on board similar concerns about the 'collective voice' of the artist and its constraints. Studies such as those by Nathaniel Mackey, Harryette Mullen, and Aldon Nielsen redress the critical neglect of formal experimentation within twentieth century African American poetry. Mackey's cross-cultural study of avant-garde aesthetics, for example, critiques the restrictive emphasis on 'accessibility' in writing from socially marginalised groups. He considers the function of obscurity and dissonance in poets ranging from Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley, to Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris and

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 266

<sup>55</sup> See Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 268 and Hall 'New Ethnicities', p. 28

<sup>56</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* vol. 1, translated into English by Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979). Denise Riley in 'A Short History of Some Preoccupations' in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 121-129, acknowledges the influence of Foucault's work on sexuality.

<sup>57</sup> Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 98

Amiri Baraka.<sup>58</sup> In considering the visual innovation and allusions to print culture in Caribbean and African American poetry, Mackey, Nielsen and Mullen question the prioritising of realist modes and oral-based poetics within diasporic literary criticism.<sup>59</sup> As such, their work offers a methodology for assessing the role of formal experimentation in the articulation of marginalised histories and identities. My thesis contends that such an approach would enrich understandings of contemporary British poetry. It shows this by analysing how various British poets fuse visual, acoustic and/or linguistic experimentation with an investigation of identity, and the desire to represent silenced histories or experiences of social marginalisation. This incorporates both the working class and the dispossessed urban poor of London who are central to the long collage poems of Fisher, Sinclair and Reading – class identities which are taken up somewhat differently by O’Sullivan in her focus on the verbal struggle for articulacy. It also includes Johnson’s use of sound and structure to encapsulate histories of class and racial oppression; questions of women’s speech at the heart of Riley’s and Mulford’s work; Bergvall’s articulation of queer identity, and Wall’s and Bergvall’s exploration of migrant experience and cross-cultural identity.

Like work by Mackey et al., strands of self-critique within avant-garde discourses also point towards new ways of understanding the relation between voice, experimentation and identity in contemporary poetry. Discussions by Peter Middleton, Marjorie Perloff, and Charles Bernstein among others, suggest the importance of discriminating between discrete implications of the authorial voice, of recognising different technologies of the text, and of contextualising modes of poetic innovation within national cultures. Along with this research, my thesis is indebted to recent work which has demanded a re-evaluation of the sites and methods of experimentation in poetry.

The claims made by avant-garde poetry in its attack of voice have not been left unexamined. Responding to a joint article by Language poets on the politics of their work

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<sup>58</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). In his introduction, Mackey draws on the work of postcolonial theorist Edouard Glissant, particularly his discussion of audience and clarity, and his demand for ‘the right to obscurity’, ‘Introduction: And all the Birds Sing Bass’, pp. 1-21, p.16

<sup>59</sup> Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant: Language of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Harryette Mullen, ‘African Signs’, *Callaloo*, vol. 19 no.3 (1996), pp. 670-689



in 1990, Middleton points up the discrepancy between their poetic and critical texts. The rejection of an 'overarching authorial "voice"' in their poetry is contradicted by the adoption of that very voice in the critical work seeking to legitimate their aesthetics.<sup>60</sup> Middleton uses such an incongruity to question the efficacy of this poetry's political claims, in which linguistic experimentation holds the power to disrupt the symbolic order, and argues, as elsewhere, that the equation of all naturalistic reference with ideology remains too general.<sup>61</sup>

Perloff's evaluation of the critique of voice takes issue with a slightly different inference – that of a distinctive authorial style. Her 1998 essay, 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject' questions the denouncement of voice as a fundamental principle of linguistically innovative poetics in America and Britain, suggesting that '[p]erhaps it is time to reconsider the role of the subject in lyric poetry'.<sup>62</sup> Perloff proposes that the poetry-workshop notion of 'voice', problematic in its implication of the poem as 'simply the outward sign of a spoken self-presence', could be replaced with the term 'signature'. While they share a suspicion of the authority of the speaking voice, the writing practices of individual Language poets are clearly distinctive and diverse, as demonstrated in the comparison of texts by Susan Howe and Ron Silliman, which 'could hardly be more different in their modes of self-writing'. The essay concludes that a dismissal of voice, part of a wider poststructuralist critique of authorship, has managed to obscure the 'critical need to discriminate difference, to define the signature of the individual lyric subject in its complex negotiations with its larger cultural and historical field of operations.'<sup>63</sup> The importance of Perloff's essay is that it suggests the need to re-appraise the avoidance of voice in critical discussions of linguistically innovative poetics. It calls

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Middleton, 'Language Poetry and Linguistic Activism', *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990), pp. 242-253, p. 243. The article responds to a collaborative essay printed in a previous issue: Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten, 'Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto', *Social Text*, 19/20 (1998)

<sup>61</sup> In 'Language Poetry and Linguistic Activism', Middleton goes on to argue that Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action offers ways of developing a more specific poetics of resistance to ideology. See also 'On Ice: Julia Kristeva, Susan Howe and avant garde poetics', in Easthope and Thompson eds., *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, pp. 81-95, which uses Kristeva's theories of the semiotic and symbolic orders, as expounded in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, to test the political claims of Language poetry

<sup>62</sup> Perloff, 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo' (1998) <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/langpo.html>> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>63</sup> Perloff, 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject'

for greater clarification in distinguishing those assumptions of voice that remain problematic from those that enable productive and insightful readings of contemporary poetry.

Charles Bernstein's critical work also points towards plural understandings of voice. The potential of voice as a technology of the text is alluded to in an early essay, and later developed in his editing of *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998). Though much of 'Stray Straws and Straw Men' (1976) attacks voice's association with naturalness and poetic personality, an exception is made for alternative uses of voice in sound poetry and 'performance and audiotape works' which 'use voice as essentially a vocabulary to be processed by techniques such as cut-up, consonant and vowel intonation, simultaneity etc'. Such activities lead him to assert that 'voice is a possibility for poetry not an essence.'<sup>64</sup> The nature of these possibilities are developed by the essays in *Close Listening*, which consider the relation of sound to semantics, the visual performance of poetry on the page, and the history and significance of the poetry reading over the last forty years. Bernstein's introduction proposes formalist 'close listenings' to poetry performances and the 'audiotexts' of performances, which would view the vocalisation of poetry 'not as a secondary extension of "prior" written texts but as its own medium'.<sup>65</sup>

*Close Listening* is one of a growing number of studies published in the last decade which have sought to redress the critical neglect of poetry performance. Despite the fact that poetry readings have played an increasingly important role in the cultural dissemination of poetry since the 1960s, critical work has lagged behind, only really emerging in the late nineties.<sup>66</sup> Some of the reasons for this neglect are practical and

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<sup>64</sup> Bernstein, 'Stray Straws and Straw Men', pp. 44-45.

<sup>65</sup> Bernstein 'Introduction', in Bernstein ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 3-26, p. 10

<sup>66</sup> A few works in the seventies and eighties do, however, provide exceptions to this trend. See for example George Economou's 'Some Notes Towards Finding a View of the New Oral Poetry', *Boundary 2*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1975), pp. 653-664; Josephine A Johnson, 'Return of the Scops: English Poetry Performance Since the 1960s', in David W. Thompson et al eds., *Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives* (Lanhan; London: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 301-316; Martin Booth, *British Poetry 1964 to 1964: Driving Through the Barricades* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). In part one, chapter 12, Booth stresses the seminal influence of Dylan Thomas's reading tours, before cataloguing the UK poetry performance events and series from the sixties to the mid-eighties (pp. 85-106). Denise Levertov, 'An Approach to Public Poetry Listenings' (1965), in Levertov, *Light up the Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 46-56



methodological – the majority of live events remain undocumented, and are rarely reviewed.<sup>67</sup> Some commentators also point to the lack of a critical vocabulary and framework, while others relate the neglect of performance to tendencies in critical theory, particularly the hegemony of Saussurean-influenced theories of language and a suspicion of logocentrism.<sup>68</sup>

A developing field of research into performance, however, has started to explore how live poetry readings and electronic media impact upon the very processes of interpretation, and such work has helped to alter perceptions about the value of voice to contemporary poetry. In addition to *Close Listening*, several edited volumes have been published in recent years including *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (1997), and *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* (2002) in the U.S., and *Reading the Applause: Reflections on Performance Poetry by Various Artists* (1999) and *Additional Apparitions: Poetry, Performance and Site Specificity* (2002) in Britain.<sup>69</sup> These have analysed the role of the poetry reading in forming communities and intersubjective relations between audience and poet, considered the relation of the physical voice to subjectivity, the body and presence, or else focused on notions of performance that go beyond the live, temporal event.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Steve Tasane, founder of performance poetry promoters; Apples & Snakes, has lamented the lack of publicity surrounding poetry events: 'Sometimes we feel a bit ghettoised. You can see a fringe play with an audience of five and it'll get full reviews; but a poetry gig that packs out a 350 seat theatre only gets a two line listing.' From an article entitled 'Oral Sets', *The Big Issue*, November 1993, pp. 23-34, p. 24. Similarly, Charles Bernstein laments that 'readings – no matter how well attended – are rarely reviewed by newspapers or magazines (though they are the frequent subject, of light, generally misinformed, "feature" stories on the perennial "revival" of poetry)' in his introduction to *Close Listening* (p.5)

<sup>68</sup> Keith Tuma, lamenting the lack of a critical framework, questions 'how can I write of all of this except anecdotally or impressionistically?' (Review of *Close Listening*, 'Midnight at the Oasis: Performing Poetry inside the Spectacle' *Modernism/Modernity* vol. 6, no. 1 (1999), pp. 153-162, p. 153). Bernstein points to the 'prevalent notion that the sound structure of language is relatively arbitrary' in critical theory as a reason for avoidance (*Close Listening*, p.5), while Peter Middleton also highlights (and refutes) the enduring fear that the poetry reading might be construed as logocentric from a deconstructive point of view. Middleton, 'Poetry's Oral Stage', in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell eds., *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 215-253

<sup>69</sup> Adelaide Morris ed., *Sound States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue eds., *We Who Love to be Astonished* (Tuscaloo: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Stephen Wade and Paul Munden eds., *Reading the Applause* (York: Talking Shop, 1999); David Kennedy and Keith Tuma eds., *Additional Apparitions* (Sheffield: The Cherry on the Top Press, 2002)

<sup>70</sup> Middleton and Mark Morrison have considered the politics of the poetry reading as a social and cultural event, by situating it in the historical context of public speaking and rhetoric training. Morrison 'Performing the Pure Voice: Elocution, Verse Recitation and Modernist Poetry in Prewar London',

The relevance of this research to my thesis lies in its suggestion that changes in cultural production are helping to redefine the very concept of poetic voice. The need for renewed understandings is also underlined by Garrett Stewart's work on literature's 'phonotext' - the embodied, inner vocalisation of a text by a reader. Stewart calls for a change in the way voice is understood, so that it is thought of more as the site or destination of a text, rather than conceived metonymically as its origin. Such a focus is needed to counteract a pervading 'phonophobia', a misdirected critical unease surrounding the discussion of voice since Derrida's attack on the logos.<sup>71</sup> Studies of acoustic technologies can also help to contextualise contemporary poetry's intense concern with the status and authority of voice. Like Perloff and Rasula, who situate the poetic and theoretical suspicion of voice within an age of mass media, recent work on audiotape stresses its role in deconstructing the link between voice and presence. Michael Davidson, for example, argues that that recording technologies have 'transformed the notion of voice from something heard into something overheard such that its invocation by poets as natural or unmediated becomes increasingly problematic.'<sup>72</sup> Significant here is the implication that changes in the electronic broadcasting of voice and sound have encouraged a renewed attention to the *textual* voice and its assumptions.

Building on this recent critical work, my study argues that the literal voice of performance can further complicate the distinctions between self-expressive, identity-based, and experimental anti-lyrical poetics. The performed voice offers a valuable site of intersection, for on the one hand it seems to reinforce the alliance between voice and self, through its corporality and reliance on authorial presence, while on the other, it can

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*Modernism/Modernity* vol. 3 no. 3 (1996), pp. 25-50; Middleton 'The Contemporary Poetry Reading' in Bernstein ed., *Close Listening*, pp. 262-299. See also chapter 2, 'Poetry's Oral Stage', and chapter 3, 'A History of the Poetry Reading', in Middleton, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. 25-60, pp. 61-103. Johanna Drucker, meanwhile, focuses on the visual performance of poetry on the page, which is distinguished from the live event of the poetry reading, as 'an instance of expressive means creating effect without direct connection to the presence of the artist', 'Visual Performance of the Poetic Text', *Close Listening*, pp. 131-161, p. 160

<sup>71</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See also 'Modernism's Sonic Waiver: Literary Writing and the Filmic Difference', in *Sound States*, pp. 237-273.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Davison, 'Technologies of Presence: Orality and the Tapevoice of Contemporary Poetics', in *Sound States*, pp. 97-125, p.99. N. Katherine Hayles also argues that the disembodied voices of audiotape have played a central role in the production of postmodern subjectivity. 'Voices out of Bodies, Bodies out of Voices', *Sound States*, pp. 74- 96. See also Hayles, *How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)



also be mediated and manipulated so as to become a depersonalised means of formal innovation. Analysing the various formal uses of the physical voice by specific poets, the second half of my thesis aims to demonstrate that performance can intensify the crossover of expressive and experimental aesthetics.

### 3. National Narratives and Experimentation

The importance of performance to contemporary poetic practice, then, calls for a revised understanding of the construction and relations of different poetic communities. The recent edited volume *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (2003) suggests that ‘the performance of writing, and writing for performance’ constitute ‘perhaps the most importantly retheorized elements in recent avant-garde practice’.<sup>73</sup> This is a particularly important point for my study’s consideration of the nature of experimentation. Bringing together poets and critics from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Ireland, *Assembling Alternatives* stresses the need to reassess the ways in which ‘the radical’ in poetry has been conceptualised, particularly to recognise how ‘powerful and operative *national* narratives of identity and progress’ have informed the practice and reception of avant garde poetry.<sup>74</sup> In this respect, it expands upon a small but important body of critical work which has been at the forefront of examining the validity of the expressive-experimental divide. Articles by Clair Wills, Linda Kinnahan and Romana Huk share the opinion that the ‘separation of poetry into formally conservative and radical forms sets up a false dichotomy’, and each considers the role of national cultures in shaping the experimental

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<sup>73</sup> Romana Huk ‘Introduction’, in Huk ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 1-37, p. 4. The book incorporates essays on international histories and comparisons by Jeff Derksen, Keith Tuma, Trevor Joyce, writings by M. NourbeSe Philip, cris cheek, Linda Kinnahan and Carla Harryman on ‘Intranational divides’, and reflections from John Cayley, Caroline Bergvall, David Marriott and Bob Perelman on recent innovative poetic practice. The book is premised on the idea that ‘understanding the embedded nature of one’s own formative assumptions in the articulation of an avant-garde poetics is difficult unless an attempt to read others’ version of “the radical” is made, and through that encounter with otherness one’s own construction of “innovation” is reassessed.’ (p.4)

<sup>74</sup> Huk, ‘Introduction’, *Assembling Alternatives*, p.3



practices of female poets.<sup>75</sup> Huk and Wills achieve this through comparisons with American poets, arguing that poetic innovation needs to be understood within the context of the different poetic traditions and audience expectations of each country.<sup>76</sup>

National cultures have also shaped readerships as well as individual aesthetics. While models of American cultural production clearly influenced the development of small, independent publishers in Britain in the 1970s,<sup>77</sup> substantial cuts to British public arts funding meant that experimental poetics have not been as successfully distributed here as they have in the United States.<sup>78</sup> Consequently the divide between establishment and marginal or avant-garde communities has been more keenly felt in Britain. As both Middleton and Andrew Duncan have analysed, this has at times resulted in an unproductive attachment to 'narratives of heroic dissidence'.<sup>79</sup> To some extent, discourses of alternative poetics in Britain have been characterised by their rejection of

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<sup>75</sup> Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3, (1994), pp 34-52, p. 38

<sup>76</sup> Romana Huk 'Feminist Radicalism in (Relatively) Traditional Forms: An American's Investigations of British Poetics', in Vicki Bertram ed., *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 227-250. See also Linda A Kinnahan 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women's Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37 no.4 (1996), pp. 620-70

<sup>77</sup> Andrew Crozier, in his introduction to *A Various Art*, argues that American examples 'provided lessons in the organisation and conduct of a poet's public life, indicating how poets might take matters of publication and the definition of a readership into their own hands by developing their own publishing houses and journals', (p. 12). Histories of little magazines and self-financed small presses stress that it is the means of cultural production and not only aesthetic choices that have defined British avant garde poetry since the 1960s. See the extended introduction to *OTHER* in *Jacket 4* (1998), <<http://jacketmagazine.com/04/otherbrit.html>> [accessed August 2006]; Robert Sheppard, 'British Poetry and its Discontents'; Bob Cobbing and Bill Griffiths, *ALP: The First 22 ½ Years* (London: Association of Little Presses, 1988); R. J. Ellis, 'Mapping the U.K. Little Magazine Field', *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, pp. 72-103; Nigel Wheale, 'Uttering Poetry: Small Press Publication', in Denise Riley ed., *Poets on Writing: Britain 1970 – 1991* (London: Macmillan 1992), pp. 9-20; The most recent study by Wolfgang Görtzschacher, *Contemporary Views on the Little Magazine Scene* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 2000) is also the most comprehensive, containing interviews with twenty six editors of small magazines in Britain and Ireland.

<sup>78</sup> Caroline Bergvall, 'ex/ Crème/ ental/ eaT/ ing', interview by Marjorie Perloff, *Revue d'études Anglophone* (2000), <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bergvall/Perloff-Bergvall-Interview-2000.pdf>> [accessed August 2006]. Keith Tuma, 'Review of Clive Bush, *Out of Dissent: A Study of Five Contemporary British Poets*', in *Criticism*, vol. 40 (1998), pp. 110 - 119. Romana Huk 'The Progress of the Avant-garde: Reading/ Writing Race and Culture According to Universal Systems of Value', Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison ed. *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 2002) pp. 141-164

<sup>79</sup> Peter Middleton 'Imagined Readerships and Poetic Innovation in U.K. Poetry', *Assembling Alternatives*, pp. 128-155, p. 131. Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003) In a discussion of the aftermath of Mottram's ousting from the Arts Council in the 1970s, Duncan suggests that 'the expansiveness of the 1960s' was replaced with 'a siege mentality' in which little magazine reviews became increasingly cliquey and there was a 'fetishization of the elements of style which signalled "marginality"' (p.176)



national forms of identification. Editors and poets suggest that a desire to invigorate British poetry has led many to look to American and European avant-gardes for inspiration.<sup>80</sup> To stress the importance of international influences and dialogues has been a way of positioning this work in opposition to both a dominant poetic tradition and an aggressive nationalist political discourse. The difficulty of asserting a new era of British poetry in the same way that new American writing was being confidently hailed stems from the enduring fear of parochialism, the worry that 'Britishness is equivalent to nostalgia for settled traditions.'<sup>81</sup> As Middleton's essay on imagined readerships importantly underlines, poetic narratives of exile and fragmented audiences need to be interpreted within a particular cultural context. For British poets of this period, national identities 'provide no viable image of community, both because of the lingering reactionary ideologies of patriotism, and because of the feebleness of federalism in the U.K.'<sup>82</sup>

This is one example of an indirect articulation of national identity within critical discourses of British poetry. Attention to the pejorative associations of 'Britishness' in this period helps to explain the difficulty in forging poetic communities that identify with a national agenda. My thesis considers how the intensification of some of these associations have also impacted on poetry's approaches to voice. The analyses in the following chapters aim to demonstrate how formal experiments with voice respond to new forms of political authority and changing conceptions of national identity. The foregrounding of voice becomes an important part of recent poetry's engagement with place, whether this is the supposedly public spaces of the city, or the traditionally

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<sup>80</sup> Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival', *Scope of the Possible* argues that, in the sixties and seventies, 'young British poets learned a great deal about the variety of possible poetics from contemporary American examples, and often from poets visiting this country', particularly Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen and Jerome Rothenberg, p.27. The editors of *OTHER* analyse the attraction of Olson's poetics of improvisation and corporeal perception on the work of Prynne, Mottram, Cobbing and Allen Fisher, and point to the number of experimental poets since the 1950s who rejected 'the insularity and bland humanism of the dominant mainstream' by turning to foreign models and translating European avant-garde poets, p. xxii and p. xxvi. Maggie O'Sullivan ed., *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (London: Reality Street, 1996) provides a pertinent example of a transatlantic dialogue based upon writing practices. The anthology suggests that the exclusion of these poets from dominant constructions of a feminist canon does more to unite them than their national identity.

<sup>81</sup> Middleton, 'Imagined Readerships', p. 131. Middleton is here responding to the self-consciousness with which Ken Edwards alludes to Britishness in the introduction to *The New British Poetry* anthology.

<sup>82</sup> Middleton 'Imagined Readerships', p. 131

personal realm of the home. There are many ways in which the poetry considered in this thesis decentres and defamiliarises the authorial voice, and I want to suggest that this is partly a critique of the values of individualism and an increasingly authoritarian form of political rule, a critique which operates symbolically rather than purely polemically.

Chapter one focuses on the politics of authoriality in the work of Iain Sinclair, Allen Fisher and Peter Reading, whose poetic sequences all interweave multiple authorial voices. The chapter considers how these formal challenges to the monologic authorial voice become implicated in their poetry's critique of a changing urban and national landscape. It analyses works spanning the seventies and eighties, Fisher's colossal *Place* project (1971 – 1985), Sinclair's *Lud Heat* (1975) and Reading's *Ukulele Music* (1985), *Stet* (1986) and *Perduta Gente* (1989). Between them, these sequences register a period of large-scale urban redevelopment, changing masculine identities, and new forms of political discourse which drew on a mythologised national past and a rhetoric of common sense moralism to bolster its authority. It is through the poets' integration of other authorial voices that these issues are engaged. All three poets are concerned with the relations between physical space and social inequality, and the representation of often marginalised urban identities and histories. Thus the chapter demonstrates that a challenge to the authoritative poetic voice is not necessarily at odds with the representation of disenfranchised voices. Instead, a collage aesthetic provides a means for exploring textual and more literal, political forms of power simultaneously.

Chapter two takes up the idea of the lyric voice as a vehicle for personal expression, a mode associated with the representation of interiority and emotional states. It considers some of the ways in which the personal voice was invested with new, sometimes contradictory meanings in the seventies and eighties, and how these tensions were played out within the poetry of Denise Riley and Wendy Mulford. Their work mediates between different strands of the debate over voice and identity. For like many experimental poets, they reject an authoritative and unified speaking voice, and question narratives of innate, coherent identities. Yet their poetry remains committed to the use of the first person, and to the articulation of subjectivity and interiority. Because the individualistic thrust of confessional feminist poetry was complicated by Thatcherite rhetoric, Mulford's and Riley's poetry, as this chapter argues, attempts to forge a new



language of the personal which avoids individualism. It examines the involvement of visual arts in this reworking of the lyric voice. An engagement with certain abstract paintings reinforces this poetry's desire to hold onto the lyric's association with powerful feelings and emotion, while avoiding strictly realist, narrative forms of self-portrayal.

The second half of this thesis turns to a consideration of forms of performance. Chapter three focuses on the multifaceted position of voice, orality and aurality in the poetry and performances of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Akure Wall. It analyses the often overlooked role of visual experimentation in black British poetry and the formally innovative uses of sound and technology in performance. Valuable work on these sites of experimentation has been progressing largely in the United States. In this chapter I aim to develop it within a British context. By considering how the human voice is manipulated and dehumanised in performance, this chapter argues against perceptions of oral performance as a more authentic, less mediated mode of poetic expression. It contrasts the work of an emergent, lesser known poet, Akure Wall, with Johnson who is now established as a major figure in twentieth century black British poetry. While the majority of critical work on Johnson has focused on his polemical poetry's configuration of an oppositional identity, this chapter develops understandings of his work by analysing the role of formal experimentation in such a configuration. It also aims to show certain continuities and shifts within a more recent generation of performance poets, arguing that experiments with visual and multimedia forms of performance have become increasingly important in articulating cross-cultural identities. In this respect it considers how performance techniques respond to changing discourses of race and nation – from exclusionary forms of national populism in the seventies and eighties, through to discourses of multiculturalism in the nineties.

In many ways, Wall's engagement with different sites of performance overlaps with the work considered in the final chapter. This analyses the very recent visual poetry and multidimensional poetry readings of Maggie O'Sullivan and the site-specific installations and performance writing of Caroline Bergvall. These poets demonstrate the effectiveness of interdisciplinary performance practices for engaging with the figurative and physical voice simultaneously. This chapter uses their poetry as a way of summarising the various investments recent poetry has made in voice, and for reflecting

on reasons behind this enduring engagement. Both poets investigate the connection between voicelessness, identity and powerlessness in their poetry. At the same time, the sounded voice, whether in O'Sullivan's poetry readings, or in Bergvall's use of recordings in the site-specific piece *Say: "parsley"*, explore the ways enunciation can be used as a marker of social identity, and a means of exclusion. As with much of the poetry considered in this thesis, O'Sullivan and Bergvall reject a dominating unified, authorial voice, and the chapter aims to show that their vocalised performances need not compromise this. The work examined here synthesises many of the preoccupations of the previous three chapters, suggesting the possibility of fusing the representation of marginalised and unofficial voices with a radical aesthetics, of conflating the embodied and conceptual voice, and finally, of reconfiguring poetry's status as a wider cultural force through demonstrating its interdependence with other artistic disciplines.



## Chapter one

### Power and the Authorial Voice: the Polyphonic Poetry of Iain Sinclair, Allen Fisher and Peter Reading

#### Introduction

Described by Gregory Ulmer as the twentieth century's 'single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation', collage has informed a wealth of visual, verbal as well as musical artforms.<sup>1</sup> Whether it is discussed in terms of bricolage, quotation, cut-up, montage or assemblage, the formal effect of collage relies on a basic premise: the often surprising relocation of material from one context into another, or as David Antin suggests, 'the dramatic juxtaposition of disparate elements without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements'.<sup>2</sup> Evidence of this aesthetic can be found in countless examples of American, Central European and Russian avant-garde art from the last century. The list includes the cubist collage of Picasso and Braque, Eisenstein's films, the music of Stravinsky and Satie, the poetry of Apollinaire, Dadaist and Italian futurist verse, the multi-media work of Kurt Schwitters, the *Cantos* of Pound and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The postwar visual art of Rauschenberg and Kruger, and the poetry of Burroughs, Zukofsky and Olson have also relied heavily on a collage aesthetic.<sup>3</sup>

Within poetry, the formal strategy of borrowing or stealing fragments from other texts issues a direct challenge to the traditionally monologic authorial voice. Depending on the extent to which the inserted voices are referenced, collage can complicate the authenticity and authority of the poetic voice. If a 'mediator' between these voices is not

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism', in Hal Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 83-108, p. 84

<sup>2</sup> David Antin, 'Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry', *Boundary 2* vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1972), pp. 98-133, p. 106

<sup>3</sup> For a broad history of collage in twentieth century visual art see Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004). See Leonard Diepeveen, *Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), for a full-length study of the role of collage in modern American poetry. The focus is on Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore and e e cummings, but the conclusion also discusses postwar American poetry, including William Carlos Williams, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery and Language poets. Pierre Joris' essay 'Collage and Post-Collage: In Honour of Eric Mottram' (1997), summarises key shifts in the uses of collage in American, British and European art and poetry, and also considers future directions of post-collage in cyber-art, <<http://www.albany.edu/mottram/emmag1pj.html>> [accessed August 2006]

easily discernable, then this aesthetic of citation and juxtaposition can be used to radically displace an authorial presence. This in turn can be used as a means of exploring the processes by which identity and subjectivity are constructed. As Marjorie Perloff suggests, 'to collage elements from impersonal, external sources – the newspaper, magazines, television, billboards – is to understand, as it were, that, in a technological age, consciousness itself becomes a process of graft or citation, a process by means of which we make the public world our own.'<sup>4</sup> The use of collage within literature then, provokes a consideration of the very nature of the authorial voice and its relationship to the self. Furthermore, in borrowing from other texts – often non-poetic genres and discourses – collage poetry implicitly questions the status and possibilities of poetry as a cultural form. Implying its interdependence with other kinds of knowledge and aesthetic expression, collage undermines the notion of poetry as a self-sufficient, autonomous art form.

This chapter considers how the work of three contemporary British poets, Iain Sinclair, Allen Fisher and Peter Reading, explores questions of authoriality and identity through the adaptation of a collage aesthetic. As well as considering their attempts at constructing new forms of authorial expression, it focuses on their use of multiple authorial voices to critique textual and more literal forms of political authority. With regard to textual authority, it explores two overlapping areas – the poetry's construction of an authorial self, and the techniques through which other textual voices are incorporated. I consider whether these formal choices help to legitimate or undermine the reliability of the poetic speaker. Looking at the nature of these appropriated materials also reveals a shared concern with the production and control of public space, and with the changing urban landscape of Britain in the seventies and eighties. As well as critical work on the ideological nature of space as a social product, it is necessary to consider the ways in which London's topography registered changes in national politics during this period. The rise of neoliberal policies, for example, fostered certain kinds of urban redevelopment, and in this respect the cityscape can be viewed as the physical manifestation of a changing national identity. What I want to consider in this chapter, then, is the link this poetry establishes between the politics of authoriality and the politics

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<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 76-77



of space. How does formal experimentation with the authorial voice become implicated in the critique of new forms of political authority?

The incorporation of data and pre-existing voices in this poetry foregrounds an epistemological concern with the nature of discourse and with the act of writing. But at the same time, I will argue that it is also concerned with identity in a way that distinguishes it from the High Modernist use of collage as part of a problematic quest for impersonality, which, as Maud Ellmann argues, can itself be interpreted as an act of power.<sup>5</sup> While in *The Wasteland*, for example, '[t]he disembodied "I" glides in and out of stolen texts as if the speaking subject were merely the quotation of its antecedents', the poets considered here all acknowledge the presence of an authorial self or creator in their works, albeit in quite different and sometimes ironic ways.<sup>6</sup> While they may aim for a poetics that looks beyond self-expression and personal narrative, they do not make claims for a disinterested (or indeed disembodied) poetry. As well as considering the ways in which their poetry reflects upon authorial identity, the chapter looks at its representation of particular British class and masculine identities, and experiences of social marginalisation. In doing so, it sets up the central argument of this thesis – that the use of formal experimentation to question the status of the poetic voice does not necessarily demote selfhood, identity or the validity of silenced histories.

## 1. Contexts

### 1.1 Poetic Communities

To demonstrate this argument, my chapter analyses specific works of each poet which share a collage aesthetic and an interest in the spaces, communities, and histories of the city. It looks at Allen Fisher's *Place* project, a series of separate, interconnecting books

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<sup>5</sup> Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987). See also Andrew Ross, *The Failures of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). These works suggest that there is still an active debate surrounding the relationship between the formal poetics and personal politics of Pound and Eliot. Morrison and Ross have interpreted their aesthetics in relation to Pound's fascism and Eliot's anti-semitism, while Ellmann highlights how the poets' advocacy of poetic impersonality is more closely interwoven with their personal politics than has sometimes been claimed.

<sup>6</sup> Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality*, p. 92

published by a range of small presses between 1971 and 1985, which have recently been republished as a single edition.<sup>7</sup> *Place* is compared with Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat*, originally published in 1975 by Sinclair's own Albion Village Press imprint, but later reprinted by Granta, and both works are considered alongside some of Peter Reading's sequences from the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> In the last decade, three volumes of Reading's collected poetry have been published, but my focus in this chapter is largely on three works – *Ukulele Music* (1985), *Stet* (1986), and *Perduta Gente* (1989).<sup>9</sup>

Fisher, Sinclair and Reading have established distinct reputations within the multifarious spheres of recent British poetry. Early accounts of 'the British Poetry Revival', as surveyed in the introduction, generally included both Sinclair and Fisher in their lists of significant poets, and both have featured in the anthologies associated with post-1960s' formally experimental poetics.<sup>10</sup> But Fisher has since become something of a major, representative figure within critical accounts of British avant-garde poetry.<sup>11</sup> His work has achieved recognition in America, and critical discussions have contrasted his

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<sup>7</sup> *Place* was originally published as five books, *Place Book One* (London: Aloes Books, 1974), *Stane*, (London: Aloes Books, 1975), *Becoming* (London: Aloes Books, 1978), *Eros: Father: Pattern* (Kent: Secret Books, 1980), and *Unpolished Mirrors* (Hereford: Spanner, 1981, reprinted by Reality Studios, London, 1986). All page numbers in brackets refer to the complete text, *Place* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2005), hereafter abbreviated to P

<sup>8</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat* (London: Albion Village Press, 1975). Hereafter abbreviated to LH. All page numbers in brackets refer to the later edition unless otherwise stated: *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* (London: Granta, 1998)

<sup>9</sup> Peter Reading, *Ukulele Music* (with *Going On*) (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985), hereafter abbreviated to UM; *Stet* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), hereafter abbreviated to S, and *Perduta Gente* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), hereafter PG. Reprinted in *Collected Poems 2: Poems 1985 – 1996* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996). All page numbers in brackets refer to this edition.

<sup>10</sup> Allen Fisher's poetry has been collected in Allnutt et al eds. *The New British Poetry 1968–1988* (London: Paladin, 1989), Iain Sinclair ed. *Future Exiles: 3 London Poets* (London: Paladin, 1992) and Sinclair ed., *Conductors of Chaos* (London: Picador, 1996). Sinclair's poetry features in Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville eds., *A Various Art* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987) and both poets are in Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain eds., *OTHER British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999)

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Barry's case study, 'Allen Fisher and 'Content-Specific' Poetry' and Robert Hampson, 'Producing the Unknown: Language and Ideology in Contemporary Poetry' in Barry and Hampson eds., *New British Poetry: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 198–215 and pp. 134–155; Clive Bush, *Out of Dissent: Five Contemporary British Poets* (London: Talus Books, 1997) contains chapters on Fisher, Thomas A Clark, Eric Mottram, Bill Griffiths, and Barry MacSweeney. Peter Barry has a chapter on Allen Fisher and Iain Sinclair in *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Ken Edwards uses Fisher's poetry to represent the 'parallel tradition' in 'The Two Poetries', *Angelaki* vol. 5, no. 1 (2000), pp. 25–37. Peter Middleton discusses the poetry of J. H. Prynne, Allen Fisher and Denise Riley in 'Imagined Readerships and Poetic Innovation in U.K. Poetry', in Romana Huk ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 128–142



poetry with that of American Language poets Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews.<sup>12</sup> Fisher is also a conceptual artist, painter and performer as well as a poet, who, during the writing of *Place*, was involved with *Fluxus*, the international radical art collective which created ephemeral and intermedia work such as performance art, 'happenings', and sound texts.<sup>13</sup> Sinclair has played a key editorial role within the British experimental poetry field, most notably with his anthology *Conductors of Chaos* (1996), and as editor for Paladin's *Future Exiles* series, but as a writer, he is probably now more widely known outside of the poetry community for his novels and non-fiction than for his poetry. *Lud Heat* is often seen as the work which established the East End focus and 'renegade charting of the city'<sup>14</sup> that would later characterise *Downriver*, *Lights Out For The Territory*, *Rodinsky's Room*, and *London Orbital*.<sup>15</sup> It is also a work known as the inspiration behind Peter Ackroyd's 1985 novel *Hawksmoor*, and responsible, as Patrick Wright suggests, for provoking 'a whole industry' around Hawksmoor's churches.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Fisher features in Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris eds. *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry, volume 2: from Postwar to the Millennium* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995) and is discussed by Keith Tuma in *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999). See also Peter Middleton 'Performing An Experiment, Performing A Poem' Allen Fisher and Bruce Andrews', in David Kennedy and Keith Tuma eds., *Additional Apparitions. Poetry, Performance & Site Specificity* (Sheffield: The Cherry On The Top Press, 2002), and Robert Sheppard, 'The Poetics of Poetics: Charles Bernstein, Allen Fisher and the poetic thinking that results', *Symbiosis* (Devon: Stride Publications, 1999)

<sup>13</sup> Ken Freidman ed., *The Fluxus Reader* (London: Academy Exhibitions, 1998); Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkley; London: University of California Press, 2002). Fisher was part of Fluxus' U.K. touring exhibition, *Fluxshoe*, 1972-3, along with Ian Breakwell, Henri Chopin, Mary Harding, Carolee Schneemann and Stuart Brisley. See exhibition catalogue, *Fluxshoe* (Cullompton: Beau Geste Press, 1972)

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins: A Keyhole Portrait of British Postwar Life and Culture* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 258

<sup>15</sup> Sinclair, *Downriver* (London: Paladin, 1991), *Lights Out For The Territory: Nine Excursions in the Secret History of London* with illustrations by Marc Atkins (London: Granta, 1991), with Rachel Lichtenstein, *Rodinsky's Room* (London: Granta, 1997) and *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25* (London: Granta, 2002). With the exception of Peter Barry's chapter, Robert Sheppard's 'Artifice and the Everyday World: Poetry in the 1970s' in Bart Moore-Gilbert ed., *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.129-151 and Simon Perril 'A Cartography of Absence: The Work of Iain Sinclair', *Comparative Criticism: An Annual Journal*, vol. 19, pp. 309-339, the majority of critical articles on Sinclair focus on his fiction and non-fiction writing. See for example Steve Pile, 'Memory and the City' in Campbell, Jan and Harbord, Janet eds., *Temporalities: Autobiographies and Everyday Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 111-127; Rod Mengham 'The Writing of Iain Sinclair: 'Our Narrative Starts Everywhere' in Richard Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew eds., *Contemporary British Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp. 56-67; *The Iain Sinclair Special Edition Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* vol. 3, no. 2, September 2005

<sup>16</sup> Wright, in *A Journey Through Ruins*, describes how 'Ackroyd's novel has made the journey from best-seller to A-Level set book; graphic novelists have plagiarised *Lud Heat*, and listings magazines like *City*



Roger Luckhurst argues that it is ‘undoubtedly one of the *ur*-texts for [the] resurgence of London Gothic’ in the last twenty five years,<sup>17</sup> and it has won Sinclair something of a cult (or occult) following. Reading represents a different position again. Rather than the small, independent presses, he is published by Bloodaxe, and received the 1986 Whitbread Poetry Prize for *Stet*. His work is the subject of a full-length study,<sup>18</sup> has been set on A-Level English curricula, and has been recognised in the kind of poetic histories that generally steer clear of Sinclair, Fisher and late modernism.<sup>19</sup> But while this may suggest that he enjoys a more mainstream or canonical status in comparison to the rest of the poets considered in this thesis, critical works continue to stress Reading’s position as an outsider.<sup>20</sup> His unconcealed scorn for the poetry establishment and his capacity to shock with his choice of subject matter and language have provoked mixed critical reactions.<sup>21</sup> He has also been excluded from some of the same anthologies as Fisher and Sinclair, such as Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s 1982 *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. This outsiderism is something that unites the poets looked at here – a sense of marginalisation from and opposition to a dominant poetry tradition helps to structure the meta-poetic aspect of their work.

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*Limits* have taken to recommending tours of Hawksmoor’s newly interesting churches’ p. 258. Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* (London: Hamilton, 1985)

<sup>17</sup> Roger Luckhurst, ‘The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the ‘Spectral Turn’, *Textual Practice*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2002), pp. 572-546, p. 529

<sup>18</sup> Isabel Martin, *Reading Peter Reading* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000)

<sup>19</sup> Reading is discussed in Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960–1995* (Harlow: Longman, 1996), Sean O’Brien, *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), and Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry* (Harlow: Longman, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> See Dennis O’Driscoll ‘No-God and Species Decline Stuff’: The Poetry of Peter Reading’, in C. C. Barfoot ed., *In Black and Gold: Contiguous Traditions in Post-War British and Irish Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 199-218 and David Kenndy’s chapter on Reading in *New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980–1994* (Mid-Glamorgan: Seren, 1996), pp. 120-152

<sup>21</sup> Gary Day, for example, criticises what he sees as Reading’s mere imitation of ‘the shock value of reality itself’, and suggests that his incorporation of ‘the language of sensational journalism seems to me a betrayal of the poetic function’. ‘To the extent that Reading writes in a tabloid idiom, his poetry becomes complicit with what it presents. He appears content to thrust before us the horrifyingly graphic image rather than to advance our understanding or to move us beyond it’, ‘Working Through Reading’, *Critical Survey*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1998), pp. 81-92, p. 82. David Wheatley in a review of Reading’s *Collected Poems* argues ‘seldom has such stimulating and valuable work been buried in as much wilful grottness, savagery and self-indulgence as in the poetry of Peter Reading’, *Poetry Review* vol. 88 no. 2, pp. 64-65



## 1.2 The City Through Collage

Another feature the works of these poets share is a distinctly urban setting. While Fisher's approach to place is extensive, as an investigation of 'place of living, locality, house borough city country planet. Place of being, body, breath, brain. Place of receipt and dispatch',<sup>22</sup> the work is essentially rooted in South London, and the poem's elusive speaker announces himself as a 'citizen of Lambeth' (P, p. 11). A lot of the collaged material of *Place* concerns geographical, ecological, and topographical data on this borough, and the original editions incorporated maps of the underground tributaries of the Thames, and of Roman roads and settlements in London, while the Roman occupation provides a unifying theme in the final book, *Unpolished Mirrors*. The list of resources which *Place* draws on is vast, bringing together literary works of Milton, Gay, Blake, Dickens, Pope and Olson, with numerous works on the history of London's buildings, railways, rivers, parishes, and the blitz. These mingle with research into the Stone Age, works on biology, engineering, Chinese mythology, language and science, Situationist texts, books on giants, and the theories of Benjamin, Foucault, Marx, Gramsci and Freud to name a few.<sup>23</sup>

In *Lud Heat*, the city is mapped in terms of malevolent energy fields, 'invisible rods of force' the narrator detects between Hawksmoor's churches in the East End of London (LH, p. 18). Partly autobiographical and shaped by the routes Sinclair takes working as a garden assistant for the Greater London Council, evidence for these forces is found in a vast history of East End crime and ritual murders, fires, bombings and floods, through to the more mundane mishaps of Sinclair and his workmates. In presenting his case, Sinclair draws on crime reports, studies of prehistoric London and Ancient Egypt and incorporates poetic extracts from Bunyan, Yeats, and Blake. As well as line drawings and maps of energies, the original edition of *Lud Heat* also featured snapshots of Sinclair and his colleagues at work. Distinct from the archaeological thrust of Fisher's and Sinclair's interest in given areas of London, much of Reading's poetry is set in a generic, unspecified urban environment, which becomes the site of present day

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<sup>22</sup> Allen Fisher, *Prosynce* (London: Strange Faeces Press, 1975), p. 9

<sup>23</sup> Resources for each book are listed alphabetically at the end of *Place*, pp. 409-414

alienation, deprivation and often brutal crime. His poetry has been described as exemplifying a relocation of the pastoral in the municipal – the inner city in his work is understood not in terms of decline, but as a ‘troubled idyll’.<sup>24</sup> *Perduta Gente*, however, is more specific in its focus on a London underworld, its subjects a group of ‘wino-unworthies/knackered-up dispos’ who sleep under the Royal Festival Hall (PG, p. 167). This collection brings together fragments from newspaper articles and letters pages, property advertisements, scientific reports, and handwritten diaries, while *Ukulele Music* integrates scathing reviews of Reading’s publications, and extracts from a ukulele manual. The distinction between genuine ‘found’ material and pastiche is continually blurred.

In addition to a poetics of citation and appropriation then, each of these poets is concerned with the urban landscape, and its relation to social identity. The representation of unwritten urban histories, and unacknowledged spaces or ‘closed societies of the city’, (Sinclair, LH, p. 56) is one of the ways in which their poetry deals with more literal manifestations of power – a strategy that critiques the organisation and control of public space. London’s status as an embodiment of changes in national authority and identity became increasingly apparent during the seventies and eighties. During these decades, as David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones argue, London became ‘the site of the most visible triumphs of a newly unfettered capitalism – the mushrooming of new financial services, the ‘big bang’, the transformation of the docklands, the dizzying rise of property values, the victory of the Murdoch empire over Fleet Street trade unionism’.<sup>25</sup> Frank Mort describes how such developments were ‘at once material and symbolic. They were enacted in the workings of policies and programmes and through systems of representation.’<sup>26</sup> Material changes included the programme of slum clearance in the 1960s which demolished entire neighbourhoods – habitable housing along with the dilapidated – and replaced them with high-rise blocks. Commercial skyscrapers had been contributing to a dramatically shifting landscape ever since changes were made to

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<sup>24</sup> David Kennedy, ‘Elegies for the Living: The Poetry of Peter Reading’, in *New Relations*, pp. 120-152, p.125

<sup>25</sup> David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Introduction’, in Feldman and Stedman Jones eds., *Metropolis – London: Histories and Representations Since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 1-7, p. 1

<sup>26</sup> Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 149



building regulations in the 1950s.<sup>27</sup> Building programmes of the 1970s registered the growing influence of a free enterprise logic, which would reach new heights in the policies of the Conservative government of the 1980s. The Docklands redevelopment in the East End of London embodied these wider shifts in political policy – most notably the centralisation of power and the erosion of local autonomy. The London Docklands Development Corporation, set up in 1981, was one of several non-elected Urban Development Corporations, whose establishment usurped local government powers within designated ‘Enterprise Zones’.<sup>28</sup> Writing at the beginning of the nineties, Bill Schwarz argued that ‘the privilege accorded those new waterfront residents is at the direct cost of the bulk of the population in East London’ and assessed the development’s failure to benefit local people, and its role in deepening social division.<sup>29</sup> This kind of city-centre development represented the erosion of a sense of an urban public sphere. The economic restructuring of the 1980s impacted on the treatment of space, which was ‘no longer regarded as a totality to be shaped according to the needs of a wider social project’. The urban fabric was instead viewed ‘as a collection of fragmented, discrete and autonomous spaces’, and the ‘new art of ‘place marketing’’ promoted self-contained urban environments which were ‘not underpinned by any notion of the need to re-create a democratic urban public domain.’<sup>30</sup>

These changes in the material landscape inform the poetry of Sinclair, Fisher and Reading in implicit as well as more explicit ways. Their poetry reflects a concern with the active and political nature of space, and with the function of spatial planning in the implementation of power. More specifically, Reading’s *Perduta Gente*, and *Unpolished*

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 36-37. Restrictions limiting the height of new buildings to under 80 feet were lifted in the fifties, and ‘in 1954 the requirement for building licences, which had restricted most commercial buildings to reconstruction of war-damaged offices and factories, was abandoned’ (p. 36)

<sup>28</sup> Franco Bianchini and Hermann Schwengel, ‘Re-imagining the City’, in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey eds., *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 212-234, p. 224

<sup>29</sup> Schwarz documents how 90% of residential housing in the docklands, formerly owned by local authorities, was sold on the open market, while the LDDC failed to employ or train the local population. The wealthy and poor have been ‘brought together in a new proximity ... While Tower Hamlets now boasts windsurfing and yachtspeople it also has indices of tuberculosis six times that of the national average. Housing waiting-lists of the three Docklands boroughs exceed 25,000, while between 1981 and 1986 homelessness increased by 81 per cent.’ ‘Where Horses Shit a Hundred Sparrows Feed: Docklands and East London During the Thatcher Years’, in Corner and Harvey eds., *Enterprise and Heritage*, pp. 76-92, p. 90

<sup>30</sup> Bianchini and Shwengel, ‘Re-imagining the City’, pp. 214-215



*Mirrors*, the last book of Fisher's *Place*, offer moments of direct social commentary on contemporary development schemes. Written earlier, *Lud Heat*'s construction of a unique and mysterious geography of the city can nonetheless be read as a response to the growing commodification of city space in the seventies, a desire to symbolically reclaim the city, at a time when historic areas including Piccadilly Circus and Covent Garden were the target of controversial redevelopment plans, and record numbers of listed buildings were being destroyed.<sup>31</sup> But as Mort suggests, London's development was enacted not only through government policies, but through systems of representation – this was a period in which place was being symbolically as well as materially marketed. The selling of London as a 'Mecca of tourism' took off in this period.<sup>32</sup> The nationwide rise of the heritage industry in the seventies and eighties has been well documented, and it played an important role in the construction of a national identity, at a time when political discourse was also drawing heavily on the authority of the past. As the number of museums doubled between the 1960s and 1980s, critics highlight the psychological, compensatory nature of the past in times of economic and social crisis, with the recession in the 1970s encouraging the feeling that the postwar period was one of decline.<sup>33</sup>

In its concern with unofficial histories and geographies, the poetry considered in this chapter provides a counter to this increasingly prevalent marketing of place and history. These texts take an anti-nostalgic approach to the past, and *Place*, through its concern with histories of subjugation, urban oppression, and social division, challenges official constructions of a unified national tradition. Fisher also rejects the systemised logic of the museum, with its neat classification of the past, through his disjunctive, fragmented use of historical data and lack of referencing or an explanatory voice. What this chapter demonstrates then, is that the social commentary of this poetry cannot be clearly separated from its engagement with authoriality and textual power – they are in fact inextricably linked. The type of authorial voice and identity their poetry constructs plays an essential role in their voicing of urban space. The integration of the data of

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<sup>31</sup> Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins*, p. 260; According to Robert Hewison in *The Heritage Industry*, '8,000 listed buildings were destroyed between 1957 and 1977', p. 37

<sup>32</sup> Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 382-383

<sup>33</sup> See John Corner and Sylvia Harvey eds., *Enterprise and Heritage*, Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins*, and *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), and Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry*



public control emphasises this entanglement – impacting on the authority of the poetic voice as it simultaneously comments on more literal forms of power.

### 1.3 Critical Receptions

The possible relationship between a formal engagement with authoriality and a thematic concern with space and power has been somewhat overlooked in existing critical work on Fisher, Sinclair and Reading. While critics have produced valuable work on their aesthetics, and on the role of place in their poetry, there has been less reflection on how these interconnect. Furthermore, while Fisher's *Place* and Sinclair's *Lud Heat* have invited some comparative analyses, neither poet has been considered alongside Reading. Although Peter Barry's study *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (2000) incorporates all three poets in its wide-ranging survey, it does so in separate chapters. Fisher and Sinclair are grouped alongside Aidan Dun, for their shared concern with mapping London in terms of myths, historical traces and energies, their development of what Barry calls 'content specific poetry', (in which, like site-specific art, poem and data are built into one another), and their 'mainly American recent poetic ancestry'.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile the poetry of Reading, Ken Edwards, Barry MacSweeney and Ken Smith is read for its documentation of the effects of Thatcherism on British inner-cities in the 1980s.<sup>35</sup>

Barry's study exemplifies wider critical tendencies in the way it distinguishes between the poetic agenda and communities of these poets. Reading's unflinching documentation of contemporary social reality seems to provide an explicit comment on the state of Britain, something reflected in the critical reception of his poetry. Tom Paulin has been influential in labelling Reading's subject matter 'junk Britain' or, 'the insane ugliness of British life', which makes Reading into 'the unofficial laureate of a decaying nation'.<sup>36</sup> This interpretation has since been complicated by David Kennedy, who argues that Reading (unlike Larkin) 'rejects narratives of "post-imperial *tristesse*", nostalgia and

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<sup>34</sup> Barry, "Take off your Shoes in King's Cross": Envisioning London', *Contemporary Poetry and the City*, pp. 165-192, p. 166

<sup>35</sup> Barry, 'Writing the Inner City', *Contemporary Poetry*, pp. 61-102

<sup>36</sup> Tom Paulin, *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 291 and 287



decline', and that he uses the condition of England instead to comment on 'the present condition of humanity generally'.<sup>37</sup> But whether his poetry is read as a depiction of a decaying society or a comment on the perpetual hopelessness of humankind, its entanglement with conceptions of national identity remains a major focus of the critical literature. In contrast, critical evaluations of Sinclair and Fisher are at pains to stress transatlantic influences and the epic scope of their poetry which seem to transcend national concerns. Several accounts of *Place* and *Lud Heat* point to the significance of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (1946 – 1958) and Olson's *The Maximus Poems* (1960), the latter of which shares with these works an investigative approach to place, incorporation of data, open field poetics and a 'close attention to the perceptual rather than the conceptual field'.<sup>38</sup> Their approach is seen as an alternative to the 'insular obsession' with the anecdotal which has characterised dominant British poetry.<sup>39</sup> Discussing Fisher, Sinclair and J. H. Prynne in an article on experimental British poetry in the 1970s, Robert Sheppard uses the revealing subheading 'naming the rocks in a larger than national way', and suggests that Olson's poetics were appealing because they offered 'a model for a re-articulation of Britain from less immediately social perspectives' than the oppositional politics of the 1960s.<sup>40</sup>

While I do not dispute that Reading's poetry is much more overt in its social and political critique, or that the poetry of Sinclair and Fisher articulates transnational themes and understandings of place, it seems important to reassess how each poet engages with national identity. Interpretations of Reading's poetry often focus on his choice of materials and the events or situations he details when discussing his depiction of the state of Britain (the street crime, child abuse, homelessness, terrorism, nuclear fallout). But I

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<sup>37</sup> David Kennedy, *New Relations*, p. 143

<sup>38</sup> Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain, 'Introduction – A Fair Field Full of Folk' in Caddel and Quartermain eds., *OTHER*, pp. xv-xxix, p. xxvi. The editors are here talking about the appeal of Olson's poetics to Allen Fisher and J. H. Prynne. Charles Olson described open or projective verse through a series of statements in his 1950 essay 'Projective Verse', in Donald Allen ed., *The New American Poetry: 1945 – 1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 386-397. These are 'COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form' an adherence to the principle that 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT' and that 'ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION' The two basic units that 'make a poem', argues Olson, are the syllable and the line. The syllable is aligned with the ear while 'the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes it, at the moment that he writes' (pp. 387-389)

<sup>39</sup> Peter Barry, 'Allen Fisher and 'Content-Specific' Poetry', p. 198

<sup>40</sup> Sheppard, 'Artifice and the Everyday World: Poetry in the 1970s', p. 137, p. 138



want to develop this by suggesting the formal effects of authorial (dis)placement in his poetry can be seen as part of his cultural critique. At the same time, while I agree with Sheppard's reading of Sinclair and Fisher as consolidating a new poetics and politics of place, I want to focus here on the function of the authorial voice in articulating or 're-articulating' Britain. The poetic analysis in the rest of this chapter considers the relationship between collage, the authorial voice, and identity. It compares the formal techniques used by each poet to integrate pre-existing materials, analysing the impact these have on poetic authority. But it also considers how these strategies shape their poetry's engagement with more literal forms of power, and their representations of a social topography of identity and social inequality. It assesses how collage is used to reflect on the changing physical landscape of London, and how this registers anxieties about wider, national changes in power and a crisis in the public sphere.

Between them, Sinclair, Reading and Fisher demonstrate the versatility of the collage aesthetic, showing how it can be used on the one hand as part of a disjunctive poetics, which displaces the authority of the unified lyric speaker, or on the other hand, in a more converging way which legitimates this authority. Useful here is the framework used by Leonard Diepeveen in his study of quotation in modernist American poetry. He distinguishes between the lyric and dramatic voice within collage poetics, but stresses that they are part of a continuum rather than polar opposites. The dramatic voice is that of the different 'inserted' voices, it 'allows a number of different voices to exist and to flaunt their original textures', while the lyric voice 'almost totally controls the new inserted voices'. He adds that 'in the quoting poem, the lyric voice meets many conservative poetic strategies, such as the establishing of authority; the dramatic voice encourages the experimental, such as the free play of signifiers'.<sup>41</sup> While quoting poems are generally somewhere between these two boundaries of voice, in Sinclair's poetry the controlling, lyric voice is nearer the surface than it is in Fisher's and Reading's.

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<sup>41</sup> Leonard Diepeveen, *Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 101

## **2 Towards a Grand Narrative? ‘Unacknowledged Magnetism’ in Iain Sinclair’s *Lud Heat***

Throughout its prose sections, diary entries describing Sinclair’s day-to-day work, and free verse poetry, *Lud Heat* incorporates both textual and oral citations. Although these voices are integrated to create quite different effects, they all help to configure a particular authorial identity, which sustains a complex relationship to the urban geography of masculinity *Lud Heat* maps out.

### **2.1 Textual Quotations and the Authority of the Lone Artist**

*Lud Heat*’s quotations are clearly referenced and demarcated from the rest of the text. They are set in quotation marks, often italicised, and their original author acknowledged. In the prose sections, quotations are used in an essay-like format, brought in to validate Sinclair’s mapping of the city. Thus the manner in which he integrates these other authorial voices helps to establish rather than to detract from Sinclair’s authority. His approach to sources is in sympathy with his totalising representation of the city. The lines of latent power he identifies across the city, which are depicted in the pseudo-Egyptian map drawn by Brian Catling (LH, pp. 18-19), suggest a certain level of mastery of urban space. The source of this power is traced back to Ancient Egypt, an ancestry identified in the pyramid design worked into the churches, and the triangular relation between the churches and other powerful sites such as the plague pit at Bunhill Fields, and ‘two major sources of occult power: The British Museum and Greenwich Observatory’ (LH, p. 15). When using scholarship to endorse these correspondences, Sinclair precedes extracts with pointers and colons, such as ‘These Pyramids can claim a relation with the lost pyramids of Glastonbury ... M. R. James writes of them:’ (LH, p. 34); ‘Herodotus was also interested in these structures, himself an initiate:’ (LH, p. 34), ‘To close: G. R. Levy’s formulation on the Maya:’ (LH, p. 38); speaking of the parish of Stepney, ‘It was an island of right-handed vitalities ... Stow speaks of this:’ (LH, p. 99). In these prose sections, the text Sinclair draws on is often lengthy, and as Diepeveen observes of some of Pound’s *Cantos* which quote at length from ‘argumentative or “nonaesthetic” texts’,



the effect can become didactic, with the quote taking on its 'original rhetorical function.'<sup>42</sup>

Much of the time, then, Sinclair uses pre-existing texts to help make his argument, supporting his own empirical research with the specialist knowledge of others, from historians of London to scholars of Druidic and Egyptian rituals, myths and medievalism. This converging, somewhat possessive, use of sources to substantiate his ideas supports his deterministic mapping of the city. In his search for unity, a whole host of seemingly incongruous historical and present day incidents are appropriated under the same energies, from murders, fires and floods through to the hay fever, sunstroke and varicose veins suffered by Sinclair and his colleagues, interpreted as 'solar viruses' (LH, p. 110) and messages from 'the world of the pyramid' (LH, p. 111). As Barry observes, this urge towards synthesis constructs the city as 'a place in which there can be no accidents, no mere coincidences. All is tightly meshed, predicated and predicted like the double plot of a typical Borgesian story'.<sup>43</sup> A desire for unity and interconnection permeates Sinclair's observation of the everyday, as he notes 'look how the full/ moon becomes an area strongly linked with the horn antennae of this snail/ crossing our path' (LH, p. 75) and describes how his 'bicycle wheel spins/ a wobbly mandala' (LH, p. 47). The mandala, a symbol for the universe and appropriated in the psychology of Carl Jung as an expression of the self, 'the wholeness of the personality', is a fitting image for *Lud Heat*, for it encapsulates Sinclair's construction of a dominant authorial self and his converging approach to London's history and landscape.<sup>44</sup>

The use of quotations does not just add authority to the poetic voice, it also helps to construct a particular vision of the artist figure. Sinclair projects himself as an isolated surveyor of the city and explicator of the unknown. In uncovering the hidden energies between Hawksmoor's churches, he attempts to interpret 'the book of the city which remains unread' (LH, p. 58). In quoting historians and scholars alongside artists he seems

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<sup>42</sup> Diepeveen, *Changing Voices*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>43</sup> Barry, *Contemporary Poetry and the City*, p. 78.

<sup>44</sup> Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed., Aniela Jaffe, translated into English by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Collins, 1963). In the chapter 'Confrontation with the Unconscious', Jung discusses his compulsion to produce mandala drawings, and the gradual realisation of their significance, 'I acquired through them a living conception of the self. The self, I thought, was like the monad which I am, and which is my world. The mandala represents this monad, and corresponds to the microcosmic nature of the psyche', pp. 187-188.



to construct an ideal of poetry as a form of research and excavation. Yet it is excavation which retains a certain degree of obscurity, for he argues that ‘the *scientific approach*’ is ‘a bitter farce/ unless it is shot through with high occulting/ fear & need & awe of mysteries’ and ‘does not demean or explain/ in scholarly babytalk’ (LH, p. 113). He celebrates contemporary art which is dedicated to empiricism, to ‘the act of seeing with one’s own eyes’ as the title of Stan Brakhage’s film has it (LH, p. 54), but which is at the same time sympathetic to myth, ‘hieratic ritual’ (LH, p. 58) and symbolic patterning.

These ideals are developed in two prose sections of *Lud Heat*, ‘Rites of Autopsy’ and ‘From Camberwell to Golgotha’ which are dedicated to Sinclair’s account of specific artworks. Brakhage’s film and Brian Catling’s sculpture exhibited at the RCA embody ‘the autoptic instinct’ (LH, p. 78). This ideal is established with a quote from Brakhage: “There’s very little that’s understandable to me about life, or even bearable, except the seeing of it.” (LH, p. 54). Artistic traditions are claimed through quotation, and Sinclair pictures Brakhage filming with ‘that Olson chant running through his head, ‘polis is/eyes’’ (LH, p. 57). That Sinclair envisages his own authorial identity and poetic ideals in similar terms to these artists is suggested in another quotation, the epigraph to *Lud Heat* – a passage from Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* introducing the figure of the muck-rake, a man who ‘can look no way but downwards’ at ‘earthly things’. The poet as muck-rake is alluded to later in a diary entry, in which Sinclair describes ‘clearing the junk from Cannon Street Road’, listing in detail the objects his raking yields (LH, p. 42). The autobiographical anchoring of *Lud Heat* places a high value on the experiential, and it is the routes Sinclair takes in his job through which he argues ‘this land has become familiar/ & resolved’ (LH, p. 127), and not through bibliographic research alone or through ‘purely psychic connection’, like Thomas De Quincey’s account of the Ratcliffe Highway murders, which ‘did not grow from direct observation of the ground – so that the major visual clue was missed’ (LH, p. 23). But Sinclair’s figure of the artist also needs to articulate ‘fear & need & awe of mysteries’, and in this respect, Catling is described as a ‘shaman’ and praised for constructing the objects of his sculptural installation with a ‘fear and expectation of death’ and ‘with an understanding of the mutualities and relevancies in Siberian, Egyptian, Meroean, Sumerian and Mayan cultures’ (LH, p. 84). Brakhage, meanwhile, is described as either discovering or



inventing ritual for his audience (LH, p. 58). The artist thus remains a secretive and authoritative figure, as the only one who knows whether such patterns are constructed by or discovered in his work, suggesting parallels with Sinclair's representation of the city in *Lud Heat*.<sup>45</sup>

Brakhage and Catling fit into a longer tradition of artists who encode their ideas through myth, and whose work belongs to a radical tradition, marginalised in its day. William Blake's presence is pervasive in *Lud Heat*. The site of his house and his burial help to construct the triangular 'lines of influence' across the city (LH, p. 18), and Sinclair quotes several extracts from *Jerusalem*, the composition of which coincides with the strange ritualistic Ratcliffe Highway Murders: 'The year was 1812, the church very nearly one hundred years old, Blake writing *Jerusalem*...' (LH, p. 25). Blake's presence also endorses the notion of the artist as a dissident, isolated genius, something which the nineteenth-century symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud also conjures up. Using an extract from *Une Saison en Enfer* (A Season in Hell), "*j'ensevelis les morts dans mon ventre*" (LH, p. 95), to close an untitled poem about the interpretation of omens, Sinclair also describes his dreams as 'monologues with Rimbaud' (LH, p. 102). His passionate rejection of the purely scientific approach colludes with Rimbaud's understanding of the artist's vision as a product of the derangement of the senses. The celebration of the marginalised, underground artist figure is perhaps made most explicit in Sinclair's review of Catling's work at a 1974 Royal College of Art exhibition. His account of the bulk of the exhibition is damning: 'the ground impression is obviously depressing; enclosed, cunning, banal and proficient. Our seduction is attempted. There are cries for love ... A spurious search for 'originality' has been encouraged ... Content is a starving zero.' Within such a context, Catling's work stands out, 'the man is obviously out of sympathy with the essential strategies of the institute, yet does not oppose them with the kind of bitter and repressive fury that is, finally, self-mutilating. He doesn't waste his energy. Prepared to work undercover he gets on with it as far as is possible in this sponsored,

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<sup>45</sup> See Perril, 'A Cartography of Absence: The Work of Iain Sinclair'. Perril discusses *Lud Heat*'s engagement with the problem of whether conceptualisation discovers relations that exist *a priori* or actively constructs them. He also points out that the title compresses this problem – with 'Heat' used in the work to signify instinctual discovery, and 'Lud' referring to King Llud, 'ruler of London in pre-Roman times' who was 'renowned as a master builder ... and therefore represents the elements of construction', p. 317. Which pole *Lud Heat* is more closely allied to is left open to question.



other-directed, environment' (LH, p. 78-9). The undercover artist is romanticised here, not for a showy rebelliousness but for his single-mindedness, his willingness to 'go it alone'.

## 2.2 Dialogue and Masculine Identity

Sinclair also depicts himself as an artist who is working undercover, albeit within a quite different environment from Catling's RCA. The attraction of his job as a garden assistant in Limehouse lies in its proximity to the sites anchoring the 'unacknowledged magnetism' of the city (LH, p. 21). 'My own jobs follow the churches across the city', he announces, and mowing 'continually between the shifting influence of St George and St Anne' is the latest in a line of temporary occupations, such as 'cigar-packing in Clerkenwell' and working in the 'ullage cellars of Truman's Brewery, Brick Lane', both of which cross the paths of hidden energies (LH, p. 21). Sinclair's day-to-day work provides evidence to support his urban mapping, while depictions of his attempted immersion in this masculine working community also consolidate a particular authorial identity. To some extent, these sections serve to ground his observations, reinforcing Sinclair's role as a muck-rake as much as a shaman, who is concerned not only with high ritual but with the rituals of everyday life. But his use of quotations in these autobiographical diary sections also serves to distance the narrator from this working class culture, implying his status is that of an outsider, a quiet observer whose motivation is quite distinct from 'Joe, Arthur, Bill and the others who are in there for the duration' (dedication to LH, p. 7).

The method of quoting the dialogue of his colleagues differs from *Lud Heat's* incorporation of other, more textual sources. A greater distance is implied, and the markers of agreement, which precede the quotes from writers, are absent. Instead, verbatim quotation is often used to more ironic effect. The boss, for example, 'discovers my next-of-kin: 'just in case.' He warns of 'rough and ready language.' ... 'I've been down here twenty years. They're not friendly like us northerners'' (LH, p. 39). The diary entry for May 14 comprises 'Tractor-driver Ben reads an account of the death of HRH the Princess Anne's horse, Doublet. 'Be better for one of us to be shot than that horse. A



right shame'' (LH, p. 40). His summary of the dog handler's stories of patrolling Victoria Park are also quietly mocking, using snippets of quotation which bring out the handler's 'Fire & treacle of self-righteousness' (LH, p. 44). Such citations aim to depict a particular environment by capturing its forms of verbal communication, which the narrator, and by implication the reader, are removed from. The tone is not always mocking, at times Sinclair appears to quote his workmates in affectionate terms, such as his use of the simple but heartfelt excerpts from the more sensitive Joe who describes his "goose pimples like golf balls" (LH, p. 101), and his fear of the sight of the hospice where "they take you in & you never come out" (LH, p. 71). Yet even these more sympathetic moments serve to strengthen Sinclair's status as the somewhat removed observer, the eloquent writer working undercover.

The distinction between the authorial identity Sinclair creates, and his approach to representing the world of manual labour is indicative of *Lud Heat*'s complex articulation of masculine identity. Sinclair seems to project a masterful authorial identity through his clear signposting of quotations, which creates a dominant authorial voice, clearly in charge of the other, inserted voices. This concurs with his constructed ideal of the artist as a somewhat heroic, independent figure, who is out of sympathy with the dominant culture. This traditionally masculine figure is a solitary but dedicated enquirer who bears parallel with Olson's Maximus. His vision of the city betrays a desire for mastery and control, not unlike Hawksmoor who 'had his vision of the whole' which he was eager to apply to the 'unwieldy Monster' of London (LH, p. 14). Sinclair's city is very much a male domain – designed by men, represented by numerous male artists and writers, and maintained by male labour – not just the GLC employees, but the 'giant dustman' (LH, p. 41), and the 'cigarette-holding slaughtermen' of the coroner's office (LH, p. 59). He relishes the opportunity to walk the flare-path of Hawksmoor's churches by night, in the company of other men 'taking drinks in the appropriate cellars and rat-holes' (LH, p. 107), and his interest in ritualistic murders, gang crime and in 'exploring the psychology of the aggressor'<sup>46</sup> reinforces this strongly gendered urban geography. But there are exceptions which seem to undermine this dominant masculinity, in turn reflecting changing understandings of masculine identity in Britain in the 1970s. There is a

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with David Sexton, *The Independent on Sunday Magazine*, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1991, pp. 20-26, p. 23



lingering ambiguity in both his projection of a masculine authorial self, and his representations of urban working class masculinity.

Sinclair is self-reflexive about the authoritative persona he assumes in *Lud Heat*. He is conscious of the limitations of his research, at times alluding to his patterning as a somewhat inadequate 'brief and nervy synopsis' (LH, p. 21), and is overwhelmed when 'information fattens to excess' and 'the whole structure becomes top-heavy and falls beyond control' (LH, p. 36). The heroic figure of the lone artist is also undercut by his awareness of the egoism of such a position. Reflecting on the grounding function of hay fever as 'the anchor, the counter - balance' in the case of a colleague whose 'self-image is higher than his rung on the ladder of reality', he also argues that 'these accusations go against the poet with equal force. If he is not truly 'here' the fevers will nail him. The continually drawn handkerchief is drenched with his melting ego' (LH, p. 67). A comment Sinclair makes in a later work, *Rodinsky's Room*, also suggests self-consciousness about his possessive authorial voice. 'We excavate the history we need, bend the past to colonise the present'.<sup>47</sup> He acknowledges, then, that his interpretation of the city, like that of others (in this case the historian Raphael Samuel), is partial and driven by personal interests.

Alongside the lingering self-consciousness which undercuts Sinclair's masterful authorial persona, his representation of the workforce implies an ambivalence towards traditional modes of masculinity. His images of all-male camaraderie organised around cultures of work or drinking suggests a desire to hold onto established forms of male identity at a time when 'the masculine myth' of absolute sexual identities was coming under various pressures.<sup>48</sup> Sinclair's sustained fascination with the East End can partly be seen as a resistance to the onset of cultural and material changes in other zones of the city which were undermining traditional working-class masculinities and configuring new

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<sup>47</sup> Iain Sinclair and Rachel Lichenstein, *Rodinsky's Room*, p. 177

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Rutherford, 'Who's That Man?', in Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford eds., *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), pp. 21-67. Rutherford argues that 'Feminism and radical sexual politics have grown up in the fissures of a disintegrating ideology of masculine authority; they have also encouraged this shifting of attention onto men' (p. 24). He discusses the weakening of various structures and institutions which have resulted in a threat to men's heterosexual identities and dominant positions. 'The changing nature of work, and the disruption of work culture with the decline of manufacturing industries, the introduction of new technology and the subsequent deskilling of traditional male jobs are changes that have undermined traditional working-class masculinities' along with 'high levels of male unemployment and the growing jobs sector employing part-time women' (p. 23).



gender identities more closely associated with commerce.<sup>49</sup> *Lud Heat*'s account of public sector working practices stresses the men's collaborative approach to their tasks. Work routines are punctuated with stories, banter, discussion of holidays and home – talk which is 'cupped in their hands like/ prison cigarettes' (LH, p. 65) – the loquacious Johnny's solutions to 'all the major political social and economic problems' (LH, p. 119), reading tabloids in the bothy, breaks for ice-cream, and friendly church caretakers offering tea (LH, p. 121). Yet it is a specific form of male-camaraderie that is celebrated, as represented by the more sensitive Joe and Arthur, 'the odd man out ... the earlier Spitalfields immigrant ... with that love of flowers and small birds' (LH, p. 59), which is valued over more volatile, authoritative forms of masculinity, as seen in the opinionated 'angry monologues' (LH, p. 45) of the intolerant boss, and the park patroller relishing his prohibitive control over public space. Undertones of violence, which are never far from the surface given *Lud Heat*'s interest in malevolent forces, also caution against the romanticisation of the East End or of working-class masculine identities. The section entitled 'The immigrant, the sentimental butcher' develops the motif of territorial aggression. A report of 'the Usher Road vigilantes – who have declared war on the squatters who are trying to plant a different culture in their territory' recounts violent confrontation over rights to protected enclaves of the city (LH, p. 120). The squatters, mostly east end families, have been allowed to inhabit the already condemned buildings, '[b]ut the indigenous mob wont stand for it. They work and they have devoured media fear. They break in with pick-axes and crow-bars ...' (LH, p. 120). This drama is seen as evidence of a more widespread contestation over the spaces of the city, particularly in the more dilapidated urban areas. *Lud Heat* alludes to violent confrontation between the white working class and immigrant communities in an area where Dockers had marched in support of Enoch Powell in 1968

put down the elements  
a bowl  
against darker times

here: Hackney South & Shoreditch where

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<sup>49</sup> Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, particularly part three 'Topographies of Taste: Place, Space and Identity in 1980s London', pp. 149-199, which discusses 'the social and symbolic geography' (p. 150) of gendered consumption, focusing on the active role played by Soho's geography in constructing both public and private masculinities.

Mr Robin May polled the National Front's  
best result                      2,544 votes  
(LH, p. 130)

These scenes register the shifting politics of the inner city, as well as an increasingly inflammatory popular press, and as Perril observes, they contain a 'prophetic resonance': '*Lud Heat* may precede the Thatcher years, but it subtly documents a heightening trend that the Tory party will capitalise upon.'<sup>50</sup>

Sinclair's authorial persona retains a certain distance from the communities depicted, a distance which is necessary in configuring *Lud Heat*'s specific kind of spatial consciousness. This work presents a tension between an empirical and more symbolic experience of space, or between what Henri Lefebvre terms 'spatial practice', and 'representational spaces'.<sup>51</sup> Sinclair's detailing of the everyday routines of labour provides an example of 'spatial practice', a repeated practice characteristic of a social space such as a workplace, which generally helps to reproduce a dominant social order. In contrast, 'representational spaces' are more complex, have the potential to complicate this order, and are associated with the lived experience of inhabitants but also with artists who make symbolic use of space, and who are concerned with a city's unconscious.<sup>52</sup> In addition to his pursuit of the hidden systems of energies within London, Sinclair's admiration for spatial artists whose work creates 'systems of non-verbal symbols and signs' is evidence of the importance of representational space to his work.<sup>53</sup> Spatial practice detracts from such systems, 'A work ethic buries ancient descriptions', and while 'teabreaks are calculated/ the rituals pushed through', *Lud Heat* argues that 'it is what we don't notice/ that is worth remarking' (LH, p. 26, p. 51). Thus to reinforce his role as an excavator of the city's clandestine codes, he needs to maintain a certain distance from everyday spatial practice. Ultimately then, although it is tempered with self-reflexivity, Sinclair's authorial identity remains authoritative and individualistic. His use of a collage of quotations helps to create this identity in different ways. The citation of dialogue adds verisimilitude to the representation of a community, in the process highlighting Sinclair's

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<sup>50</sup> Perril, 'A Cartography of Absence', p. 318

<sup>51</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974) translated into English by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), outlined in Chapter 1, pp. 1-67

<sup>52</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 39

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 33, p. 39



somewhat tangential position to it. When quoting from textual and literary sources, however, he tends to use extracts which articulate sentiments he agrees with, integrating them in a converging manner which helps to legitimate the authority of his controlling poetic voice. Through these extracts he claims a tradition for *Lud Heat*, which is a composite of mystic scholarship, urban history, empirical research, and symbolist art. The extracts retain the authority of their origin, and it is their source and not only their content that is important in this respect, for they help to consolidate a particular ideal of the artist. This reflection on authorial identity, as well as engaging with the power relations of the text, is also an important part of *Lud Heat*'s critique of different models of masculinity, and thus a way of engaging with British identities which were under scrutiny in this period. The use of other textual sources to endorse a projection of the self can also be seen as one kind of response to the changing nature of the city. Reflecting on the reasons that the Gothic 'provides such resonant ways of apprehending contemporary London', Roger Luckhurst suggests that '[s]o etiolated is any idea of a metropolitan public sphere that we have turned instead to the private experiences of hidden routes, secret knowledges, flittering spectres, the ghosts of London past.'<sup>54</sup> Sinclair provides evidence of such a turn, and the approach he takes to other authorial voices throughout *Lud Heat* serves to strengthen the authority of his own private and highly individual experience of the city.

### 3. Kaleidoscopic Voices and Authorial Displacement in Allen Fisher's *Place*

Like Sinclair, Fisher is also concerned with the impact of the physical environment on the individual: both *Lud Heat* and *Place* engage with space as an active force. But their approaches are quite distinct. Where Sinclair's concern with the active environment is individual and specific in its focus on the arcane symbolism and power exerted by Hawksmoor's churches, Fisher's approach is somewhat more dispersed, and more sociological. His concern with the built environment and housing conditions can be seen as part of his 'empirical attempt to record the unrecorded, or at least suppressed, real life

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<sup>54</sup> Luckhurst, 'Contemporary Gothic London', p. 541

of the urban people in their precise history'.<sup>55</sup> The representational space constructed by *Lud Heat* grants the author a degree of control over the urban landscape, at a time when the fabric of the city seemed to be changing at a pace beyond the control of its inhabitants. While responding to some of the same pressures, Fisher's poetics avoid this sense of mastery, which is a necessary part of his critique of individualism and authoritarian rule. In conjunction with its experimental structure, *Place*'s decentring of the authorial voice is an essential part of this critique.

Fisher's project aims to capture the simultaneity of various processes and systems shaping our sense of place at any one time. It demonstrates the intersection of unseen physical, biological, social, historical, ecological, geographical and financial systems in determining the experience of the urban subject. This concurrent exploration of 'place of living' and 'place of being'<sup>56</sup> entails rapidly shifting subject positions and uncertainty about the speaking voice – the legitimating authorial voice central to *Lud Heat* is much less visible here. At the same time, however, this uncertainty does not represent a total displacement of the authorial self. Like Sinclair, but to a lesser degree, Fisher draws attention to himself as the author of a work in progress, with interjections such as 'it's not just my information that's incomplete' and 'how in hell did i expect to cover all this ground/ it takes me more than half an hour to walk to the library/ to look this much up' (P, p. 55). *Place* also incorporates several dates and signed letters, including a review-letter to Sinclair on the publication of *Lud Heat* (P, p. 152-3), letters to friends, and one to the borough council criticising the demolition rather than rehabilitation of housing in Coldharbour Lane (P, p. 129, p. 157). Momentarily autobiographical details like these suggest that while *Place* may reject a dominant guiding authorial voice, it does not try to present itself as objective or impersonal. This is reinforced in the frequent use of the first person pronoun and the repetition of visceral descriptions, which locate the human self in relation to biological and physical systems beyond human perception.

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<sup>55</sup> Clive Bush, *Out of Dissent*, p. 128

<sup>56</sup> Fisher, *Proscyncel*, p. 9



### 3.1 Falling in Line: Ideology and the Cityscape

*Place*'s preoccupation with rivers serves different functions. Archaeologically, they provide a focus for documenting historic changes to the physical landscape and for assessing the human impact on the natural environment, but they also serve a more metaphoric role. On one hand, images of the polluted Thames testify to the ecological damage caused by the overcrowding of the nineteenth century, as 'London spreads beyond its walls' (P, p. 158) with "the tentacles of the Great Wen/ reaching out into rural England"' (uncited quotation, P, p. 162). But the Thames and its tributaries also provide a way of representing modes of thinking and the flow of creative energies, so that images of pollution – 'the whole river an opaque brown' (P, p. 374) – also represent a stagnation of thought, contributing to *Place*'s 'critique of and escape from a culture marked by unhealth'.<sup>57</sup> *Place book one*, which was started in 1971, draws on Nicholas Barton's *The Lost Rivers of London* (1962) to trace the various tributaries of the Thames that have gone underground. These lost rivers become a recurring image, and their presence contrasts with the straight Roman road, used throughout *Place* to symbolise authoritarianism and a valorisation of the conceptual. The maps in the original edition of *Place book one* introduce this tension, one setting out the city's Roman roads and settlements and the other depicting the open and underground rivers of London. This book charts the historic pressures put upon the rivers by industry – 'the rivers we cut/ the artificial divides' (P, p. 47):

the Bosses of this brickwork  
that insist our rivers be straight  
from here to here                      by way of the Ring road  
not by way of body's measure    the earth's pulse  
but the quadrant and motor car  
(P, p. 52)

This logic of the ring road, the quadrant and the car refers in a quite literal sense to the kind of urban-motorway scheme the Greater London Council were proposing on a massive scale in the 1960s. According to Roy Porter, the Ringways 'were envisaged as a spider's web of orbitals and radials' consisting of 800 miles of road, and representing 'the vastest investment ever proposed in London's fabric. Some 100,000 people would lose

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Hampson, 'Producing the Unknown: Language and Ideology in Contemporary Poetry', p. 138

their homes to make way for the motorways – about the same total as displaced by all the railways in the whole of the Victorian era.’<sup>58</sup> Local opposition eventually helped to defeat the Ringways scheme, which was abandoned in the mid seventies. But Fisher’s image of straightening out the river also taps into the metaphoric potential of the dead straight roman road

so our new roads are straight through the heart    past it

to fall in line with the others  
to fall in line

in a grid    an “iron grip of history”  
chosen by our logic    bottlenecked to the chaos  
out of which our pleasure comes    our sexual violence (P, p. 52)

The gridiron road structure comes to embody creative, sexual and social repression, which in the final book, *Unpolished Mirrors* is personified in the character of Watling. Named after one of the Roman roads of London, Watling’s monologues are delivered in an authoritative, controlled and expository manner, distinct from the more reflective and meandering poetry of the rest of *Place*, a distinction underlined in the strict left hand justification of these sections. Watling, ‘perpetrator of city life as oppression’ (P, p. 385), represents ‘the passion to control’ (P, p. 376), the ‘suppression of ecological considerations’ (P, p. 385) and declares

I bring you this way  
for orderly directions of conscience  
Moral purity and racist message  
Roman and Victorian  
following my cardinal line  
from emotional seeking  
towards intellect without analysis (P, p. 376)

*Place*’s rejection of the systemisation of everyday life represented by Watling’s ‘cardinal line’, is essential to Fisher’s poetics and the designing intelligence of *Place* as a project. Its structure is acutely unlinear – in its original published format, the boundaries between the separate books were blurred due to the re-shuffling and re-ordering of sections, so that some appeared in more than one publication. The ways in which the different books are conceived of as reflecting, responding to and revising others, rejects a

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<sup>58</sup> Porter, *London: A Social History*, pp. 359-360



chronological or hierarchical arrangement,<sup>59</sup> with the overall structure instead imagined as a rotating sphere, which can be joined by the reader at any point.<sup>60</sup> The arrangement of the text on individual pages also tries to avoid a linear appearance, with irregular alignment of blocks of text, lines placed at diagonals, and protracted spaces between words. Metapoetic moments of *Place* describe the search for new and inventive art forms, and celebrate ambiguity and process over a more assertive linearity. In a later poem, 'Subsequent Looping', Fisher criticises poetry which represses experimentation and relies upon a 'personal autograph' to claim 'universal/ assent'. Such poetry is imagined in directional terms:

self satisfaction  
 behave like a billiard ball directed  
     at a pocket  
 damper to revolutionary  
 directionless joy<sup>61</sup>

The exhibitions and performances of Joseph Beuys, (who, like Fisher, was also a member of *Fluxus*) are seen as providing an alternative aesthetic model. His work 'invents new forms' and represents 'soft control/ through colours chemicals that remain ambiguous/ anticipates energy instead of predicts' (P, p. 366). Similarly, Fisher's poetics throughout *Place* aspire to 'grasp the world/ without gripping it' (P, p. 343) and to reject an authoritarian, Watling-like control of his subject. This is achieved in part through his unpossessive approach to other authorial voices.

In comparison with Sinclair, Fisher's signposting of sources is less overt, and this is part of his more disjunctive aesthetic. The sense of *Place*'s fragmentation stems not so much from its use of syntax, but from the constant jumping between subject matter to create a montage of various scenes and details. Where Sinclair sought to explain connections between various sites and incidents, *Place* often leaves readers to speculate on the connections between its fragmented scenes and bits of texts, and raises questions

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<sup>59</sup> See Hampson, 'Producing the Unknown', for a more detailed outline of the structure, of *Place*, based on an interview with Fisher in *Alembic* 4, (1975-6): Books I and III were seen as 'thematic' with Books II and IV as 'excursionary reflection' upon them, and the books were seen as locations, as components of a structure, not as the basis for a linear, chronological project. The sets that constitute each book were shuffled, re-shuffled, cut into each other to lay bare the constant re-presentation and re-vision of the work, the work as praxis not object, the notion of 'open-field' composition (deriving from Olson) combining with the desire to de-mystify the process of composition.' (p. 138)

<sup>60</sup> Allen Fisher, *Prosyncel*, p. 9

<sup>61</sup> In Denise Riley ed., *Poets on Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 90-91

as to whose voice we are hearing. To take an example from an early section of *Place*, one page starts with:

Our position is quite clear  
if only we could see it

under the car fumes we can breathe  
if we try and our minds will dance (P, p. 17)

This style of poetry – written in the present tense, using the collective pronoun, and making broad ontological statements – crops up repeatedly throughout *Place*. It can be seen again, for example in lines such as ‘we are within cycles migrating’ (P, p. 57), ‘everything that happens here/ happens in our being’ (P, p. 72) and ‘we are becoming too old/ our bones are dried tobacco for children’ (P, p. 25). But the next lines represent an abrupt shift, with ‘the Bishop of Baieux was/ scything a spade into the head of William Rufus’ (P, p. 17). On the next page there is another shift in tone and scene. It opens with a quotation:

“That people shall, once a year, at the time accustomed,  
with the curate and substantial men of the parish, walk  
about the parishes.”

and is followed by a dense list detailing the exact route taken here in ‘Rogation Week’ (P, p. 19). Distinguished by a different font, it starts ‘from the landing place at Lambeth to waterside and Old Barge House to corner St. George’s fields and so west of the Ditch south to Lord Mayor’s stone near Dog and Duck’ (P, p. 18) and carries on in a similar fashion. These extracts suggest something of how Fisher’s poetics work, and how his use of quotations heighten the sense of disjunction that is already established by the constant movement between different subject matter and situations. The text on p. 18 is recognisable as another authorial voice through its particular texture – its brisk instructional tone, its slightly archaic phrasing (‘at the time accustomed’, and ‘so west of the Ditch’), and partial use of quotation marks. While the first section appears to quote a law, part of a town charter, the route description is probably taken from Thomas Allen’s *The History & Antiquities of the Parish of Lambeth* (1826), which features in the list of resources (P, p. 409). Like Fisher’s frequent integration of historical statistics in *Place*, this is the type of text not usually understood as individually ‘authored’, and the lack of direct referencing draws attention to this, providing a comment on the dispersed nature of



power and the seemingly anonymous voice of public control. As Foucault's discussion of the links between political power and urban space traces, since the seventeenth century, the model of the city has increasingly become the 'matrix for the regulations that apply to a whole state'.<sup>62</sup> With government rationality modelled on the policing of the city, the spaces and microspaces of social activity have become ever more planned and regimented, and this form of spatialised power relies on the accumulation of administrative resources such as statistics. Alongside Fisher's incorporation of such resources, the monologues of Watling make explicit some of the forms of bio-power by which the State permeates these microspaces of everyday life. 'I bring you street configurations/ ... to guide and control your movement' Watling announces, continuing that the 1936 Public Health Act to regulate 'drainage, roof water conveyance, cesspools/ disposal of foul matter.... Gives me the right to enter your property/ without consent' (P, p. 386).

The use of information in the rogation week example above typifies the nature of quotations within *Place* – while their appearance seems to create a chaotic, digressive structure, they often help to develop certain themes that are returned to in later books of *Place*. As one critic points out, Fisher's work articulates a tension between the 'rapid juxtapositions of different materials and patterns of continuity'.<sup>63</sup> The Lambeth rogation week data contributes to this work's exploration of place as property. This allusion to a practice which reinforced the boundaries of parochial property and the power of the church, finds echoes elsewhere in *Place*: in data regarding disputes about the ownership of specific estates, statistics on the disappearance of common land, and commentary on more contemporary property development, in which the majority of the population are once again reminded of their lack of rights

before they know  
purchasing power is the license to purchase power controls

townplanning  
involving compulsory purchase

"the acquisition of everybody"  
(Vaneigem cites Croydon) (P, p. 171)

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<sup>62</sup> Michel Foucault, interview with Paul Rabinow, 'Space, Knowledge, and Power', in Rabinow ed., *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 239-256, p. 241

<sup>63</sup> Scott Thurston, 'Method and Technique in the Work of Allen Fisher', *Poetry Salzburg Review*, no. 3, (2002), pp. 10-33, p. 29



### 3.2 National Identity, Past and Present: Survival of the Fittest

A desire to conceive alternatives to possessive ownership shapes the subject and aesthetics of *Place*. The urge to ‘grasp’ or understand the world ‘without gripping it’ leads to the displacement of a unified authorial voice which would traditionally guide readers through the poem’s argument. The emphasis is on the reader to identify connections, not just from line to line, but throughout *Place* as a whole. Moments of the poem almost seem to revel in a state of fragmentation, discordance, and uncertain authorship, as in the page below:

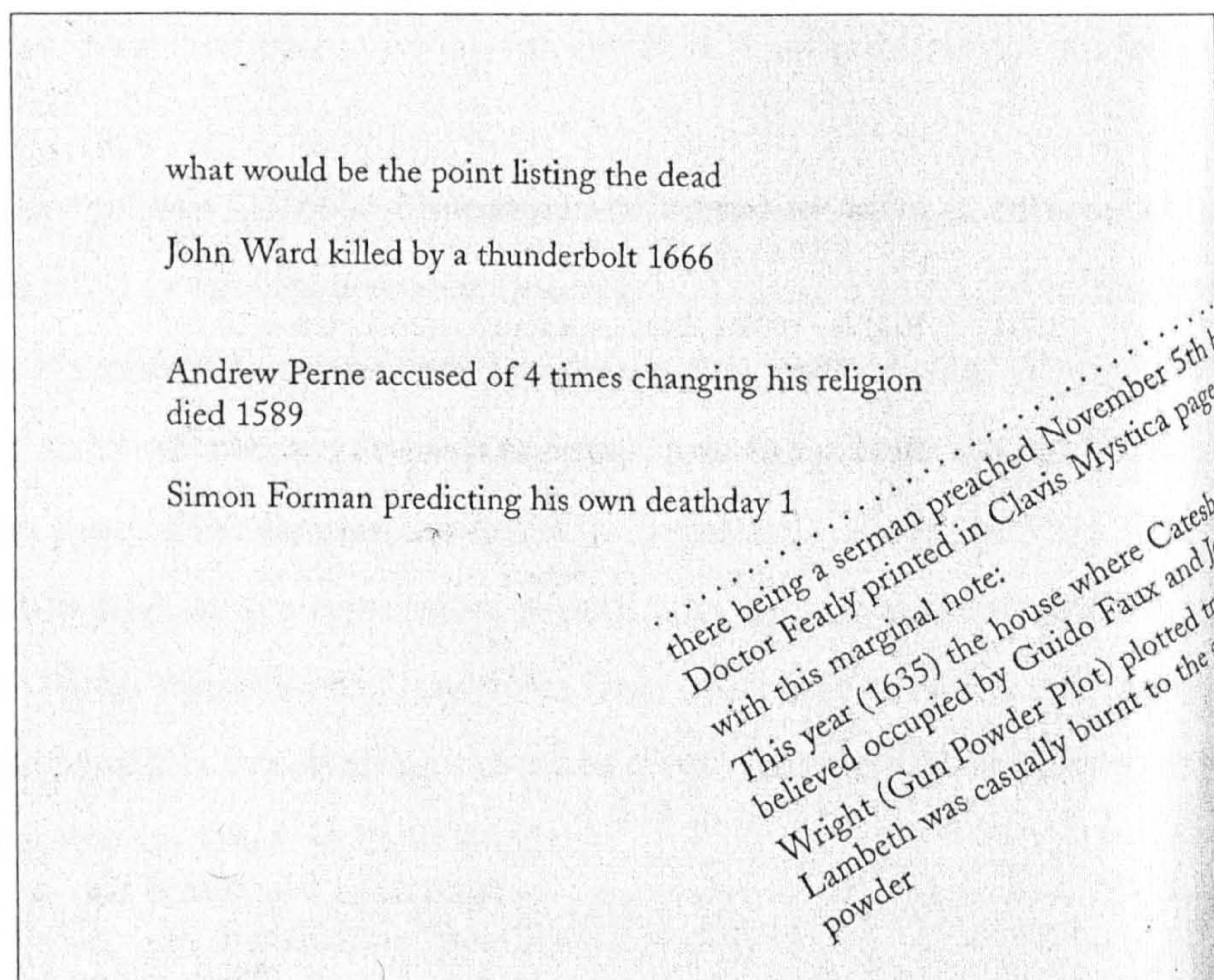


Figure 1: *Place*, p. 38

This list is presented without explanation as to the connections between ‘the dead’, and this is interrupted by a torn fragment of text describing a note found in a book of sermons – compressing multiple layers of authorship into a scrap of writing. To physically read this text involves a strain because of its incompleteness, but this seems to help it to say something about divergence and disjunction on a much larger scale. The men listed are in



some way connected to events following the English Reformation – Guido Faux and Robert Catesby for their role in the 1605 gunpowder plot, the astrologer Simon Forman for predicting where another fugitive involved in the plot was hiding, and Daniel Featley for his work as a translator for the King James Bible. In the wider structure of *Place*, these allusions relate to the myth of a unified national culture, and are reminiscent of the violence and subjugation involved in the formation of any nation. This permeates *Place*, not only through references to the invention of a national religion, but through images of contested rights to sovereignty, such as the eleventh century Bishop of Baieux ‘scything a spade into the head of William Rufus’ (seen above) or references to historic battles, ‘475 ad. Britons defeated at Crayford, 4000 dead’ (P, p. 14). The most vociferous image of conquest is the imperialist Watling, who also represents the construction of a unified national identity: ‘I assist to keep you to tradition/ with commodities I have approved of’, the ‘tapestries, flags and coins’ which remind that ‘I am noble and founded cities’ (P, p. 386).

The speeches of Doll in *Unpolished Mirrors* provide a counterpoint to Watling’s monologues. Doll is an allegorical embodiment of the marginalised urban voice, a ‘street woman’ who ‘came to London stone a pleb/ of Jack Straw’s rout’ (P, p. 379, p. 392). She recounts a history of ‘coercian rape butchery’ from the perspective of the suppressed, spanning the time of the Roman conquest to the present day (P, p. 392). The idea of both city and nation built on the repression of particular groups also informs Fisher’s attention to historical social exclusionary practices. Data regarding asylums and the lives of specific individuals in Lambeth workhouses create fragmented narratives in *Becoming*:

Roger Pike “housed” in Elder Road  
for breaking church music  
misspelling ‘guard’

“Clean up the centre ..  
“Sugar-dust the page ..  
“Move out the feeble ..  
(P, p. 243)

The scene is a House of Industry for Infant Poor in Elder Road, 1810, where the children’s skin is ‘cleaned with abrasives/ thus rosy “health”’. Roger is ‘released to join the Junior Leaders/ in a scrubbed – clean vest’, only to appear again towards the end of

this book, 'Roger's still inside the prison system' (P, p. 298). The extract above is another example of Fisher's use of quotations to create indeterminacy – with their origins unidentified, and quotation marks left unclosed. However, these phrases work together through juxtaposition to suggest analogies between the aesthetic, the social and the political realm – the framing of the euphemistic 'sugar-dust the page' between the two socially repressive, exclusionary measures draws attention to the role of the text, of the written word, in the systemisation of society.

This brief history of Roger Pike (and other named individuals of Elder Road) contributes to *Place*'s sustained critique of 'intellect without analysis', the manipulation of abstract logic into a form of social control and exclusion. In particular, Fisher draws attention to the appropriation of Darwinian rationality by 'Galton's eugenics/ the 'IQ curve' made symmetrical', in which 'method of "Nature" equals/ method of "Society"' (P, p. 243)<sup>64</sup> and his attack of contemporary British political policy centres on neoliberal economics, 'a political economy expressing abstract formulae/ "laws of nature", Darwin's will/ Greed planting/ competition not exchange' (P, p. 361). Britain's status as 'a nation of bankers and banked' (P, p. 403) was becoming increasingly apparent at the beginning of the 1980s when *Unpolished Mirrors* was first published, and this book is direct in its attack of the "ecocatastrophe"/ again made possible in 1977 when Cutler/ leads the Greater Council of London/ proposed "to begin work immediately to revive/ the Docklands". Horace Cutler, the Conservative leader of the GLC from 1977 – 1981, promises "the most exciting urban development in Europe for/ the rest of this century." Achieved "by allowing/ the natural economic mechanisms of/ a great city to operate" (P, p. 374). The movement towards these policies is traced in earlier books of the mid-seventies, through the prism of building regulations and redevelopment. Buildings are

thrown together  
not without plans    rather without consideration  
that the statistical pattern is incomplete  
(P, p. 171)

and 'misguided aesthetics' result in 'paper/ mapping lives and styles with social ignorance/ governed by finance' (P, p. 171).

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<sup>64</sup> Francis Galton (1822–1911), the British scientist and cousin of Charles Darwin who coined the term 'eugenics'.



*Place*, then, aims to show some of the ways in which power modelled on an abstract conceptual logic, or governed by a financial ethos has impacted upon the lives and environment of city dwellers throughout history. It enacts a critique of authoritarian politics, and in doing so, its use of different authorial voices, and the integration of traditionally non-poetic material plays a major role. The techniques by which Fisher incorporates these other voices encourage indeterminacy and appear to displace his authorial presence. His decentring of the authorial voice conforms to *Place*'s search for new aesthetic structures, which work in unlinear ways. This displacement can also be seen partly as a formal response to the authoritarian centralism of the new right political project, which is critiqued more explicitly in *Unpolished Mirrors*. There is a sense in Fisher's poetry that in incorporating extracts from other texts, he is not necessarily endorsing their argument, and this differs from Sinclair's use of quotes to claim certain traditions and knowledge. Fisher has stressed that the list of resources for *Place* are not automatically recommendations for further reading, that they are 'long turgid things quite often' which he has 'just pulled from', declaring 'I am in the best sense a magpie in that regard: I drop round and pick up and then use it in my own nest'.<sup>65</sup> *Place*'s wide range of sources contributes to its ambitious scope. Its disjunctive aesthetics entail constant shifts between physiological perceptions, understandings of national identity, and regional history – shifts which capture something of the complex meanings of 'place' understood in terms of being and living. It is thus an attempt to represent something bordering on the impossible, 'our position', which Fisher claims would be 'quite clear if only we could see it'. Through an irregular system of referencing, or at times through total lack of referencing, collage serves to heighten his disjunctive poetics. But while his incorporation of pre-existing voices often intensifies the diverging and disorienting effect of his poetry, *Place* is not without unity. Rather than relying on a chronological or narrative structure, this coherence is created through a series of parallels and echoes throughout its five books. Its underlying concern with unwritten urban histories, and the links between political power and the design of the city, accounts for connections between much of its collaged material.

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Scott Thurston, p. 22

#### 4. 'This is a Quote Like so Somebody Said it': Authenticity, Obsessional Chuntering and Authorial Personae in the poetry of Peter Reading.

Like Fisher, Reading also uses collage to decentre the authorial self, and his poetry shares a constant, disjunctive shift between its various voices. But unlike *Place*, Reading's sequences tend to use several extracts from a smaller number of sources. As a result, their texture gradually becomes familiar, and this helps to make evident a coherent organising logic to an initially divergent cast of voices. In this respect his balance of the lyric and dramatic poetic voice seems to fit somewhere between Sinclair's and Fisher's; he rejects the explicitly controlling authorial voice found in Sinclair's *Lud Heat*, but the connections between his competing voices are made apparent in a more prescribed manner than in Fisher's work. This might be through a central metaphor, as in the editing vocabulary of *Stet*, the title of which refers to the instruction 'let it stand', or else through the construction of characters and narrative situations – the voices in both *Ukulele Music* and *Perduta Gente*, for example, are eventually revealed as part of the same sequence of events.

This more novelistic element of Reading's poetry is also reflected in the nature of his collaged material. There is less use of archival and scholarly resources, which in Sinclair's and to some extent Fisher's poetry, helped to create an image of the poet as a lone researcher. Instead there is a greater representation of idiolects which construct symbolic figures or characters. Many of the voices Reading creates capture the nuances of spoken discourse, such as the idiomatic monologues of the man at the bar in *Stet* ('Still, that's the way as they wants it and that's the way as they'll get it' (S, p. 103)), the drunken slur of the homeless man in *Perduta Gente* ('gizzera fifty or twenny fer fuggsay' (PG, p. 165)), and the notes the cleaner Viv writes to her boss in *Ukulele Music*, which mimic the spontaneity and openness of spoken narrative ('as they SWEAR it is non malingereent tumer ONLY which in my opinion only needs GOOD TONIC and will soon be old self again' (UM, p. 43)). A more omniscient novelistic voice occasionally interrupts these characters' monologues to provide a distanced account of certain scenes, particularly incidents of violent crime. The authorship of much of the written material



Reading integrates – including the ukulele manual, newspaper cuttings, reviews, and data on radioactive material – remains ambiguous. Having lost the authority of their origins, it seems that it is the *type* of discourse these quotations represent that is most significant to Reading's aims, rather than their original authors. Reading implies suspicion towards the cultural authority of his sources, often using them ironically. The reader's search for some measure of authenticity is repeatedly frustrated: through the lack of a dominant authorial voice, an ironic use of source material, uncertainty about whether extracts are genuinely 'found' material or exercises in pastiche, and finally, through his construction of a semi-fictionalised, semi-biographical poet figure which is written into his work.

The status of Reading's authorial voice seems to be entangled with his poetry's critique and social commentary in two ways. The lack of a trustworthy 'straight man'<sup>66</sup> to offer an overriding sense of dominant wisdom in his texts can be viewed in light of one of the discourses he repeatedly incorporates – popular journalism. Writing a few years later than Sinclair and Fisher, some of his poetry's collaged material gestures towards the pervasive rhetoric of 'common sense', a vital part of the new right's move towards 'authoritarian populism'. As Stuart Hall describes, during the 1980s, the right succeeded in translating economic doctrine into the language of a reactionary common sense, and the popular press played a major role in defining this idiom.<sup>67</sup> The absence of a dominant legitimating voice in Reading's poetry seems to implicitly critique the kind of blind conviction and simplified logic with which many of his newspaper extracts and characters make plain their opinions. At the same time, Reading's use of voice to problematise poetic authenticity relates to a recurring anxiety in his work – what one critic has aptly labelled his 'nagging metadiscourse about the futility of poetry'.<sup>68</sup> His concern with the limited power of art in the face of human cruelty and suffering is enacted partly by undermining the reliability of the authorial voice. To consider the relationship between his work's critique and its disrupted authoriality, this section first examines *Perduta Gente*, a sequence which focuses most explicitly on the spaces of the city in making its social commentary. It then turns to consider the status of the authorial

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<sup>66</sup> Kennedy, *New Relations*, p. 138

<sup>67</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', in Hall and Martin Jacques, *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart in association with Marxism Today, 1983), pp. 19-39

<sup>68</sup> Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry*, p. 180

voice here and in other eighties' works, arguing that the avoidance of a legitimating voice is key to his assessment of a changing nation as well as to his metapoetics.

#### 4.1 Singing the Grotty: 'Post-Coronation Disintegration'

*Perduta Gente* offers some of the most overt social commentary of Reading's sequences. Written at the end of the eighties, it juxtaposes voices, sources and scenes which foreground the growing chasm between rich and poor in Britain, using the city's dense topography of inequality as an index for the state of the nation. Its juxtapositions are bluntly made. It opens at London's South Bank, the scene of a classical music concert, 'Sibelius 5's/ incontrovertible end -/ five exhalations, bray of expiry/ absolute silence...'. This is contrasted with the 'foetid/ tenebrous concert' of the 'insulate ranks of expendables, eyesores,/ winos, unworthies' who have taken root 'Under the Festival Hall' (PG, p. 160). On the facing page is an assemblage of found material, incorporating newspaper clippings and real estate advertisements, articles on the growing trend for renovating derelict barns by buyers for whom 'money is no object', and headlines announcing 'London's most exciting apartments all have river views, £330,000 to £865,000' (PG, p. 161). Without voicing a direct invective, such contrasts offer an unmistakable judgement on the boom of the unregulated property industry, highlighting its contribution to steep rises in homelessness in the 1980s. Urban redevelopment such as the Docklands scheme resulted in bringing the wealthy and poor into new proximity, a disparity later encapsulated in the scene:

Wound round a varicose indigo swollen  
leg, between second  
and third pair of trousers (which stink –  
urine and faeces and sick),  
Property Pages delineate *bijou*  
River-View Flatlets  
£600,000 each.  
(PG, p. 193)

*Perduta Gente*'s range of voices and discourses also encompass moments of Dante pastiche, in line with the origin of the title in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and used to create the effect of a tour through the city's underworld; 'Now we arrive at the front of



*the ruin;/ here there are moanings,/ shrieks, lamentations and dole,/ here there is naught that illumines*' (PG, p. 163). Various sources also help to create an elaborate narrative threading through *Perduta Gente*. Handwritten, torn out pages from a diary and shreds of secret papers containing information on radioactive material piece together the story of one character, a former worker at a nuclear power plant. As the homeless man's diary describes, '(quite posh, he was) but he got the sack for telling the newspapers about some radioactive leak, and he's stolen all these papers – Top-Secret – from the Power Station' (PG, p. 195). Unable to find work, he ends up a destitute alcoholic. His half-glimpsed story comes to represent both international and national fears – a fragment of a newspaper account, its title reduced to 'ernobyl ac', points to the haunting, recent memory of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. At the same time, through the character's ensuing dispossession, as Barry observes, 'Reading insists that new post-industrial employment patterns have meant a radical extension of socially coercive anxiety'. For, in 'a society without safety nets',<sup>69</sup> *Perduta Gente* warns 'Don't think it couldn't be you - / bankrupted, batty, bereft,' (PG, p. 173).

*Perduta Gente* also documents shifting perceptions of the poor and the unemployed within popular opinion. Under the headline 'Remedy', fragments of found newspaper material are collaged together. The text comes from readers' letters, many of which are authored by the indignant 'ex-soldier from Telford', a recurring figure in Reading's sequences, who also crops up in *Stet*. The cut-up newspaper columns offer drastic measures for dealing with both criminals and those on the dole, who are given 'too much money to hang about the streets and not to look for work' (PG, p. 166). The implicit alignment of criminals and welfare claimants reflects wide-scale shifts in popular and political discourse during the 1980s, which helped to naturalise the erosion of the welfare state. Relevant here is Hall's analysis of the repertoire of the radical right, which stresses the achievement of converting 'hard-faced economics into the language of compulsive *moralism*', and describes how the assault on the essence of social welfare was mounted 'through the emotive image of the 'scrounger': the new folk-devil'.<sup>70</sup> Throughout *Perduta Gente*, Reading uses fragments which are metonymic of a

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<sup>69</sup> Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, p. 88, p. 86

<sup>70</sup> Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', p. 29



historically specific moment, voices and sources which gesture towards a changing national identity, in which “Being British’ became once again identified with the restoration of competition and profitability’.<sup>71</sup> Pinpointing details from a specific political climate – government investment in nuclear power, the endorsement of competitive individualism, socially irresponsible urban redevelopment, and rising homelessness – reinforces Reading’s frustration with humankind’s ability to turn a blind eye to suffering, as he asserts, ‘Carrying on as though nothing is wrong is/ what we are good at’ (PG, p. 212).<sup>72</sup>

Reading expresses concern that poetry should not be complicit with this pretence that ‘nothing is wrong’. His experimentation with poetic voice plays an important part in this critique. Rejecting an explanatory authorial voice develops his poetry’s unease with the complacency of grand narratives which purport to explain all, and with ‘Dogma-adherents... smug in eternal truth’ (S, p. 93). Instead, his critique is built up through a series of juxtapositions, which contrast multiple voices. Even the voices which seem as if they may be directly representing Reading’s own judgement are complicated. This is particularly true of *Stet* – a work which explores the comfort of firmly held beliefs while obscuring any sense of an ‘authentic’ authorial voice.

The competing voices of *Stet* include the specialised language of a physicist being interviewed about his work on the Hydrogen Line, vignettes of childhood memories of national and international events, and an account of displays at a naval arms exhibition. There are also monologues from the anonymous man at the bar, and submissions for the ‘poem of week’ competition in *Comfy Home* magazine (S, p. 102), both of which provide direct comment on ‘post-Coronation disintegration’ (S, p. 94), and represent their own strategies for survival, whether through drink, or, like ‘Contented of Telford, Mrs’ through the belief that ‘This world is not as bad as all that/ In spite of the strikes and wars/ And football violence and all that/ ... So to Our Lord a praise I sing’ (S, p. 98). These disparate voices are given coherence through the connotations of the title, a term used in editorial practice to suggest that no alternative can be found. *Stet* is an exploration of the protective nature of beliefs, whether personal, national or religious. One example is

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> A slight variation of a line which appeared previously in *Ukulele Music*: ‘Carrying on as though things were O.K. is what we are good at’ (UM, p. 41).



the kind of national rhetoric which excuses the arms industry, by providing a gloss in terms of economic profit, ‘*Marvellous boost to British Economy*’, ‘*benefit to the needs of our own people .../Government not responsible ... actions of/leaders of other...*’, tired phrases from ‘Great Britain’s/ Satrapess gloatingly self-applauding’ (S, p. 96). The relevance of the interview with the astrophysicist becomes apparent in his support for ‘Reasonless causal physics’, ‘a system of physical causes, rather than some kind of Reason with a capital R and the implicit mumbo-jumbo of all that, which one conceives-’ (S, p.108), an opposing world view to that represented on the facing page by the alcoholic who philosophises ‘All of us know like/ there must be *Something* out like, you know Out There like / ... must be a Reason./ This is a quote like so somebody *said* it:/ ‘Man is a very religerous creature’’ (S, p. 109). The ‘poem of the week’ extracts represent a more vehement version of this faith, with a certainty that ‘Billy Graham, /With words of Truth and Love,/ Will bring an end to this horrid mayhem’ (S, p. 101), but they also act as an extreme representation of poetry as comfort. The continual references to the phrases and square brackets of the editing process also allude to this, with their instructions to ‘Plump up a stanza, close the brackets, /snuggle down into a cosy redraft ...]’ (S, p. 92), and ‘[Re-draft the sick obsessional chuntering,/ strike out the old gratuitous cruelties ...’ (S, p. 86), the antithesis of Reading’s own work and poetic ideals, summed up in the line ‘I sing the Grotty [no alternative]’ (S, p. 103).

#### 4.2 Authorial Identity: Competing Voices of the ‘Powertree Bloke’

An attack of lyrical poetry pervades Reading’s collections, along with the conviction that ‘verse at the best of times/ chunters to insubstantial minorities’ (S, p. 104). Yet it is often difficult to align dismissive comments like these with Reading’s authentic authorial voice. Not only does his prolific output of publications complicate his alleged belief in the futility of verse, but his poetry’s self-critical voices are at times unconvincing. A battle between voices in *Stet*, for example, represents a direct affront to personal poetry – one voice attempts an apostrophe to a deceased friend, while another scathingly undercuts his elegiacs:

even as that sad realm in the middle was gently expiring  
devenustated but yet, even though feculent, *ours*.

[Therapy, whining, anxious to demonstrate  
how the nice bard is awfully sad about  
having his old pal flinched by crunched car –  
others' bereavements don't marvel readers.]

25 years ago, we, at a spring's bank, tasted a chilled draught;  
[Hippocrene hogwash] tonight, mawkish, I, solo, glut hock...

those days we charted our years by the dark swift coming and  
going

wants  
[Who do you think you are whining to? No reader shares your  
bereavement  
and it's pathetic and mad to address yourself to the dead.] (S, p. 104)

The sudden adoption of an elegiac mode, complete with Latinate, elevated diction, the use of long, complex clauses and syntax, and the gravitas of a falling cadence, is symptomatic of Reading's fondness for parodying different styles. The interjecting critical voice, in contrast direct, demotic and aggressive, attacks the elegy's reliance on subjectivity, and the strong presence of the poet's personality and experience. It attacks what is perceived as indulgence on the poet's part for acting out a form of 'arrogant therapy' (S, p. 104), and then assuming its relevance to readers. As a result these voices form part of a justification on Reading's behalf for his continual attempts at distancing and self-effacement (or at least the effacement of his *autobiographical* self). But this section is also indicative of the difficulty of identifying an authentic authorial voice within his polyphonic poetry. Although Reading does indeed seem to reject particularly autobiographical and nostalgic stances in art, aligning the damning voice above with Reading's position or his 'authentic' voice remains problematic. Firstly because, as Isabel Martin's study details, the elegy is genuine in lamenting the death of Reading's close friend Michael Donahue, killed in a car crash in 1985.<sup>73</sup> But even without this biographical information, there is still something largely theatrical and simplistic in the critical voice which seems to indicate again an element of parody – as so often in his poetry he is juxtaposing extreme viewpoints. To read it straightforwardly as Reading's

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<sup>73</sup> Martin, *Reading Peter Reading*, p. 171



own sentiments also risks downplaying his poetry's abiding and humane concern with personal loss, and suffering throughout history, and does not cohere with the moments in which such loss is presented in a compassionate manner, such as the glimpsing of the simple words on the child's gravestone in *Ukulele Music*, or the description of the widow's sudden burst of tears which closes *Stet*. Thus what seems to be at stake in the opposing voices above is not so much a denial or criticism of genuine human suffering, but the transformation of such emotions in some modes of art into highly constructed, elevated forms, and the presumption that in doing so it can speak for others. This attack on the poet's subjective perspective and personal outpouring being passed off as universally valid poetry ultimately relates back to Reading's attack on the arrogance and self-importance of poetry and its assumed power to speak to society.

Reading's rejection of autobiographical confessional poetry does not preclude him from being written into the text. The presence of a poet figure in some of his sequences is at times an elaborate construction, other times more closely related to Reading's biography. While *Stet* draws on memories from his own life, a twist in *Perduta Gente* constructs the former power station employee as the author. This is made clear in a review of the work, presumably penned by Reading himself, for it paradoxically becomes part of the poem's text. We are told that the author 'steadfastly maintained to the police' that he had found the official papers concerning radioactive contamination 'in a trash bucket on the Victoria Line station where he was busking' (PG, p. 191), and he is 'last encountered in the concourse of Euston, pediculous, intoxicated beyond capability' (PG, p. 208). In *Ukulele Music*, the poet character is constructed indirectly through the voices of others, and this becomes a way of critiquing poetic authority more widely. The voices include those of Reading's critics, or 'Grub St. reviewing its own lame valedictory tosh' (UM, p. 40), who accuse his work of being "too black and over the top" (UM, p. 20) and protest that "This is not Poetry, this is reality, untreated, nasty"/ This is demotic and cheap" (UM, p. 40). The tiresomely cheerful address of the ukulele manual Reading repeatedly quotes from – "The Uke is an instrument for the best accompanying of happytime songs!" (UM, p. 40) – is used as a retort to these critics.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> This is developed further in *Ukulele Music* when he defends himself against claims of caricature in his attempts to depict the speech of the working classes, invoking Dickens in his defence: "What is to one class



*Ukulele Music* draws on the association of this instrument with escapist art, or ‘fiddling while Rome burns’, as Viv says at one point, ‘*we are like the man in the music Hall song that goes he play his Uka uker Youkalaylee while the ship went down.*’ (UM, p. 15), and this motif is reinforced in the mock-archaic sea narratives told by the Captain, which relate various maritime disasters but which always end with the performance of music or sea shanties. The juxtaposition of the ukulele’s promise of ‘zip and sparkle’ with critical reviews of Reading’s treatment of his subject matter (UM, p. 40) suggests a defensive and self-justifying position. Yet as elsewhere, it is hard to discern how authentic such a tone might be. Clearly he *is* trying to justify his poetry in opposition to escapist art but his obsession with reviews can also be interpreted in a more ironic and mocking light – again as a way of highlighting the egoism of the more universal figure of the poet. Such a view is strengthened by the poet’s construction through the notes of Viv in which he is portrayed as a self-pitying and sulky character. She records his reaction to a newspaper review, ‘*When you got TERRIBLE, stamping and raging calling him stupid/ and how the man was a FOOL, which was the day you took DRINK.*’ (UM, p. 34), and attempts to comfort him, saying ‘*Don’t you go brooding and brooding and getting all of a state sir/ just cos the LTERARY GENT don’t seem to like your nice books*’ and calling their reviews ‘*old tommy-rot*’ (UM, p. 40). Although the poet figure is written into the sequence, it is Viv who is in many ways a more central, and authorial-like figure. It is through her that the various narrative strands come together, and is it she who links the figures of the captain and the poet. When at the end all three are united in the underground bunker in anticipation of a nuclear attack, it is Viv’s voice which predominates, observing that ‘*the Powertree Bloke and the Capting doesn’t arf GABBLE- / what with the Capting his YARNS: tother keeps changing is VOICE*’, but allowing that ‘*they can’t help it, poor souls*’ (UM, p. 46). In questioning the reliability of the rambling poet, and in her status as a more developed and endearing character in *Ukulele Music*, Viv displaces the poet figure, and in doing so, contributes to Reading’s wider challenge to poetic and artistic authority.

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of minds and perceptions exaggeration,/ is to another plain truth’ (Dickens remarks in a brief// preface to *Chuzzlewit*)’ (UM, p. 34))



The displacement of the unified authorial voice is performed in two ways in Reading's work: firstly, through the juxtaposition of disparate voices and sources without referencing or an explicit explanation, and secondly, through the fabrication of authorial identities. These constructions seem to undermine the search for an authentic personality behind the poem, and, by implication, challenge understandings of poetry as an expression of self-presence. By introducing elements of self-parody into the poetic characters, as in *Ukulele Music*, Reading mocks a reverential attitude towards the authority of the poet. His critique of the ineffectual nature of poetry as a social force is thus accentuated by his experimentation with the authorial voice. His documentation of the degradations of contemporary social reality in Britain contributes to an exploration of poetry's powerlessness, particularly acute in the face of a disintegrated public sphere. But despite these despairing sentiments, his work *does* still imply that poetry can have a public role to play, not through the provision of comfort or escape, but through the confrontation of this social reality, which, though it may not offer any solutions, may at least encourage readers to 'Recognise, not acquiesce' (S, p. 101).

## Conclusion

In comparing how the poetry of Sinclair, Fisher and Reading uses multiple authorial voices, this chapter has aimed to demonstrate that a collage aesthetic can be adapted for quite different agendas and effects. The distinctive manner in which each poet uses quotation suggests that it would be reductive to posit any unifying theory about poetic collage and its impact on the status of the authorial voice. Collage can help to configure a particular authorial identity, as in Sinclair's *Lud Heat*, where quotations are used to claim a particular artistic tradition and construct a specific image of the poet figure. But it can also be used to detract from the search for an authorial identity, and to displace a dominant sense of authorial presence, as in Fisher's poetry, and slightly differently, in Reading's. What can be said more generally about collage, however, is that it interrupts the authorial voice in such a way as to foreground power relations within the text. Like much experimental poetry since the 1970s, it draws attention to the constructed nature of the poetic medium, rather than aspiring to the effect of naturalness and spontaneity, aims

which have been aligned with 'voice-based' poetries.<sup>75</sup> Yet I have argued in this chapter that this is not just a formalist concern. I have tried to demonstrate that anxieties over the authority with which the poetic voice speaks are to some extent influenced by changing narratives of identity in Britain during this period. Even Sinclair, who on the whole uses quotation in a possessive manner to legitimate his authority, is self-reflexive about his controlling persona, and this contributes to his work's articulation of different masculine identities. Meanwhile Fisher's and Reading's engagement with textual authority can be read in relation to certain features of the national and political discourse of the time. These include the simplified construction of a national past, a commodified heritage which Fisher complicates by highlighting the historic subjugation of large sections of England's 'kaleidoscopic population' (P, p. 327). By rejecting an overriding explanatory voice, Reading's poetry avoids the dogmatism of the pervasive, moralist rhetoric of the popular press and new right discourse, exemplified by some of his characters. Furthermore, all three poets also use collage as a way of voicing urban space; the dramatic transformations in London's physical landscape and its social topography embody wider scale shifts in power, and their representations of the city thus reflect upon changing notions of Britishness. The un-linear, spatial nature of collage makes it a particularly appropriate formal device both for representing the contested spaces of the city, and for decentring the authorial voice. What the comparison of these poets has endeavoured to demonstrate is that their engagement with the politics of authoriality is entangled with their exploration of more literal forms of power.

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<sup>75</sup> Particularly in the seventies' writings of Language poets, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. See Charles Bernstein, 'Stray Straws and Straw Men' (1976), in Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975 – 1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), pp. 40-49, and Marjorie Perloff's analysis of the poetic shift towards artifice in *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)



## Chapter Two

### Rethinking Poetry's Personal Voice: the Lyric Self in the Work of Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley

#### Introduction

The attack on the lyric voice within experimentalist poetic discourses has focused on its association with personal expressiveness and self-portrayal. Much avant-garde practice has sought to challenge the private, intimate image of poetry, and to dispute the illusion of self-presence which, at least since the poetry of romanticism, has been allied with the lyric mode. In contrast to chapter one's focus on the voicing of the distinctly public space of the city and its relation to the politics of authoriality, this chapter takes up the more personal associations of the lyric voice. It acknowledges the importance of this personal voice to British feminist poetics in the 1980s, and considers how two female poets working in an experimental tradition mediate different strands of the debate over voice and identity. Both Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley complicate subjectivity and the idea of an innate, coherent identity in their poetry. Their work refuses an authoritative, legitimating and wholly reliable speaking poetic voice. Yet it remains committed to the use of the first person and to the articulation of interiority. In different ways their poetry enacts re-workings of the lyric voice, aiming to detach it from some of its trappings of authority, authenticity and control, while continuing to value forms of personal and emotional expression.

This re-working of the lyric can be seen as an attempt to make sense of some of the contradictions surrounding femininity and notions of the private in the 1980s. Like other identity movements, Second Wave Feminism made a strong case for the public relevance of personal experience. The favoured strategy for achieving this within the poetry of the period was a consciousness-raising, confessional aesthetic. Yet the individualistic thrust of confessional poetry was complicated somewhat by a changing political climate in Britain, in which the entrenchment of individualism helped to reinforce the very public-private divide which feminism had sought to dissolve. The cautious, analytical use of 'I' in Mulford's and Riley's poetry thus needs to be understood

within different poetic, theoretical and political contexts, which section one of this chapter briefly sketches out.

Mulford and Riley both started publishing their works in the 1970s. They were part of a network of Cambridge poets writing at the time, together with J. H. Prynne and John James, who were influenced by American poets working out of a late modernist mode, in particular, the 'New York School' of writers, which included Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Alice Notley. Mulford founded a small press, Street Editions in the early seventies, which later merged with Ken Edwards' Reality Editions to become Reality Street Edition, and through this she published Riley's *Marxism for Infants* and her own collection, *Bravo to Girls and Heroes* in 1977. The two have also collaborated on poetry collections, *No Fee: A Line or Two for Free* and *Some Poems: 1968 – 1978*.<sup>1</sup> Since these early publications, Mulford's collections have included *Late Spring Next Year: Poems 1979 – 1985*, and most recently *And Suddenly Supposing* (2002), which brings together poetry from the last three decades.<sup>2</sup> Riley's recent *Selected Poems* (2000) also collects poems from previous collections including *Dry Air* (1985) and *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993).<sup>3</sup>

Riley is also known for her feminist theory and linguistic studies, including her investigation of the historic indeterminacy characterising women as a collectivity in '*Am I That Name?*' *Feminism and the category of 'Women' in History* (1988).<sup>4</sup> Her other academic works theorise the relation between language and the individual by focusing on questions of interpellation, agency and the language of self-description. These include the essays 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?' (1997) and 'Bad Words' (2001) and the collections *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity and Irony* (2000) and *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*.<sup>5</sup> She cites the theoretical influence of Michel Foucault and European

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley, *No Fee: A Line or Two for Free* (Cambridge: Street Editions, 1979) and *Some Poems: 1968–1978* (London: CMR, 1982)

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Mulford, *Late Spring Next Year* (Bristol: Loxwood Stoneleigh, 1987), hereafter abbreviated to LS; *And Suddenly Supposing* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2002), hereafter abbreviated to AS

<sup>3</sup> Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street Editions, 2000), hereafter abbreviated to SP; *Dry Air* (London: Virago, 1985), hereafter abbreviated to DA. *Mop Mop Georgette* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1993). All quotations from *Mop Mop Georgette* refer to their reproduction in *Selected Poems*.

<sup>4</sup> Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988)

<sup>5</sup> Riley, 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1997), pp. 7-110; 'Bad Words', *Diacritics*, vol. 31, no. 4, (2001), pp. 41-53; *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*



socialists and theorists of society such as Marx, Hegel, Engels, Althusser and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>6</sup> Mulford's prose works have included a biographical study of Sylvia Townsend Warner, a book on women saints, *Virtuous Magic* (1998), and the edited collection *The Virago Book of Love Poetry* (1990).<sup>7</sup> She highlights the influence of theorists Cixous and Irigaray on her writing, as well as American female poets working in an experimental, textually disruptive tradition.<sup>8</sup> Mulford also spent time working with the journal *(HOW)ever*, and her poetry has received recognition in America, with praise from Fanny Howe and Rachel Blau du Plessis among others.<sup>9</sup> Both poets have been collected in anthologies associated with Mottram's 'British Poetry Revival', including *The New British Poetry, Conductors of Chaos* and *OTHER*. They also featured in *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK*, and their work is most frequently considered alongside other female poets represented here.<sup>10</sup> These include Geraldine Monk, Susan Howe, Caroline Bergvall, Nicole Brossard, and Maggie O'Sullivan. Riley's poetry has also been compared to that of the American poet John Ashbery.<sup>11</sup> The following section considers some of the feminist positions and theories which have proved influential to Mulford's and Riley's treatment of the lyric voice.

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(California: Stanford University Press, 2000); *Impersonal Passion: Language As Affect* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Riley 'A Short History of Some Preoccupations' in Judith Butler and Joan W Scott eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 121-129

<sup>7</sup> Mulford, *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* (London: Pandora Press, 1988); with Sara Maitland, *Virtuous Magic: Women Saints and their Meanings* (London: Mowbray/Cassell, 1998); *The Virago Book of Love Poetry* (London: Virago, 1990)

<sup>8</sup> Mulford 'Curved, Odd... Irregular'. A Vision of Contemporary Poetry by Women', *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 1, no 3, Winter 1990, pp. 261-274

<sup>9</sup> Blau du Plessis' praise for *The ABC of Writing* is quoted on the back cover of *Late Spring Next Year*, and Howe is quoted on *And Suddenly Supposing*.

<sup>10</sup> Maggie O'Sullivan ed., *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the U.K* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996)

<sup>11</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women's Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1996), pp. 620-670. Romana Huk discusses Riley alongside Susan Howe in 'Feminist Radicalism in (Relatively) Traditional Forms: An American's Investigations of British Poetics', in Vicki Bertram ed., *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 227-250. Harriet Tarlo draws on several poets from *Out of Everywhere*, including Mulford, Riley, O'Sullivan, Brossard, and Carlyle Reedy in 'Provisional Pleasures: The Challenge of Contemporary Experimental Women Poets', *Feminist Review*, no. 2 (1999), pp. 94-112. Clair Wills compares Lyn Hejinian, Riley and O'Sullivan in 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1994), pp. 34-52. David Herd, 'Occasions for Solidarity: Ashbery, Riley and the tradition of the New', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 30 (2000), pp. 234-249



## 1. Contexts

### 1.1 Voicing Feminisms

In its political campaigning, the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s in Britain fought for a range of legal and social rights for women, from rights to equal pay and job opportunities to freedom from violence and sexual intimidation. Writing in 1982, Mulford talked about the women's movement as changing 'little by little, so much of my life, my teaching, my writing, my friendships, relationships with men and women; it's impossible to measure the reach of it.'<sup>12</sup> Writers were closely involved in the conferences, workshops and groups of this movement and the seventies saw the establishment of several feminist publishers and magazines, such as Virago (1973), Onlywomen Press (1974), and *Spare Rib* (1972). Numerous women-only poetry anthologies sought to redress women's exclusion from the historical literary canon.<sup>13</sup> The consciousness-raising groups of the women's liberation movement emphasised the political nature of the private sphere as a site of sexual inequality and oppression, and as Claire Buck describes, this tended to encourage the flourishing of certain 'poetics and models of the self and experience'. The dominant strain of poetry 'was characterised by a clear fidelity to its political ideals translated into a poetics concerned with cultural critique, an accessible language and form, and the expression of women's personal experience'. Generally written in the first person, and using a 'language of statement', such poems ground theories and feminist political debate about sexuality within an anecdotal frame.<sup>14</sup> This aesthetic relied on a single-voice model for exploring gender

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<sup>12</sup> Wendy Mulford, 'Notes on Writing: Three Years On' in Michelene Wandor ed., *Gender and Writing* (London: Pandora Press, 1983), pp. 37-41, pp. 38-39

<sup>13</sup> See for example, Cora Kaplan ed., *Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women Poetry* (New York; London: Paddington Press, 1975); Carol Cosman, Joan Keefe, Kathleen Weaver, eds., *The Penguin Book of Women Poets* (London: Allen Lane, 1978); Lilian Mohin ed., *One Foot on the Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry, 1969 – 1979* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1979); Diana Scott ed., *Bread and Roses: Women's Poetry of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Virago, 1982) and Fleur Adcock ed., *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry* (London: Faber, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Claire Buck 'Poetry and the Women's Movement in Postwar Britain', in James Acheson and Romana Huk eds., *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (New York: University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 81-111, p. 90, p. 87, p. 88



issues and the ideology of a 'common language' became a central tenet of this feminist poetics.<sup>15</sup>

The engagement of academic feminism with psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories in the eighties is often seen as questioning earlier gender discourses. Psychoanalytically informed theorists, most notably Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, argued for the value of experimental textual practice as a form of subversion. Suggesting that the inherited structures of language are inherently masculine and oppressive, a feminine practice of writing was theorised in terms of disruption and multiplicity, which resisted the phallogentric symbolic order. Kristeva's jouissant 'semiotic' is associated with the female due to its flourishing in the pre-Oedipal stage of development, while Irigaray and Cixous proposed the liberating possibility of women's writing, *écriture féminine*, that is based upon the experience of female corporeality.<sup>16</sup> This envisaged a different, more diffuse and multifarious conception of female language than the clear and more unified collective voice endorsed within radical feminism.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, another strand of theoretically informed feminism was more concerned with the social and historical construction of gendered identities and sexual difference. A prime example of this is Riley's Foucauldian analysis of the category of 'women' in *Am I That Name?* which demonstrates the changing social, medical and political construction of the term throughout history, from its invocation in sixteenth-century feminist polemic, to nineteenth-century sociological feminism, through to body politics of the late twentieth century. All of this aims to demonstrate that "'women' is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity".<sup>18</sup> The work of Judith Butler similarly undermines the idea of gender as an autonomous category; rather than the universal 'given' that

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<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Fraser, 'Without a Net: Finding One's Balance Along the Perilous Wires of the New' (1992) in Fraer, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2000), pp. 131-138, p. 135

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)

<sup>17</sup> The distinctions between the premise of these feminist aesthetics are summarised by Rita Felski: 'The first proposes a distinctive female consciousness or experience of reality as the legitimation for a feminist aesthetic; the second is linguistically based and antihumanist and appeals to a notion of the "feminine," understood as a disruption or transgression of a phallogentric symbolic order rather than as a characteristic of female psychology.' *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchison Radius, 1989), p. 20

<sup>18</sup> Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 1-2



feminism and psychoanalysis have generally assumed, she suggests that sex and gender are fabricated unities that 'conceal gender discontinuities' and act as a regulatory force which actually shapes sexual orientation.<sup>19</sup> Other critics argue that like identity, 'experience', which has been highly valued within second-wave feminism, also needs to be historicised and understood as 'linguistically contained, socially constructed' and 'discursively mediated.'<sup>20</sup> There is a danger, however, of making reductionist distinctions between second-wave feminism and theory-based feminism of the 1990s, something Lynne Segal's recent study has warned against. Contemporary feminist texts often portray a falsely homogenised version of seventies' women's liberation, which is 'almost always described as a theory of 'equality', rather than of 'difference' ... Both of these descriptions miss the point. Women's Liberation in its heyday was a *theory and practice of social transformation*'.<sup>21</sup> Her history of the last three decades of feminism suggests that 'although they never used the rhetoric of deconstruction, the third stage now being labelled 'post-feminism' is not so removed from where many second-wave feminists came in.' While using different conceptual tools, both stages aimed to 'avoid the problems of straightforward inclusion in, or exclusion from, the masculine symbolic order and a world organised primarily around men's interests.'<sup>22</sup>

The poetry of Mulford and Riley also cautions against drawing strict divisions between different 'factions' of feminism. As the first half of this chapter considers, their poetry explores the idea of the linguistic construction of the subject, the relation between language and gender, and the politics of representation. Kathleen Fraser recalls of American poetry communities in the 1970s that women-edited publications were not wholly sympathetic to linguistically experimental poetry exploring 'uncertainty and

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse' in Linda J. Nicholson ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 324-340

<sup>20</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 39-40. Brown argues that to abandon the unified subject does not mean that women cannot still discuss personal experience, but that labels of 'true' and 'authentic' should be rejected. Joan W. Scott has also questioned the investment in experience within feminism. She argues that more attention needs to be paid to the construction of experience, without which we risk taking 'the existence of individuals for granted (experience is something people have) rather than to ask how conceptions of selves (of subjects and their identities) are produced.' 'Experience' in Butler and Scott eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political*, pp. 22-40, p. 27

<sup>21</sup> Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 15

<sup>22</sup> Segal, *Why Feminism?*, p. 16



multiplicity in female experience',<sup>23</sup> and those working in this tradition were marginalised by a dominant feminist poetic which deployed a more unified, unproblematic voice. The situation for British female poets was similar; despite their concern with gender, Mulford and Riley have frequently been left out of anthologies of women's poetry. However, while their poetry explores the textuality of identity, it is also committed to the first person and to the articulation of emotion and interiority, which implies an understanding of the self which is more than a discursive construction. To return to the terms of Easthope and Thompson's analysis of contemporary poetry in the introduction to this thesis, both use defamiliarisation, and devices which 'fracture the 'sayable'', as a way of reflecting on the processes and inadequacies of communication. But at the same time, theirs is also 'a poetry of emotion' and, to some extent, of 'lived experience', a poetry which Easthope and Thompson equate with 'the marginalised voice'.<sup>24</sup> Through the self-conscious use of the lyric voice, Mulford's and Riley's poetry mediates between a range of feminist priorities and agendas.

## 1.2 Contesting Dichotomies: Experimental vs Expressive, Public vs Private

In considering how this poetry negotiates between a critique of representation and the expression of identity and interiority, I make use of certain observations within existing critical work on Riley and Mulford. Often considered alongside British and American female poets working in an experimental tradition, much of this work focuses on the relationship between a politics of gender and the politics of the text. Several critics consider the ways Mulford and Riley explore the constructed nature of identity – Helen Kidd, for example, points to Mulford's use of the sea and land erosion as a liminal image for 'the negotiations which surround subject identity'.<sup>25</sup> Carol Watts suggests that Riley's early work enacts 'a drama of interpellation: the way in which language hails identity and brings it into social being', something most clearly dramatised in the poem 'Affections

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<sup>23</sup> Kathleen Fraser 'Without a Net', p. 135

<sup>24</sup> Easthope and Thompson, 'Afterword', in Easthope and Thompson eds., *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, pp. 209-210

<sup>25</sup> Helen Kidd 'The Paper City: Women, Writing, and Experience' in Robert Hampson and Peter Barry eds., *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 156-180, p. 172



must not'.<sup>26</sup> Linda Kinnahan's work is important for its consideration of genre, particularly its observation that 'contemporary women's experiments with the lyric are weighted by [a] history of negative gender associations', which have positioned women's lyrical practice as trivial and/or solipsistic.<sup>27</sup> Arguably some of the most valuable work on this poetry uses it to pose wider questions about the ways in which 'radical' and 'expressive' poetries are conceptualised. Contrasting what poetry by Susan Howe and Eavan Boland has to say about history, identity and textuality, Romana Huk argues that formal devices do not render a poet more or less radical.<sup>28</sup> She identifies in Riley's poetry an implicit critique of the attitudes of both mainstream and experimental poetry worlds – the experimentalist suspicion of the first person as retrogressive, and assumptions by more formally traditional poets that disruptive poetics are 'off on theoretical/elitist tangents that have no connection with actual lives or politics'.<sup>29</sup> In suggesting that Riley's poetry disrupts the binary between these two extreme positions, Huk is influenced by Clair Wills' previous work on experimental women's poetry, which argues that 'the separation of poetry into formally conservative and radical forms sets up a false dichotomy'.<sup>30</sup> What is particularly significant about Wills' critique for my thesis is her acknowledgement of the place of voice in establishing such a dichotomy. Poetic practices 'which do not question the drive towards romantic modes of self-expression, the poetic 'voice', or the centre of the poem as a speaking 'I' are frequently pitted against those that focus on language over theme, and deconstruct 'the possibility of the formation of a coherent or consistent lyric voice.'<sup>31</sup>

Wills' discussion is also insightful in suggesting that, in contrast to apocalyptic postmodern visions, experimental poetry is not necessarily about the absence of subjectivity. Instead, both 'expressive' and 'experimental' poetries can be viewed as different responses to the reconfiguration of the relationship between public and private spheres. She argues that much experimental women's poetry, including Riley's, is also

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<sup>26</sup> Carol Watts 'Beyond Interpellation? Affect, Embodiment and the Poetics of Denise Riley' in Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones eds., *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 157-172, p. 161

<sup>27</sup> Linda A Kinnahan 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women's Poetry', p. 637

<sup>28</sup> Romana Huk 'Feminist Radicalism in (Relatively) Traditional Forms', p. 239

<sup>29</sup> Huk, 'Feminist Radicalism', p. 247

<sup>30</sup> Clair Wills 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice', p. 28

<sup>31</sup> Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry', p. 34



expressive, for it articulates 'the ways in which the private or intimate realm of experience is constructed 'through' the public'.<sup>32</sup> Wills here draws on a particular set of meanings of the private and the public, where the former denotes 'emotional inwardness', interiority, and psychic experience, and the latter refers to mass-media and mass-culture, the language of which peppers Riley's *Mop Mop Georgette*. But definitions of public and private are notoriously unstable and often contradictory, and this interiority/mass culture distinction is slightly different from earlier feminist uses of the terms to refer to the economy of wage earners and the private realm of the domestic, familial sphere.<sup>33</sup> While gender discourse of the women's liberation movement sought to erode this division between the domestic and the public sphere, political conservatism of the seventies and eighties strengthened it through an emphasis on traditional family structures. It also succeeded in investing notions of the 'private' and the individual with new significance: in the shift towards a private market economy which valued individual enterprise, and rhetorically through a language of private accountability, culminating in Thatcher's famous claim that 'there is no such thing as society', 'there are individual men and women and there are families'.<sup>34</sup> As Maureen McNeil surveys, Thatcherism contested feminism in numerous ways, though its gender politics operated elusively rather than directly. As well as the reinforcement of the public-private divide, these worked through 'the entrenchment of middle-class models of the masculine bread-winner through the reinvigoration of domestic consumption', 'the undermining of concrete gains made in

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 42. Wills' discussion of the reconfiguration of the public and private relationship draws on Baudrillard's vision of a world without subjectivity, as the private, familial life is increasingly penetrated by the public world of mass culture and the media. Jessica Benjamin and Sylvia Benhabib offer a less pessimistic diagnosis of the outcome of this reconfiguration, arguing that the subject has not been entirely erased, but that new, more negotiated, forms of interiority and the lyric self remain possible. p. 39

<sup>33</sup> This distinction is itself problematic. Nancy Fraser points out that the feminist use of the expression "the public sphere" to 'refer to everything that is outside the domestic or familial sphere ... conflates at least three analytically distinct things: the state, the official economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse.' She goes on to examine how this conflation is more than a theoretical issue, and has practical political consequences. 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 109-142, p. 110. Other works on the public sphere point to the multiple and often conflicting means of public and private. Michael Warner identifies eighteen different understandings of the relation of public to private in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 29-30. Bruce Robbins highlights that the conflicting definitions of 'public' encompass two radically opposed notions – the liberal-economist model defines the public as state and the private as the market economy, while feminists have used 'public' to refer to the domain of wage labour.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Thatcher 'Aids, Education and the year 2000!' interview with Douglas Keay in *Woman's Own* 31<sup>st</sup> October 1987, pp. 8-10



struggles over women's welfare, employment and professional possibilities', and 'the closing down of discourses of sexuality.'<sup>35</sup>

The concepts of the public and the private in this period were thus highly contentious, and carried much ideological weight. The valuing of the private marketplace resulted in an indirect assault on some of the gains of feminism. The reason for underlining this is to stress that within British poetry, the claiming of a 'personal' voice became increasingly complicated in this period, especially for feminist poets. Hesitations about using an authoritative 'I' with any certainty need to be understood within this national and political context. Kinnahan's essay stands out as one of the few to make mention of this, arguing that 'the status of expressivity for women in Britain was thus complicated by the political use to which women's interiority could be put.'<sup>36</sup> This chapter suggests that Mulford's and Riley's experimentation with the lyric voice is partly a critique of individualism, and an attempt to forge a new, alternative language for personal expression. I concur with critical work which suggests that these poets bridge the divide between expressive and experimental poetics, and that, despite its critique of representation, their poetry refuses to abandon subjectivity and the lyric self altogether. But I also want to develop these critical discussions in a number of ways. Firstly, I want to consider how the multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings of the personal are explored in their poetry, and how this is implicated in articulations of a gendered identity. This includes the personal in terms of domestic space, family relations, and the body, as well as interiority. Secondly, in considering the relation their work suggests between voice and identity, I also want to take into account some of Riley's more recent theoretical work on language and agency, and suggest that her poems on the 'troubled nature of lyric poetry' (SP, p.110) in the early nineties prefigure the major preoccupations of 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?', *The Words of the Selves* and *Impersonal Passion*. Finally, I will also argue that meditations on the visual arts play a significant role in attempts to formulate new forms of expression. The importance of painting to their work, and its relation to the reworking of a lyric voice is something that has yet to receive much critical

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<sup>35</sup> Maureen McNeil, 'Making and Not Making the Difference: The Gender Politics of Thatcherism', in Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey eds., *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 221-240, p. 235

<sup>36</sup> Kinnahan, 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric', p. 652



attention. The final section of this chapter examines Mulford's and Riley's engagement with different kinds of paintings, suggesting that unlike a mimetic ekphrasis, these poems use artworks as a self-reflexive way of trying out different formal strategies. Whether the focus is on abstract expressionism, or art which borders the abstract and the figurative, both poets are drawn to intense, gestural modes of painting which are suggestive of passion and emotion without being representational. In this way, the visual artworks become complicit in the reworking of the lyric voice: their presence reinforces the desire to hold onto the lyric's associations with powerful feelings, emotional or inner states, while their abstract nature reflects the desire to avoid more individualised forms of self-portrayal.

## 2. 'Is a Writing of Writing a Writing of the Self?' Textuality and the Poetic 'I'

I can't believe in a selfhood which is other than generated by language over time; yet can readily feel inauthentic if I speak of myself as a sociologised subject. This describing 'I' produces an anxiety which can't be mollified by any theory of its constructedness.

(Riley, 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?', p. 44)<sup>37</sup>

In both Riley's and Mulford's poetry, the 'describing 'I'' is scrutinised, but never completely abandoned. In a 1979 essay on her writing practice, Mulford describes her concern with the construction of the self, 'who was this 'I' speaking? What was speaking me? How far did the illusion of selfhood, that most intimate and precious possession, reach?'<sup>38</sup> The relation between the self and language is an enduring preoccupation of her work, and provides a thread running through the sequence *The ABC of Writing* (1979-1980). Here she asks questions about identity as a textual construction, pondering 'is a writing of the self a writing of writing?/ and is a writing of writing a writing of the self?' (AS, p.64). The compact poem 'Trawls' from *The Light Sleepers* (1980), meanwhile, comments on the power relations between this self and language, with its title evocative of a writer's search through a

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<sup>37</sup> Denise Riley, 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1997), pp. 75-110, p. 44

<sup>38</sup> Wendy Mulford, 'Notes on Writing: A Marxist/Feminist Viewpoint', Wandor ed., *On Gender and Writing*, pp. 31-36, p. 31

sea of words, a vast resource of language ready to be used. However, any sense of creative control over language is undermined in the poem's opening

small in  
tense sur  
rounds sur  
renders I,

(AS, p.50)

The double meaning of 'tense' here, in its grammatical sense and as part of the enjambed 'intense', work together to suggest a kind of claustrophobia within language, which speaks or 'renders' the speaker. The 'I' is placed revealingly after the verbs to imply the self's lack of total control over language. This vulnerability is also alluded to in the action of being surrendered, and reinforced in the opening 'small', and the 'gentle/ humiliation' of the poem's close, as well as through the lack of capital letters. Pronouns are frequently defamiliarised within Mulford's poetry as a way of provoking reflection on the individual's location within language. Yet though it sometimes seems in her poetry as if the self is completely rendered by outside forces, a discursive, textual illusion, she also argues that her writing 'still works restlessly within the unreconstructed domain of the passions. This implies for me continuing to work with a subject, and 'I', despite or through its rifts, absences, contradictions', an 'I' which is an 'active and desiring subject'.<sup>39</sup>

This bears comparison with Riley's poems from *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993) and her later academic writing on linguistics. The essay 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?', for example, is explicit about her understanding of the dialectical relation between language and the self, a relation many of her poems posit more tentatively. Several poems speculate on the tension between writing and being written, encapsulated in the figure of the poet grappling with her relation to lyric poetry, with all its haunting 'sound-echoes' and 'aural traces of lines from, say, Wordsworth or Auden', for, she argues, 'poetry in its composing is an inrush of others' voices'.<sup>40</sup> In the poem 'A Shortened Set', these pre-existing voices detract from the poet's agency – 'I'd thought/ to ask around, what's lyric poetry?/ Its bee noise starts before I can' (SP, p. 43). 'Lyric' implies a similar lack of control

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<sup>39</sup> Mulford, 'Notes on Writing: Three Years On', p. 39

<sup>40</sup> Riley, 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?' p. 92, p. 83



Stammering it fights to get  
held and to never get held  
as whatever motors it swells  
to hammer itself out on me  
(SP, p. 56)

Here, however, language's fluctuation between getting held and not getting held gestures towards the *possibility* of individual agency. This is something Riley's essays take further; tempering her support for poststructuralist theories of textuality and constructedness, she refuses to abandon the 'describing 'I'' and argues to 'revive some half-disgraced notion of the dialectic, some quite modest notion of mutuality between the great dictator language and the writer, even if the boss inevitably retains the upper hand.'<sup>41</sup> In her most recent linguistic essays, she describes the experience of being 'poised somewhere halfway between "language speaks me" and "I speak language."'<sup>42</sup>

These questions of agency – the negotiation between writing and being written – inform both poets' reflections on the creative process and on the claiming or imposition of identity. Their poetry's relation to different feminist projects is thus bound up with this 'writing of the self'. Part three demonstrates this through readings of poems which engage most directly with questions of gendered identities and a female voice. It considers how subjectivity is problematised in these poems, and how formal experimentation is used to displace some of the authority of the traditional lyric voice. But this section also considers their poetry's continuing commitment to the personal, arguing that while it challenges ideas of an innate identity, it still values the communication of emotional states, experience, and interiority.

### 3. 'With What Voices Do Women Poets Speak?'

The use of the first person in Mulford's and Riley's poetry is marked by a hesitant self-consciousness, frequent qualification and a suspicion of polemic. While creating an

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<sup>41</sup> Riley, 'Is There Linguistic Guilt?', p. 86

<sup>42</sup> Riley 'Malediction', in *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*, pp. 9-27, p. 18. An earlier version of 'Malediction' was published as 'Bad Words' in *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001), pp. 41-55

impression of the shifts and ambiguities of inner consciousness, these qualities also evade the authority and poise of the traditional lyric voice. Although such an evasion is clearly not confined to female poetic practice, it does respond to a form of control often perceived in masculine terms. Mulford is direct about this authority as gendered in her prose, while Riley also suggests it in her poem 'Pastoral', where the urge 'to own perceptions' is associated with patriarchal authority (SP, p. 64). It is necessary, then, to consider how each poet's displacement of the lyric voice's authority is bound up with an exploration of female identity and gendered power relations. In analysing how their poetry engages with the contradictory investments made in femininity in this period, it is also important to distinguish between the different uses of the personal and the public in their work. Alongside thematic concerns with the politics of the domestic sphere, the female body, and personal interiority, I also want to suggest that the sense of embarrassment in some of Riley's early nineties work is related to anxieties about articulating subjectivity within the public domain of writing. Her direct addresses to readers also acknowledge uncertainties about the nature and existence of specific readerships and poetic publics.

### 3.1 'Placeness', Oscillation and Female Speech in Mulford's Poetry

In a 1990 essay on American women's poetry Mulford asks '[w]hat is authority in poetry? With what voices do women poets speak?'<sup>43</sup> The question refers both to a possessive use of the lyric voice, and to the difficult place occupied by women within poetic tradition, particularly those working in the masculine tradition of modernism.<sup>44</sup> She goes on to claim that '[a]uthority in poetry has always been patriarchal ... to be an important poet, by definition, is to be authoritative and to be male'.<sup>45</sup> Within avant-garde or experimental poetry, including that written by the subjects of her essay, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, and Fanny Howe, 'there is no unified lyric voice – its claims are exploded, its modes of expression done-to-death.'<sup>46</sup> This absence is also true of

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<sup>43</sup> Wendy Mulford, "Curved, Odd...", p. 263

<sup>44</sup> Something Mulford also discusses in 'Notes on Writing', p. 34

<sup>45</sup> Mulford "Curved, Odd ...", p. 263

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 263



Mulford's poetry, in which the reader is often similarly 'deprived of the reassuring authority of the poet's voice, claiming responsibility for perception and emotion and organising meaning'.<sup>47</sup> The voices speaking in Mulford's poetry are provisional and shifting. Her poems often bring together a myriad of precisely phrased observations, characterised by a neat conflation of concrete and abstract nouns, so that a room is 'morning shaped', the day is a 'faded bedspread', or life is 'just spans measured in finger-lengths of song'.<sup>48</sup> Descriptions often move rapidly between the physical and environmental to the conceptual, as in "L'oubli partiel est perfide", where 'sheep dog down to/ fold day notched on/ fingers back of a yawn/ spine of the/ tongue' flows into 'I/ query the leg mother/ saint whore' (LS, p. 18). The lack of context for many of these perceptions adds to the ambiguity of her poetry. Unfinished statements blur into one another, as in the bewildering departure described in 'Setting Sail for the Falkland Isles: Fools Paradise': 'the dockside pubs/ haven't had such a night in the ten thousand well-wishers/ crowded the a man sold union jacks' (LS, p. 28). Her poetry avoids narrative, but occasionally makes use of pared-down figures and situations in an allegorical fashion. The recurring presence of the 'old-fashioned moralist' and the 'invigilator' in *The ABC of Writing*, for example, suggest a haunting sense of authority and convention watching over the creative process. Such poetics involve a 'work of reconstruction by the reader', as she observes of the poetry of Hejinian et al., where reading strategies are equated with throwing 'rope-bridges of meaning across the gaps', hunting down thematic words, sound patterns and searching source material for 'clues to logical sense.'<sup>49</sup>

But how do Mulford's techniques, and her evasion of the authority of the lyric voice, relate to her position within feminist debates and the exploration of gendered identity within her work? The poems 'Elegy: for male lovers (Bradford 1980)', "How Do You Live?", and sections from *The ABC of Writing* are of particular importance in this respect, for they explore issues of a female language, the relation between public and private spheres and feminine myths, while also representing the domestic politics of her work. Both 'Elegy: for male lovers' and "How Do You Live?" move through different

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 266

<sup>48</sup> "L'oubli partiel est perfide", LS, p. 18; 'The cylinder, the sphere, the cone', *The Bay of Naples* (London: reality Studios, 1992), p. 34; 'In the Hebrides', LS, p. 47

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 266

feminist standpoints, but instead of formulating a strong argument, or creating what she describes as ‘words for marching songs’,<sup>50</sup> they articulate uncertainties and ambiguities about these positions. ‘Elegy: for male lovers’ takes as its starting point the murders of thirteen women by the so-called ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ Peter Sutcliffe, and British radical feminist campaigns against male intimidation and violence, such as the 1977 march through London to ‘Reclaim the Night’. The poem opens with two explicit, opposing statements:

The law says  
‘We cannot cater for every odd woman that gets murdered’  
and thirteen women die.

Women say  
‘Curfew the men, let the streets be ours  
or let them die.’ (LS, p. 50)

Mulford’s poetry is often uneasy with polemic, and the tone retreats from these statements into something more characteristically intimate and reflective – the contemplation of a sleeping female lover, of whom the speaker is ‘no protector’ from the ‘violence waiting beneath the slates/ down in the derelict streets’. Vietnam is also invoked as evidence of the masculine violence of the public realm, the ‘napalm living torches’ and the ‘cities of molten ash’, crimes which ‘are not made by women’. Here the speaker again adopts a representative stance, a collective female voice, ‘We do not cut up bodies for lust/ or expert from its camps release the last latest death-toy’, an allusion to the strong relationship between the women’s movement and the peace movement in Britain in the early 1980s. However, it goes on to suggest women’s complicity in these crimes:

We have our positions in the theatre of cruelty –  
assistants, ordinands and clerks  
prostitutes and wives  
passive recipients of the lie:  
We lie with you and are not innocent.

Although the argument seems direct enough, ‘the lie’ seems to undercut its claims, challenging the idea of sexual involvement with men as a form of complicity. This subtly

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<sup>50</sup> In ‘Notes on Writing: Three Years On’, Mulford talks about her poetry’s relationship to feminism, suggesting that it is ‘not the kind of poetry that ‘services’ the women’s or any other movement, not words for marching songs and hallelujahs for meeting-halls, though we need those too ... but poetry that is *transformative*, that compels us to recognitions we would prefer not to see’. p. 38



critiques certain representations of women within different contemporary discourses. As has been documented, the coverage of the 'Ripper' murders highlighted how judicial and popular discourses surrounding male violence on women tended to alter the terms of the 'innocence' of victims, once they were marked out as openly sexually active women.<sup>51</sup> Yet the 'lie' of complicity with male violence can also be seen as questioning ideas of essential male and female natures in the first place; the romanticisation of the feminine within strands of 'cultural' feminist thinking which was gaining support in America and Britain at the beginning of the decade. This celebrated women as 'essentially nurturing, non-violent and egalitarian' and condemned the 'masculine' as 'ineluctably dominating, destructive and predatory'.<sup>52</sup>

The address to the lover describes the comfort of a personal relationship, a refuge from the world 'through the open window':

Softly call my name.  
Cold and dark the night  
Close the window tight  
Love don't let them in  
Love me hard till light.  
In our four arms world  
Dream-suspended, curled, believe  
body and soul suffice  
Fearless, complete.  
(LS, p. 52)

Despite its warmth and affection, this also suggests escapism and a retreat from society into the private realm of personal relationships, and possibly also a separate female world. The poem describes the allure of this form of sanctuary. But the enclosed, restricted nature of this refuge in the private is suggested by the sudden change in

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<sup>51</sup> In *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1987), Lynne Segal argues in a chapter entitled 'Sex and Violence' that feminists should not endorse the inevitability of men's urge to dominate women in order to combat menace of rape, 'but rather attack the way in which our society constructs and condones the idea of a coercive sexuality as 'male'. We need to expose and denounce, relentlessly, all the juridical and popular discourse or perception of rape which sees it as an act which can be precipitated by any indication of active sexuality in women, evidence of any such active sexuality signifying the 'guilt' of the raped victim rather than the rapist. We can still observe this assumption in rape trials, as we saw it in the grotesque abominations of the 'Ripper' murders in England, where the police, the media and the prosecution all at least partially endorsed Peter Sutcliffe's pathological obsession (if not his tactics) with punishing prostitutes – only the most 'respectable' of his victims being described as 'innocent' (p. 104)

<sup>52</sup> Segal, *Why Feminism?* p. 27. See also Segal, *Is the Future Female?* Chapter one 'The Themes of Popular Feminism' for a more detailed discussion of the role of American spokeswomen Robin Morgan and Andrea Dworkin in cultural feminism.

structure. The brevity of the lines, ending on stressed rhymes, and the falling rhythm of the distinctive trochaic metre, imply a distance from ordinarily spoken rhythms, and thus emphasise the artificiality of this defence from the outside world.

The poem “How Do You Live?” also considers constructions of femininity and its relation to the private realm. Like ‘Elegy’ it incorporates different discourses and a series of unidentified voices, but it is more formally disruptive and fragmented, and also visually exploits the spaces within and surrounding the text. It is dedicated to Cixous ‘who gave me the question’, and reveals some of the ways in which she has influenced Mulford’s writing and feminist position while also suggesting a degree of distance from some aspects of her work. The poem considers the role of the body in different discourses surrounding women, from patriarchal ones to certain feminist responses. It opens with an attempt to find an answer to the question of the title:

no clear answer, ambivalently.  
reciprocally.            in  
oscillation.            lurching in surprise &  
wonder.  
(LS, p. 54)

These terms allude to Cixous’ critique of hierarchical binaries inherent within masculine modes of thinking. ‘oscillation’ and reciprocation invoke the alternative forms of relation Cixous believes women’s writing can bring about, writing which ‘is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other ... the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion ... but infinitely dynamised by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another’.<sup>53</sup> Yet this kind of representational, epistemological politics is to some extent a distraction from the Marxist-feminist analysis of the material conditions of women’s oppression, ‘the broken sump/ evenly coating the labour we/ unevenly perform – oh there is/ too much talk’. Attempts to reclaim the body through writing represent ‘ultra-private/ accommodations between person &/ politics’. Kinnahan’s analysis of this poem is particularly insightful, detailing its exploration of the female body’s textualisation, the different discursive placements of the female in the private sphere. She draws attention to the colliding

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<sup>53</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, in Vincent B. Leitch et al eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York; London: Norton, 2001), pp. 2039-2059, p. 2047



discourses of patriarchal dominance and those of body politics in the poem, interpreting the lines 'I said you can/ drop a mile or two before the bank-rate rises then lie back my sweet/ & take it, a curt remedy/ after too much attempted', in terms of '[a] voice linking economic and sexual power through an image of rape ... it seems to surface as part of the social text that voices "woman," whose submission is both expected and enforced through the "curt remedy" of economic, sexual and psychical dominance'.<sup>54</sup> The final stanza, set in quotation marks, seems to suggest that body politics, a 'tucked body refuge', may not be doing enough to interrogate women's 'placeness' within the private sphere of the home:

'a woman's place behind the home  
everywhere & nowhere fear  
of placeness, hold on  
for what we can, cradling  
cuddling care, home love  
tucked body refuge will satisfy what part?'  
(LS, p. 54)

In her prose Mulford has commented on the feminist arguments that propose women need to remake language, '[y]es, we must break through our silence. But we cannot *create* a language [...] We cannot choose to assume or dismiss language at will'.<sup>55</sup> Her poetics demonstrate a desire to rupture existing systems of representation, and she argues that she 'has been concerned to *produce* meaning *across* and in defiance of the repressive codes of everyday, communication-ready language'. Yet her qualification of these aims reinforces her distance from theories of *écriture féminine*: 'I would not go so far as to say I have had *no* 'relation of obligation to the law of legibility''.<sup>56</sup> Mulford's poetry does suggest that women's relation to language is partly shaped by gender. But this relationship is stressed as something socially and culturally constructed, rather than dependent on an ahistorical notion of female corporeality. This kind of recognition is what feminist critics such as Janet Wolff and Elizabeth Grosz have argued can save the project of body politics from charges of essentialism. Rather than relying on an uncritical

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<sup>54</sup> Kinnahan, 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyric', p. 650

<sup>55</sup> Mulford, 'Notes on Writing', p. 34

<sup>56</sup> Mulford, 'Notes on Writing', p. 32. She quotes Cixous from a 1976 interview. In response to a question on her form of writing, and whether it was a conscious choice, Cixous states 'What I can tell you is that I haven't chosen ... I have never chosen a way of writing, I have always started on impulse' and 'I mean that I have never had any relation of obligation to the law of legibility.' Hélène Cixous, 'Interview with Helene Cixous' by Christiane Makward *Substance* 13 (1976), pp. 19-37, pp. 30-31



notion of the female body, Wolff argues that body politics should 'speak *about* the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction, at the same time as disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation.'<sup>57</sup>

In *The ABC of Writing*, Mulford describes how she 'attempted to ground my work in the multiple voices of my life'.<sup>58</sup> The sequence theorises a politics of the 'small, material, local, *domestic*'<sup>59</sup> and reflects on the social and material constructions of female speech, a subject upon which the poem 'h' offers the most direct commentary:

my sense of any generalisable difference in fe/male speech not through any biological/physiological determination but in and through social practice, most notably of the *nurturing parent*, still female, with insignificant (statistically) exceptions. That practice of being *available*, as hands, lips body, limbs from the earliest total presence to the later availability *at any time on demand* of ear, tongue, hands, *is* directive of *how* we listen, *how* speak, basic rhythm of attention and response.  
(AS, p. 60)

The long, enjambed lines fill the width of the page to enact as well as describe the unrestricted, ready 'availability' of parental speech. This relationship with language is gendered not because it relates to any unmediated experience of the female body, but because of social conditions which mean that women are still more likely to take on a larger share of parenting. The result of the physical and psychological demands of motherhood, Mulford goes on to suggest, is a state of 'multiplicity' and 'fragmentation', qualities reflected in her work's poetics. But the poem warns against getting lost in the celebration of such a state if this loses sight of the need for material change, and the realities of gender inequalities that still exist in and out of the home, 'multiplicity that is not metonymic of privileged condition, not value to be sought as release from male bondage, of the single, erect, unified, but is a condition of continuous struggle in daily, social experience.' Here the poem rejects idealistic approaches to sexual inequality, which, as in "How Do You Live?" seek refuge in ideas of a feminine nature; and particularly in the valorisation of motherhood, 'multiple claims of the inflated institution

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<sup>57</sup> Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women & Culture* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), p. 138. In the chapter 'Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics', pp. 120-141, Wolff draws on and praises Grosz's assessment of the debate surrounding *écriture féminine* in Grosz's essay, 'Philosophy, Subjectivity and the Body: Kristeva and Irigaray', in Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Grosz, eds., *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), pp. 13 -156

<sup>58</sup> Mulford, "Curved, Odd ... Irregular", p. 264

<sup>59</sup> Mulford, 'Notes on Writing', p. 36



of motherhood which we must demystify, speak against give up – at what cost?’. The ‘inflated institution’ has different bases, in psychoanalytically-informed feminist theories which focus on the child’s pre-oedipal relation with the mother, as well as much American literature on mothering.<sup>60</sup> It can also be contextualised against national political rhetoric in this period which celebrated the unit of the family and advocated a return to Victorian values. Yet giving up the claims of this ‘inflated institution’ is not without risks, and the speaker expresses the fear of losing ‘the ease the comfort in our most intimate affections with our children and their fathers’. This re-establishes the deliberating nature of *The ABC of Writing*, which avoids polemic through its uncertainties, hesitations and contradictions.

These hesitations are an essential part of *ABC*’s ‘writing of the self’. Instead of a ‘Steely declamation of who-you-are/ & how the hell you got to be’ (AS, p. 57), an impression of the speaker’s identity is suggested through various fragments, and is constantly being redefined from different temporal and geographical locations, and through different relations with others. Small biographical details allude to the presence of family members and the domestic sphere without providing a central or individualised narrative, such as ‘Andrew going green on the cliff path. John writing ‘After Christopher Wood’. Rhiannon on roller-skates’ (AS, p. 60),<sup>61</sup> the recollection of awkward ‘polite mothertalk’ (AS, p.61), and the ‘whitebread&marmite lemonade’ but ‘oh go nocrisps’ of ‘children’s tea-time’ (AS, p. 57). These everyday domestic details appear in between more discursive passages of reflection on language, as in ‘h’, above, or on the ‘invention of memory’ (AS, p. 56) or the nature of representation, such as ‘what is/ the point of naming things’ and ‘? to signify what *IS* requires an act of daily phenomenological daring in any order’ (AS, p. 62). This structure builds up a picture of the movements of consciousness, oscillating between theoretical, conceptual questions and the demands of the material world. In this respect, Mulford’s poetry creates an impression of personal experience, and personal life, without the narrative or individualistic quality frequent in consciousness-raising poetry. Notions of the personal are thus important to Mulford’s

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<sup>60</sup> For example writings by Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Adrienne Rich in the late seventies. See Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* chapter four ‘Sex, Gender and Mothering’

<sup>61</sup> A reference to a poem written by Mulford’s husband, the poet John James, collected in John James, *Berlin Return* (Matlock, London and Liverpool: Grosseteste, Ferry and Délire, 1983)



poetry in different, overlapping ways – her work is expressive of interiority, while also exploring the complex relationship between female identity and the home – both experientially and discursively. Continuing to write in the first person, she nonetheless strips the lyric voice of some of its trappings of authority and authenticity. Her work thus finds a way of bringing together certain aims of identity politics with avant-garde experimentalism: it suggests the value of emotional and personal experience in understanding material forms of oppression, but also questions realist models of representation, and the idea of a unified identity.

### 3.2 ‘An Inrush of Others’ Voices’: Interiority and Inauthenticity in Riley’s Poetry.

Riley’s poetry shares with Mulford’s certain preoccupations – the desire to articulate interiority without the use of a confessional mode, and a thematic concern with different discursive constructions of femininity. Many of her poems from the early eighties explore the performance of gendered identity, and the impossibility of a collective female voice. Her early nineties poetry becomes increasingly concerned with the status of lyric poetry, and its relation to broader questions of agency, authenticity, and the affective potential of language, concerns which also inform her theoretical work on linguistics and identity. Her poems and critical work draw parallels between claiming an identity and the work of the writer, particularly the lyric poet. A distinctive feature of Riley’s work is that her use of the first person pronoun is accompanied by an acute self-consciousness and constant qualification, a sense of embarrassment which is to some extent gendered. For it articulates anxieties about speaking in public as a woman, and particularly speaking about subjectivity and emotional experience, which have gendered connotations within poetic tradition. But at the same time, her testing out of different poetic voices, and her direct appeals to her audience reflect an anxiety about the changing status of contemporary poetry – about how it should speak to its audience, and who this reading public might be.

The poems of *Dry Air* reflect upon the awkwardness with which the individual inhabits identity, focusing in particular on gendered identity. As ‘Affections Must Not’ summarises, ‘inside a designation there are people permanently startled to/ bear it, the



not-me against sociology' (DA, p. 27). The process of learning female roles is suggested partly through straightforward but symbolic description, as in 'Making a Liberty Belle', in which the instructions for making a ballet costume, neatly 'copied out of an Annual', are discovered in a childhood exercise book (DA, p. 8). But as in Mulford's poetry, pronouns are also defamiliarised as a way of suggesting a divided identity and implying parallels between the occupation of gender and language. A short untitled poem, for example, describes how 'she has ingested her wife/ she has re-inhabited her own wrists', until the transformation of the closing line where "She' is I' (DA, p. 11). Another opens with 'she's imagining her wife & how will she live her?'

The house and domestic spaces are frequently used in this collection as images of containment, and as a means to analyse the material conditions of gender inequality. 'The Cloud Rose' opens with the menacing image 'The house had its teeth in her leg' (DA, p. 57), while the Marxist-feminist poem 'Affections Must Not' literalises the power relations of the domestic realm: 'the houses are murmuring with many small pockets of emotion/ on which spongy grounds adults' lives are being erected and paid for daily' (DA, p. 27). These unstable grounds refer to the 'old fiction of reliability' (DA, p. 26) of a gendered divide between public and private spheres. The fallacy of this separation is suggested through another concrete image:

while their feet and their childrens' feet are tangled around like those of fen larks  
in the fine steely wires which run to and fro between love and economics

But the poem is hopeful in its belief in real change, starting with a recognition of the sources of gender oppression: 'inside the kitchen there is a realising of tight-ropes'. The severance of these wires is realised grammatically through the closing statement 'I. neglect. the. house'. There is positive affirmation in the belief that 'tables that will rise heavily in the new wind & lift away, bearing their precious burdens// of mothers who never were, nor white nor black', which relates to the exploding of the mythical nature of socialised designations. As in Mulford's poetry, 'mothers' are burdened by a weight of over-determination, existing as mythical constructions that can never be lived up to: 'mothers who were always a set of equipment and a fragile balance'. The use of domestic space in these early poems then, emphasises the political nature of the personal sphere. At the same time, the confinement of the house's interior represents the stifling nature of attempting to live life according to one identification. Such a parallel is underlined in the

placement of the line beginning 'inside the kitchens' directly under the words 'inside a designation'. As Riley argues in *Am I That Name?* people do not live their life fully defined by only one identification, but will more commonly skate across several, and any descriptive label, such as woman, can carry its own sense of repressions, 'there is more to life than this designation lets on, and to interpret every facet of existence as really gendered produces a claustrophobia in me; I am not drawn by the charm of an always sexually distinct universe.'<sup>62</sup>

Looking at the ways in which the category 'women' has been voiced over time, *Am I That Name?* argues that it is an unreliable and erratic collectivity. But if the idea of a representative female voice is problematic in Riley's work, so too is any kind of language based upon female corporeality. Such doubt structures 'A Note on Sex and "the reclaiming of language"' originally published in *Marxism for Infants* (1977). This takes the form of an allegory, with 'the Savage' as the central figure, her journey representing the search for an authentic female identity, a return to a forgotten, subversive state of linguistic pleasure. The desire for self-discovery is imagined in the form of a journey 'back home from the New Country' to 'ancestral plains' (DA, p.7), which stresses the character's belief in a *primordial* site of femaleness. That this project will never quite fulfil the sense of authenticity hoped for is underlined in all the tourist-like trappings – the Savage wears 'native- style dress' and carries 'a baggage of sensibility'. In the end she finds the essentialist myth of the female, rather than providing her with her 'true' identity, has been exploited and commodified in a similar way that an obsession with primitivism has:

The Savage weeps as, landing at the airport  
she is asked to buy wood carvings, which represent herself.

As with the mothers in the kitchens of 'Affections Must Not', sexed designations are overdetermined:

She will be discovered  
as meaning is flocking densely around the words seeking a way  
any way in between the gaps, like a fertilisation

The work is  
e.g. to write 'she' and for that to be a statement

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<sup>62</sup> Riley, *Am I That Name?* p. 111



of fact only, and not a strong image  
of everything which is not-you, which sees you.

The link between the 'reclaiming of language' and the fertilisation image suggests some of the dangers surrounding the uses of the female body within feminist discourses. As hinted at in Mulford's "How Do You Live?", there is a fear that theories such as Irigaray's and Cixous', of a language capable of expressing the female body and identity, may inadvertently construct a new form of biological determinism.<sup>63</sup> In a similar vein, Riley also critiques the reading of work by women in terms of the body, which she argues can become 'a complete strategy of containment'.<sup>64</sup> A later poem, 'Milk Ink' poses a direct affront to this process of 'body reviewing',<sup>65</sup> alluding to Cixous' statement that the woman writer 'writes in white ink',<sup>66</sup> stating simply 'Don't read this as white ink flow, pressed out/ Of retractable nipple. No,/ Black as his is mine' (SP, p.104). It argues instead to 'let me skate', a phrase recalling the movement between different identifications argued for in *Am I That Name?*

Between the collections *Dry Air* (1985) and *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993), Riley's poetry shows a shift both in style and in its preoccupations. While it is still concerned with questions of identity and authenticity, its treatment of the public private divide moves away from the feminist focus on the politics of the personal sphere, towards an interrogation of the 'vexed outer/inner division', the 'dialectic of social outer and psychological inner'.<sup>67</sup> This coincides with Riley's theoretical investigations of inner speech and the affective potential of language, in which she is influenced by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The essays 'Bad Words' and 'Malediction', for example, investigate the 'forensics of spoken injury', that is, 'the tendency of malignant speech ... to ingrow like a toenail, embedding itself in its hearer until it's no

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<sup>63</sup> In chapter 5 of *Am I That Name?* Riley takes up such questions of biology, and questions schools of feminism which use the concept of the female body as a core of identification. She argues that 'Only at times will the body impose itself or be arranged as that of a woman or a man' and that 'the body becomes visible as a body, and as a female body, only under some particular gaze – including that of politics ... There is no deep natural collectivity of women's bodies which precedes some subsequent arrangement of them through history or biopolitics', p. 103, p. 106

<sup>64</sup> 'Denise Riley in Conversation with Romana Huk', *PN Review*, 103, vol. 21, no. 5 (1995), pp. 17-22, p. 21

<sup>65</sup> 'Riley in Conversation', p. 21

<sup>66</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 2045

<sup>67</sup> Riley, 'The Right to be Lonely', in *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*, pp. 49-58, p. 51, p. 52



longer felt to be “from the outside””.<sup>68</sup> Several of Riley’s theoretical writings on language and interpellation make parallels between the writing process and social identification, stressing the lack of complete control over either. As *The Words of Selves* posits, ‘your writing arrives on the page largely from the outside – as your identification does’.<sup>69</sup> Riley’s poems reflect some of these ideas, but in a much less authoritative manner. Instead, her poetry dramatises the process of linguistic internalisation, feelings of inauthenticity, and doubts about the aims of self-presentation which her prose theorises in a more distanced manner. A shift in style is important here. From the conciseness and allegorical situations of earlier work, her poetry becomes increasingly verbose and fluid, filling the width of the page in an almost breathless style, which seems to capture the intensity and immediacy of being ‘pulled at by voices’ as ‘Seven Strangely Exciting Lies’ puts it (SP, p. 82). This interior experience is expressed through a first person speaker, though unsurprisingly, this is a highly self-reflexive speaker.

Although it has been criticised by some for hampering her work or for leaning towards narcissism,<sup>70</sup> the first-person speaker in Riley’s poetry is used to deconstruct rather than to bolster a sense of poetic authority. The self-critical movement between different voices reflects an anxiety about the theatricality and inauthenticity of assuming certain tones. ‘Cruelty Without Beauty’ attempts to account for the adoption of different tones: ‘If I speak with formal/ heaviness, that’s the weight of stiff grief’; ‘No I don’t much like this bland authoritative tone either/ but it is what I took for years of reworded loss’; ‘I’ll drop this clinic voice...’ (SP, p.70). While opening with an assertive statement that ‘The writer should properly be the last person that the reader or listener need think about’, the ending of ‘Dark Looks’ completely undercuts this, dramatising a writerly insecurity about being misunderstood, or, worse still, just being ignored:

...So take me or leave me. No, wait, I didn’t mean leave  
me, wait, just *don’t* – or don’t just flick and skim to the foot of the page and then get up to go –  
(SP, p. 74)

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<sup>68</sup> Riley, ‘Bad Words’, p. 41, p. 43

<sup>69</sup> Riley, *The Words of Selves* p. 91

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, John Wilkinson, ‘Illyrian Places’ Review: Denise Riley, *Mop Mop Georgette* in *Parataxis: Modernism and Modern Writing*, no. 6 (1994), pp. 58-69 and James Keery ‘Review of the Third Cambridge Conference of Contemporary British Poetry’, *PN Review* vol. 20, no. 3 (1994), p. 13



This qualification and uncertainty all helps to undermine the authority and finality of the poetic speaker, suggesting that it is never quite possible to adequately express what she is trying to say, as in 'Wherever You Are', in which the tone is once again pleading:

..No, what

I really mean to say instead is, come back  
won't you, just all of you come back, and give  
me one more go at doing it all again but doing it

far better this time round - '  
(SP, p. 48).

'Wherever You Are' acknowledges the strong urge towards self expression within poetry – the desire to articulate interiority, 'So I go to the wordprocessor longing for line cables/ To loop out of the machine straight to my head// And back, as I do want to be only transmission' (SP, p. 48). 'A Shortened Set' provides an important comparison, for it articulates the fine line between the expression of an inner world, and the perceived self-indulgence of confessional modes of poetry – the 'lyric urge/ to showing-off' (SP, p. 36). Riley's poetry aspires towards an expression of interiority without an autobiographical representation of the self. Bodily images of wounds and scars (and their re-opening) are invoked which relate to the exposure of confessional poetry recounting painful experiences or suffering. Such exposure, however, can become frivolous and self-indulgent once it is used to define oneself, as in the facile comparison of suffering in 'Cruelty Without Beauty': 'Show me your wound: Ah yes mine's deeper'. It also warns against attempts to interpret the poet's individual psychology – 'There is a body, or soul, under/ your skin too, but you won't assuage your doubts/ about it by unpeeling me' (SP, p. 70). 'A Shortened Set' asks

This  
representing yourself, desperate to get it right,  
as if you could, is that the aim of the writing?

(SP, p.37)

This poem discusses the use of remembered experiences as a way of representing the self. The process of recollection is disjointed, 'All the connectives of right recall/ have grown askew' and 'the accounts are wrong' (SP, p. 56). It proves a frustrated process because of the pressure for accuracy and authenticity, for *right* recall. Anxieties about the

possibility and desirability of self-portrayal are key to the distinction her poetry makes between interiority and individualism; she describes how she tries to ‘use bits of personal life relatively *impersonally*, by taking snippets which could be from *any* life marked by needs and disappointments and longings’ and aims to give these weight and presence without ‘individualising them so completely that I’m telling a personal narrative.’ This attempts to avoid ‘a particularly violent or seductive appeal back towards the writer. I hope I would not be the heroine of my own work.’<sup>71</sup>

Riley’s poetry is full of metapoetic reflections on the problems of authenticity and repetition. But these concerns are not only about the writing process, they are essential to her poetry’s broader exploration of the relation between the private individual and the social world of language. A reflection on the composition of poetry as an ‘inrush of others’ voices’ becomes a way of foregrounding and worrying this divide. Two longer poems ‘The Castalian Spring’ and “Affections of the Ear” use fantastical or mythical figures to represent the poet’s flawed search for an original voice. The tourist speaker of ‘The Castalian Spring’ is metamorphosed into a toad after drinking water from the spring which is famously imbued with poetic powers. The ensuing stanzas are devoted to the question of what she should do with ‘this novel voice’ (SP, p. 87), what kind of public she should claim. Although the poem analyses the figurative meanings of voice as poetic address, the change in physical state stresses the corporeality of voice, a physical ‘swelling ... in my throat’, a ‘honk and boom’, which suggests that this poem is also about everyday acts of spoken utterance. But the speaker’s loss of lipstick as she drinks, and her ‘newly/ Warty skin’ is perhaps also a play on gendered stereotypes in which to speak in public involves a loss of femininity.<sup>72</sup> The voices the toad-poet experiments with vary from a didactic mode of social commentary, formal experiments reminiscent of sound poetry and surrealist chance techniques, through to an autobiographical poetics, and finally on to a ‘One Love’ sixties’ style communitarianism, to which other,

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<sup>71</sup> ‘Denise Riley in Conversation’, p. 17

<sup>72</sup> Michael Warner demonstrates the ‘visceral force behind moral ideas of public and private’ with the nineteenth century example of Frances Wright who toured America lecturing against slavery and for women’s and workers’ rights. Warner describes how ‘She provoked nearly universal attack for her public appearances, leading the American Catherine Beecher to write: ‘Who can look without disgust and abhorrence upon such a one as Fanny Wright, with her great masculine person, her loud voice, her untasteful attire, going about unprotected ... I cannot conceive any thing in the shape of woman, more intolerably offensive and disgusting’’, Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 21, p. 22



postmodernist voices can be heard reproaching ‘Don’t *you* stifle *us* with your egoist’s narrative or go soft on “sameness”’ (SP, p. 91).

In its movement through these different addresses, the poem suggests a frustrated search for originality. Each time the toad-speaker experiments with a new mode of speaking, there is a familiarity about it, emphasised in her reflection ‘And beauty of utterance was surely enough, I thought I had read this’ (SP, p. 89), as well as her tourist status. “Affections of the Ear”<sup>73</sup> describes the plight of the mythical Echo, who is condemned to linguistic repetition, a ‘passive hell’ in which ‘to forcibly repeat others’ words is my ear torment, my own catastrophe’. This state becomes a ‘tropé for lyric poetry’s barely hidden bother:/ As I am made to parrot others’ words so I am forced to form ideas by rhymes, the most humdrum’ (SP, p. 96). This refers to the ‘white noise’ of aural ramifications involved in poetic composition, as Riley describes elsewhere, the creation of ‘lines whose tones and cadences I’ve stolen against my will’.<sup>74</sup> *Mop Mop Georgette*’s interweaving of various snippets from ballads, songs, slogans, lines from other poets, and phrases from mass culture, some of which are credited in the notes, can also be seen as a comment on the repetitive, allusive nature of lyric poetry.<sup>75</sup> Yet they are also a way of highlighting how ‘the word in language is half someone else’s’.<sup>76</sup> These allusions underline that it is not only writing, but the supposedly private, inner consciousness of individuals that is composed of the utterances of others. This weakens the division between interiority and the ‘imagined asocial space’ of outside.<sup>77</sup> As ‘Knowing in the Real World’ has it, ‘I’m not outside anything: I’m not inside it either’ (SP, p. 53). However, even when such statements are made, and these distinctions

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<sup>73</sup> Appropriately enough, the title is itself a quote, as Riley explains in the notes to *Selected Poems*: ‘Robert Graves’ first volume of *The Greek Myths* claims that narcissus oil was used as a cure for ‘affections of the ears’. Here the word ‘affection’ is an archaism for ‘disease’. p. 110

<sup>74</sup> Riley, ‘Is There Linguistic Guilt?’, p. 92

<sup>75</sup> For example there are snatches of songs by The Cascades, The Everly Brothers, Marvin Gaye and Neil Sedaka in ‘A Misremembered Lyric’, ‘Shantung’ and ‘Rayon’; The titles ‘Seven Strangely Exciting Lies’ and ‘Outside from the Start’ come from W. H. Auden’s poem ‘The Question’, and from Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception* respectively; ‘The Castalian Spring’ alludes to visual effects by the Japanese film director Kurosawa; ‘Knowing in the Real World’ and ‘Wherever You Are Be Somewhere Else’ incorporate extracts from Alexander Gardener’s 1893 *The Ballad Minstrelsy of Scotland*, and the latter takes its title from a Nintendo Game Boy slogan; ‘Cruelty Without Beauty’ reverses the name of an animal-friendly make-up brand.

<sup>76</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated into English by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 293, quoted by Riley in ‘Is There Linguistic Guilt?’ p. 81

<sup>77</sup> Riley, ‘The Right to be Lonely’, p. 52



weakened, Riley's poetry also articulates that however 'inauthentic' one's inner language might be, this does not detract from the strong conviction of one's interiority, as something *felt* as real, and yet difficult to articulate. This is reflected in the strongly corporeal images used in poems such as "Affections of the Ear" and 'The Castalian Spring', and the highly effective image of the physicality of interior language used in "Outside From the Start":

And then my ears get full of someone's teeth again  
As someone's tongue

As brown and flexible as a young giraffe's  
Rasps all round someone else's story –  
(SP, p. 98)

Riley's depictions of interiority in distinctly tangible terms, here as in "Affections of the Ear" and 'The Castalian Spring', blurs the distinction between the physical and the psychical, articulating something of the affective power of language. Many of her nineties' poems undermine clear distinctions between a sense of inner and outer space, and challenge understandings of the personal in terms of uniqueness and individuality. Riley has declared wanting to have 'the intensity of the personal narrative but with the aimed-at width of something much more general.'<sup>78</sup> The successful achievement of this aim is partly down to her poetic address, which echoes the intimacy of confessional lyric poetry, and yet rejects its more individualised portrayal of the self.

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The lyric became a contested poetic mode during the period Mulford and Riley started publishing their poetry. Debates about the relation between aesthetics, politics and identity have frequently centred on the first person voice and self-expressive dimension of the lyric, whether in support or condemnation of it. This section has suggested that Mulford's and Riley's poetry forms a negotiation between some of the strands of these debates. Both poets are concerned with finding a way of expressing personal, interior experience, while avoiding the authority and appeals to authenticity often associated with

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<sup>78</sup> 'Denise Riley in Conversation', p. 17



the lyric, and the individualised narrative associated with confessional modes of feminist poetry. The final section of this chapter considers how an engagement with contemporary painting helps to claim these poetic ideals. In their response to the formal experimentation and affective power of certain artworks, these poems propose models of poetic address which are both expressive and experimental.

#### 4. 'A Painterly Sweep of Words': Visual Art and the Lyric Voice

Several of Mulford's and Riley's poems use paintings as a stimulus for thinking about formal strategies of representation, and the potential of both poetry and art to communicate certain emotional experiences. Some of these are reflections on unnamed artworks, such as sections from Mulford's *The ABC of Writing*, and Riley's 'Red Shout'. 'A Shortened Set' incorporates descriptions of a certain style of painting, which Riley's notes reference as works by Ian McKeever, and her poem 'Lure, 1963' is based on a Gillian Ayres painting of the same name. Mulford has written concise pieces on specific artists, including 'Fifty Years after Edvard Munch' and 'Words After Schiele', but her poetry's most sustained link with painting, and my focus for this section, is the sequence *The Bay of Naples* (1992), twenty six poems inspired by Howard Hodgkin's 1985 Whitechapel Gallery exhibition.<sup>79</sup> Hodgkin, Ayres and McKeever are all contemporary British artists, working largely in an abstract tradition, though Hodgkin's works are notable for the fine line they trace between abstraction and figuration.

A significant body of critical work has developed around poetic descriptions of paintings.<sup>80</sup> So-called 'ekphrastic' poetry brings to the fore questions regarding the very nature of linguistic representation, acknowledging 'the unbridgeable hermeneutic gap between poetry and the real',<sup>81</sup> and giving 'to the language art the extraordinary

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<sup>79</sup> Mulford, *The Bay of Naples* (London: Reality Studios, 1992), hereafter abbreviated to BN

<sup>80</sup> Leo Spitzer's often cited definition of ekphrasis is the 'poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art' which implies 'the reproduction, through the medium of words, of sensuously perceptible *objects d'art*', 'The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' or Content vs. Metagrammar', in Leo Spitzer, *Essays on English and American Literature* ed., Anna Hatcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 67-97, p. 72

<sup>81</sup> Peter Barry, 'Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis', *Cambridge Quarterly* vol. 31, no. 2 (2002), pp. 155-165, p. 157



assignment of seeking to represent the literally unrepresentable.’<sup>82</sup> Some areas of this critical work prove useful for approaching Mulford’s poetry on the limitations of verbal representation, which, as in *The ABC of Writing*, is inspired by figurative forms of painting. But theories of ekphrasis are complicated somewhat when both the poetry and the art it engages with challenge mimetic, figurative modes of representation. Here critical work on the New York School of poets, including Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, suggests some relevant ways into examining the relationship between painting and contemporary experimental poetry. In particular, Michael Davidson’s definition of the ‘painterly poem’ seems applicable to the works considered in this section. Distinct from ‘poems “about” painting’, the painterly poem ‘activates strategies of composition equivalent to but not dependent on the painting’.<sup>83</sup> Its focus is ‘on its ability to embody the painting’s formal strategies and with less emphasis on its mimetic potential’. He concludes that ‘in a sense the contemporary painterly poem is “about” the problem of reading where a paradigm of reception as recovery is no longer operative.’<sup>84</sup> In addition, Marjorie Perloff’s study of Frank O’Hara suggests that modern American painting inspired his poetry in a number of different ways. These include allusions to artworks as a way of grounding particular moods, but also imitations of the process of painting itself – in some poems attempting to do with words what Abstract Expressionists were doing with paint.<sup>85</sup>

This final section questions the extent to which Mulford and Riley use paintings as formal parallels for what they are trying to achieve in their poetry. It considers whether certain artistic techniques are used to justify their aesthetics and to suggest reading strategies for approaching their poetry, or whether artworks are drawn upon for their perceived *distance* from the capabilities of verbal representation. I want to suggest that, as Davidson observes of the New York poets, Mulford’s poems configure equivalent strategies of representation to the Hodgkin paintings they allude to. Riley’s poems, meanwhile, construct a different relationship to the paintings she describes. While they

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<sup>82</sup> Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 9

<sup>83</sup> Michael Davidson, ‘Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1983), pp. 69-79, p. 72

<sup>84</sup> Davidson, ‘Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem’, pp. 71-72, p. 77

<sup>85</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 70



admire the affective power of the abstract expressionist canvases she invokes, her poems seem conscious of the difficulty of achieving the same visceral impact on the page. In both cases though, reflections on paintings contribute to the search for a means of communicating experiences of the private realm – whether understood in terms of the home or as interiority – without recourse to individualised narratives.

#### 4.1 ‘Not the Thing but the Inner Sound of Blue’: From Description to Abstraction in Mulford’s *ABC* and *The Bay of Naples*

There are certain moments within *The ABC of Writing* which can be described as traditionally ekphrastic in their attempts to verbally represent visual representation. Yet the tone of these moments seems to embody what W. J. T. Mitchell terms “ekphrastic indifference”, that is, ‘the commonsense perception that ekphrasis is impossible ... No amount of description, as Nelson Goodman might put it, adds up to a depiction.’<sup>86</sup> These situations seem to be used by Mulford not so much to comment on the discrepancy between visual and verbal arts, but to argue for the limitations of realist modes of representation. The poem ‘c’, for example, is devoted to a description of a postcard, seemingly of a work by Christopher Wood who is mentioned earlier in the poem:

this card is of an oil, size? Fishing-boat PZ134 in harbour ... In the background, a dark-red/burnt sienna gaff-rigged? ... A sail hangs over the harbour wall, to dry? Two fishermen lean against PZ134, one against the engine-room, one, elbows propped on gunwale, smoking. This word you gave me. A third man stands by the forward? mast, mending something, the boom and pulleys of the trawling net? Lobster creels? are on the deck, two with lids on. All these questions your boat gives me. (AS, p. 54)

This section captures a desire to label and a yearning for accuracy which is ultimately frustrated as the speaker strains to make out small details of the picture. The specialised boating terminology implies the pedantry of this quest for precision. The passage as a whole seems to suggest the limitations of mimetic structures of representation, which presuppose language as a transparent medium.

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<sup>86</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 152. Mitchell here alludes to Nelson Goodman’s study, *Language of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), p. 231

The poem 'i' continues this critique, by questioning the ability to capture colours precisely, 'I get a mother's day card, some white, gold and prussian? blue crocuses'. The accuracy of the landscape description is also undercut by qualifications, so that the 'tall old elms' turn out to be beeches, and the sky proves un-representable – 'pink. This evening in the gone-away-from-gold traces of blue-pink suffused in ? light - / just light: off-cream off-pale-yellow off-white light and I cannot find its base'. (AS, p. 61) It is colour which often proves impossible to describe, and which comes to signify an aesthetic movement beyond image and description. Much of Mulford's poetry suggests the importance of accepting uncertainty. *ABC* questions 'what is the point of naming things' (AS, p. 62) and the account of the elusive sky in 'i' of *ABC* seems to emphasise this, 'all merged into its selves it has no particular character, and it has every character. negative capability sky' (AS, p. 61).

Mulford's reservations about a descriptive aesthetic is one quality her poetry shares with Hodgkin's paintings. She also shares with his artwork a similar sense of scale, an attention to the small, domestic details of everyday life, and a desire to articulate interiority and emotion. Michael Auping, in considering Hodgkin's relation to different artistic traditions, suggests that '[e]ven more so than Pollock... Hodgkin finds himself on a thin edge between a European need for figuration and order and an American tendency toward freedom and chaos.'<sup>87</sup> Mulford's relationship to representation – not completely abandoning it, yet also concerned to disrupt 'the repressive codes of everyday, communication – ready language',<sup>88</sup> parallels this negotiation of Hodgkin's. While his works often appear abstract, they frequently contain figurative elements which are suggestive of certain situations, settings or relationships, which are pinpointed in their quite specific titles. The bold, intense use of colour and the inclusion of more abstract forms aim to communicate the memory of these situations, the internal and emotional effect they produce. He has described himself, revealingly, as 'a representational painter,

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<sup>87</sup> Michael Auping, 'A Long View' in Michael Auping, John Elderfield and Susan Sontag eds., *Howard Hodgkin Paintings* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), pp. 9-32, p. 29.

<sup>88</sup> Mulford, 'Notes on Writing', p. 32



but not a painter of appearances', as someone who instead paints 'representational pictures of emotional situations.'<sup>89</sup>

This is something Mulford's poetry also seems to do. It communicates emotional situations, but not necessarily through a realist or wholly descriptive aesthetic. It draws on colour suggestively, as a way of implying certain feelings. Its juxtaposition of brief but precise images, which shift rapidly between location and speaker, parallels Hodgkin's use of recognisable, figurative elements with little context or narrative. There are also parallels between Mulford's articulation of the self in works such as *The ABC of Writing* and James Meyer's assessment of Hodgkin, in which he argues that '[t]he self portrayed in his art is not a monad, sequestered in a pristine isolation, but one who exists in a constant and shifting relation to other persons, places and objects. His colour – 'necessary', additive – is the chromatic expression of a contingent subjectivity'.<sup>90</sup> There are further similarities in what Auping describes as Hodgkin's 'anti-heroic' approach to the American Abstract Expressionism of the sixties and seventies. Producing modest-sized paintings at a time when many were working with huge canvases, big enough for the bodily gestures of 'action painting',<sup>91</sup> Hodgkin has been described as deflating the rhetoric and condensing the 'spatial and spectral energies' of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>92</sup> For similar reasons, he has also been aligned with the French tradition of Intimism, to which Bonnard and Vuillard belonged. This tradition was concerned with the relationship between forms, and took its subjects from experiences of day-to-day life, refusing the grand statement. There is a similar streak of anti-heroism permeating Mulford's poetics, which is particularly evident in her rejection of a declarative voice. Several of her poems are grounded in the domestic sphere, and their conciseness, frequent avoidance of capital letters and punctuation all contribute to an anti-heroic, anti-rhetorical poetry.

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<sup>89</sup> Hodgkin quoted by Susan Sontag, 'About Hodgkin', in Auping et al eds., *Howard Hodgkin Paintings*, pp. 105-112, p. 108

<sup>90</sup> James Meyer, 'Hodgkin's Body', in James Serota ed., *Howard Hodgkin* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp. 19-60, p. 47

<sup>91</sup> Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', in Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), pp. 23-39

<sup>92</sup> Michael Auping, *Howard Hodgkin Paintings*, pp. 29-30. Several of Hodgkin's pre-1990s works measure less than 100cm x 100cm, with some as small as 40cm x 40cm.

Rather than descriptions of Hodgkin's paintings, the poems in *The Bay of Naples* are 'inspired by and have a variety of direct or tangential connections with them.'<sup>93</sup> The poems have the same titles, and one of the most immediate similarities with the corresponding paintings is their scale; sometimes less than ten lines and rarely going beyond a page. The shape of the book, too, is a compact five-inch square. As with the relationship the New York Poets constructed with painting, many of these poems can be seen as 'imitating' with language what Hodgkin achieves through paint. 'Jealousy' (1977) is a prime example of Hodgkin's representation of an emotional situation. The painting abandons any trace of figures, instead conveying its subject purely through gesture, form and colour. It depicts a small red flame-like form against a yellow background overlaid with rigidly patterned green circles, which is then heavily framed in red, brown and black layers. The relationship of form and colour suggests an intense feeling of enclosure, contained anger and restriction. Mulford's poem of the same name can be seen as a verbal equivalent of such techniques: a piling up of phrases and concrete images work in relation to one another to evoke the sensations of jealousy:

rust tawny flaming  
 rib-cage aswirl  
 crisp bicycle-clip  
 crimping surprises  
     icy-glowing  
     framing a blur (BN, p. 15)

The opening and closing lines describe the painting, while the remaining lines deploy images of confinement, but the effects are also achieved through sound – particularly through the repetition of harsh consonants, which all help to depict the unyielding nature of this state. Like the painting's suggestive use of forms without figuration, the poem's disrupted syntax helps to represent an emotional state without detailing an individualised scene, narrative or context.

In poems such as 'Jealousy', then, the focus is on the interior experience or emotional response rather than the precise situation that it might stem from. As 'The Green Château' phrases it so effectively, 'not the thing but the/ inner sound of blue' (BN, p. 7), lines which also capture the synaesthetic aspirations of Mulford's poetry. Colour is

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<sup>93</sup> Described on the back cover of *The Bay of Naples*.



often used in *The Bay of Naples* as a way of suggesting emotional states without describing them. The opening of 'Anecdotes', for example, creates an expectation of a story or a love lyric, but uses colour to suggest certain feelings:

once you were blue to me .  
green in a swirl  
blue-bobbing fringed  
in retroussée pink  
sun sweetly setting  
such amorous clouds  
(BN, p. 20)

Instead of naming qualities, it evokes a memory of a youthful romance through the emotional associations of colour – the liveliness of a swirling green, and the tension between the pretentiousness of the 'retroussée pink' and the seriousness of the more heartfelt 'blue' suggesting the folly of this relationship. In these poems, blue often comes to signify a depth of emotion which, as in the earlier 'The Meaning of Blue', from *Late Spring Next Year*, is something that defies realist models of representation. In this earlier poem the search to uncover the 'real meaning of blue' necessitates a transcendent movement 'beyond image', for blue becomes allied with 'other things out there beneath the whiteness besides those/ the conscious mind allows' (LS, p. 45).

Where they do partially depict figures, Hodgkin's paintings tend to do so in social situations, such as domestic interiors or gardens, rather than in studios, places where 'conversation and glances are exchanged'. Often these will be fragments of scenes, as Nicolas Serota describes, 'a fragment caught, as if by the click of a shutter, at an instant of social engagement and heightened awareness of self.'<sup>94</sup> As section two demonstrated, Mulford's poetry also explores the self as it is constructed through social relations. Several poems in this collection capture relationships through carefully selected details, or fragments of scenes, as in 'In Alexander Street', in which 'my days are dotted with beginnings & endings of sentences spoken/ or dreamed' (BN, p. 31). The distinctness and possibly the attraction of this relationship stems from the unknown element, that which has not been shared, 'I do not know you/ we have never been to France together/ football/ theatre/ collected stamps/ cooked together' (BN, p. 31). It belongs to a fantasy escape from routine and familiarity. It represents a direct contrast to the marriage evoked in 'Mr

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<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Serota in Serota ed., *Howard Hodgkin*, introduction, p. 14

and Mrs'. As in the poem 'Jealousy', this portrayal of a stifling relationship is achieved through a listing of slightly unnerving images, such as 'silver-chewing', 'couple leashed in/ permanent rental/ in the tender solace of cats', and the injunctions '-put a nice suit on - / - have your eyes straightened'. The shattered expectations of homelife are captured in the 'bright blue broken willow-pattern home' (BN, p. 14), as appearances are revealed as a garish sham. This chimes with sections of other poems in *The Bay of Naples*, which allude to the domestic sphere in disillusioned terms, conjuring up a sense of oppression, such as in 'Hopes at Home' which describes 'the blackest depths' and 'the/ relentless fall/ of gravity' (BN, p. 22), 'the shredded promise of a home' in 'In a hot country' (BN, p. 33), or else a sense of diminished authority as suggested in 'Clean Sheets',

who am I to say  
do not who never could  
launder well  
a happy home  
(BN, p. 18).

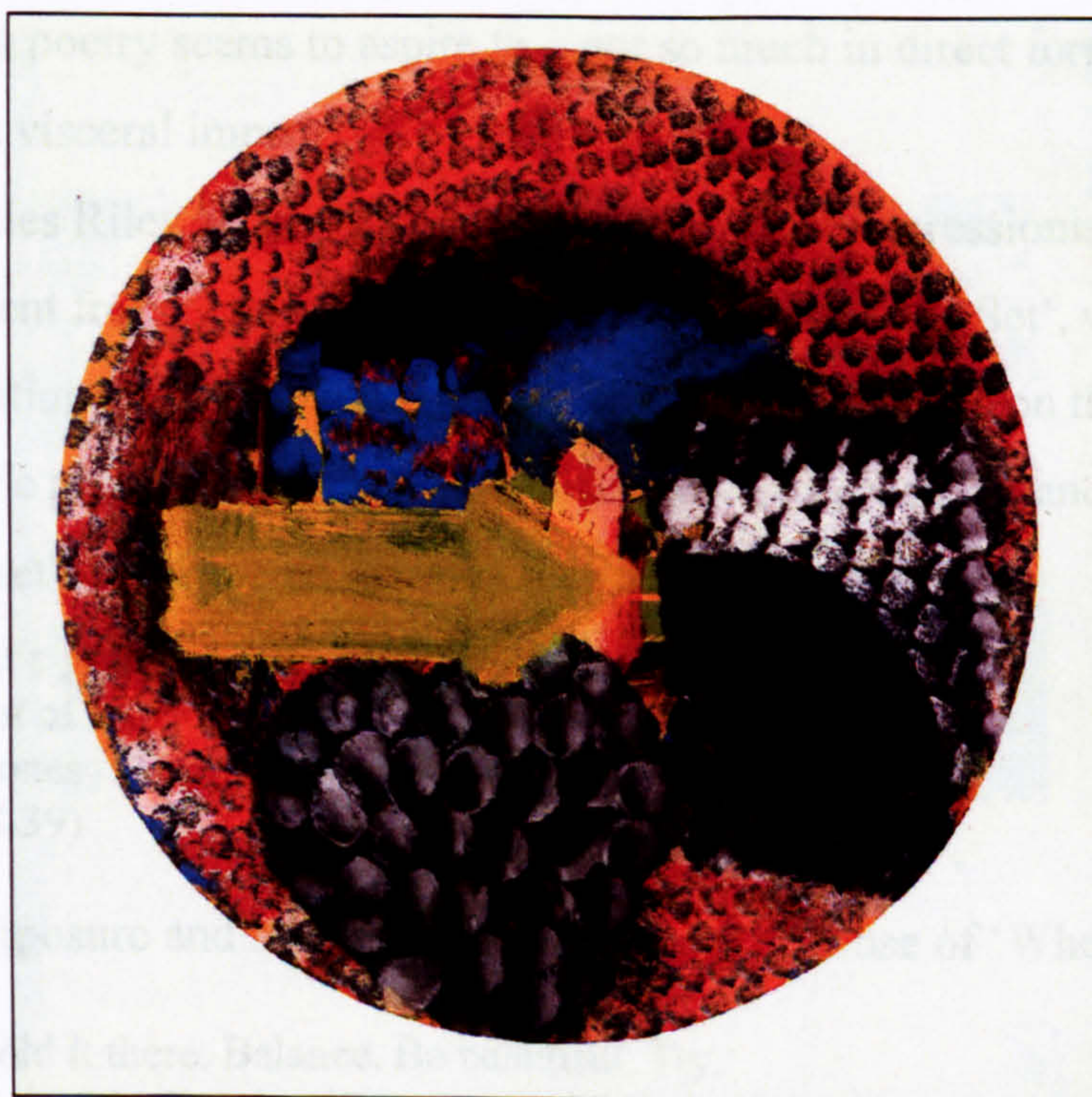
As well as responding to Hodgkin's paintings, then, Mulford's poems in *The Bay of Naples* also develop ongoing preoccupations, such as the relationship between the domestic realm and the social construction of a voice. 'Valentine', which opens the collection, summarises this part-inspired/part-tangential relation between poem and painting. She uses the circular shape of the painting and its enclosure of different vying forms (an arrow, heart shape, square and triangular forms), as a way of thinking about visual and verbal signs which constitute speech acts. It continues the concern with the power relations between the self and the language, which can be found throughout her poetry, by opening with an image of the thick physicality of language:

there are spaces we cannot reach  
in the heart of the circle the words grown viscous  
tasting of sherbet vanilla praline nuts  
a whole cosmos turned to toffee  
(BN, p. 3)

In conjunction with the title, these saccharine descriptions imply an inauthentic and commodified language of love, whether that language may be verbal or visual. Related to this sticky, implicating image of communication, the poem also alludes to the instability of identity, 'she is nowhere constituted and bits/ hang off her all the time', and not



dissimilar to Riley's evocation of the linguistic chaos of interiority, 'Valentine' uses the incongruous forms of Hodgkin's paintings to suggest the materiality of inner speech, 'terms jostle. within/ the elastic limits speeches slide collide/ bumping against the steel skull-cap' of 'our corralled selves' (BN, p. 3). This is a key poem in assessing the relation between Mulford's poetry and Hodgkin's artworks, for it shows how she invokes them not so much in a descriptive or traditionally ekphrastic way, but as a way of foregrounding different formal strategies, and to explore connections between poetry and the visual arts in their articulation of personal emotion. Mulford's poems thus configure a formal equivalent to Hodgkin's paintings; like his thickly painted works which draw attention to the wood they are painted on by leaving sections uncovered and by incorporating the frame into the picture, her poems draw attention to the materiality of the signifier. The fluidity of the images and the descriptions of her poetry are arrested somewhat by a lack of sequential structure to connect them. This combination of recognition and disorientation renders Hodgkin's paintings, which blur the distinction between figuration and abstraction, a highly appropriate aesthetic model.



**Figure 1.** Howard Hodgkin, *Valentine*, 1978 – 1984, oil on wood, diameter 120.7 cm<sup>95</sup>

<sup>95</sup> From Nicholas Serota ed., *Howard Hodgkin: Forty Paintings, 1973 – 84* (London: Trefoil Books, 1984)



## 4.2 Shouting Colour: Riley's Synaesthetic Painterly Poems

The relationship between Riley's poems and the artworks they allude to is somewhat different. While Riley's poetics are less formally disruptive than Mulford's, the paintings she invokes are more radically abstract than Hodgkin's, creating a more substantial gap between verbal and visual form. Riley talks about envying 'the brilliance and broad canvas of American abstract expressionist paintings, and the hopelessness of replicating that in words. It's always vexing to me that you can't get that sense of immediacy of colour and speed on the page, or a broad and generous, painterly, heavy drag or sweep of words.'<sup>96</sup> This sense of distance is important. It allows a certain level of defamiliarisation, and enables reflection on the processes of interpretation and the relationship between artwork and audience more generally. In reflecting on the emotional and somatic impact of these works, Riley uses painting to develop phenomenological concerns with the boundary between interiority and exteriority. Their presence suggests some of the limits of linguistic forms of communication, yet the paintings also represent something Riley's poetry seems to aspire to – not so much in direct formal equivalences, but in terms of its visceral impact.

The qualities Riley seems to admire within abstract expressionist art are those which appear absent from certain modes of poetry. 'A Shortened Set', which asks whether 'representing yourself' is 'the aim of the writing', reflects on the mannerly poise and control of lyric poetry. It questions the desire towards precision and accuracy, which aspires to fix or 'set' remembered emotional experience:

Is that what's going on – the slow  
replacement of a set of violent feelings  
by neutral ones  
(SP, pp. 38-39)

This sense of composure and steadiness is rejected in the close of 'Wherever you are':

Stop now. Hold it there. Balance. Be beautiful. Try.  
- And I can't do this. I can't talk like any of this.  
You hear me not do it.  
(SP, p. 49)

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<sup>96</sup> 'Denise Riley in Conversation', p. 20



In contrast, the visual impact of abstract and Abstract Expressionist works, including those by Ayres and McKeever, is more immediate and intense, their gestural techniques embodying a strong sense of movement. A desire to achieve the effect of 'pouncing leaps of speed' (SP, p. 69) runs through several of Riley's poems, including 'A Drift', which opens with the order to 'Move swift as a blur a fast drawn finger's smudge a/ corner of the eye's unsteady streak a smear of nothing' (SP, p. 68). 'Red Shout' and sections of 'A Shortened Set' focus on the kinetic nature of abstract art, both in terms of the forms of the painting, and in highly charged impact on the viewer. Both of these poems use paintings to think about the artist's and writer's desire for an audience, and artistic expression as a desire for community. Both describe the materiality of the painting's surface in rich and detailed terms, and use this as dramatising the moment of impact of art: 'I still wait for a really human sign/ as light and shocking as an annunciation -/ sometimes I get it and in democratic form: *Red/ Shout.*' (SP, p. 75). Like Mulford's 'inner sound of blue', this describes a synaesthetic form of address. The red shout recalls the untreated 'violent feelings' of 'A Shortened Set'. While the poem starts by thinking about the writing on the page, it goes on to describe the moment of impact in distinctly painterly terms:

Red waves race by the sides of the eye  
to open out beyond in tides of shining browns  
sliced harder in to black and quicker as a sheet of  
clear red beauty rips apart – if there's good power  
this red wont stop but zips straight through  
who's here flat out and glad, hit hard on the head  
by life and through who isn't:

The success of the red waves in zipping through or affecting everyone suggests its truly democratic, human nature and, Riley continues, is proof that art 'can work', that it can communicate successfully

all this means only  
it can work, the corrective of in this case paint  
for isolation – what works is just that someone  
possibly scared stiff and also living did it, no?  
(SP, p. 75)

The function of art, whether visual or written forms, is here seen as its communicative potential, its power to 'speak' to others, and to overcome isolation in doing so. But,

importantly, this is not described in realist, representational terms, it is its intensity and passion that is admired, not its mimetic potential. The movement from the powerful description of the affective force of the painting to the more uncertain closing 'no?', however, suggests the sense of vulnerability which accompanies this 'human sign', the expression of emotional experience.

Riley also uses paintings to develop her poetry's preoccupations with the shared nature of language and emotion, and with the desire to communicate a non-individualised sense of the personal, the 'intensity of the personal narrative but with the aimed-at width of something much more general.'<sup>97</sup> Like 'Red Shout', 'A Shortened Set' links the creative process with a desire for some form of human connection with another:

Are you alright I ask out there  
straining into the dusk to hear  
I think its listening particles of air  
at you like shot.  
You're being called across your work  
(SP, p. 39)

'A Shortened Set' refers to the quest to communicate shared emotion, which also means recognising the inauthenticity, the lack of uniqueness to these emotions – 'The slap of recognition that you know./ Your feelings, I mean mine, are common to us all:[...] In this I'm not unique, I'm just/ the only one who thinks I'm not. Maybe.' (SP, p.38).

Continuing the distinctive uncertainty of Riley's poetry, and her suspicion of the declarative statement, a reproaching self-critical voice pipes up, 'Don't quote the 'we'/ of pairs, nor worse, of sentient/ humanity, thanks', which acknowledges that her position may appear presumptuous, and that her poetry's challenge to individuality may not be welcomed by all. The poem consists of twelve uneven blocks of text, which shift in voice, location and subject matter, but which are all somehow linked to the artist's or writer's task. The painterly section refers to works by Ian McKeever. Although the notes do not specify individual paintings, the descriptions suggest his 'Lapland Group', a sequence of twenty large canvases from the mid 1980s influenced by the landscapes of Swedish Lapland. Tree structures are discernable in some of these, but the paintings largely take an abstract approach to space, and they are notable for their movement away

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<sup>97</sup> 'Denise Riley in Conversation', p. 17



from primary colours and towards a monochrome base which has since come to characterise McKeever's work (see figure 2). The poem identifies strongly organic, visceral qualities within the spaces and colours of the painting

How can black paint be warm ? It is. As ochre stains slip into flooding milk, to the soft black that glows and clots in sooty swathes. Its edges rust, it bleeds lamp-black slow pools, as planes of dragged cream shoot over it to whiteness, layered. Or the cream paint, leaden, wrinkles: birch bark in slabs, streaked over a peeling blue. A twist of thought is pinned there. A sexual black. And I can't find my way home. (SP, p.38)



**Figure 2.** Ian McKeever, *Sarek*, 1986  
Oil and photograph on canvas, 220 x 170 cm<sup>98</sup>



**Figure 3.** Ian McKeever, *Hearing You Breathe II*, 1986  
Oil and photograph on canvas, 220 x 170 cm<sup>99</sup>

The sensuality perceived in the surface of the painting, its 'human' qualities, thus seems to express what the speaker previously describes as 'My heart takes grateful note/ to be in life', the comfort to be gleaned from the idea that one's personal feelings are in fact 'common to us all', the pre-condition of sympathy and 'sentient humanity'. Yet the sense

<sup>98</sup> From Catherine Lampert ed., *Ian McKeever: Paintings 1978–1990* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1990), p. 72

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 77



of being lost towards the end of this section, and the more foreboding 'Ice glazed/ to a grey sheen, hard across dark grey spikes' is less comforting. This relates to the paradoxes of 'perfectly democratic loneliness' (SP, p. 37) – for though these feelings may be shared, this does not guarantee their successful communication. While the poet asks 'Are you alright' to the vague 'out there' of her public she receives no response or reassurance that she has been heard. 'A Shortened Set' thus articulates one of Riley's main hopes for poetry – the expression of shared feeling. This is summarised in the close of the poem, 'In a rush/ the glide of the heart/ out on a flood of ease' (SP, p. 45). Yet poetry is hampered in this aim by a tradition of mannerly poise and analytical reflection. Here the immediate, physical and synaesthetic impact of certain abstract paintings offers a model of how she would like her poetry to be able to speak to its audience.

'Lure, 1963' provides further comment on the lack of uniqueness to feelings which are presumed personal, interspersing an account of Gillian Ayres' painting with lines from pop songs expressing clichéd sentiments.<sup>100</sup> This contributes to Riley's later poetry's exploration of the shared, repetitive nature of language, and its portrayal of interiority as an inrush of others' voices. Ayres' painting is characterised by distinct blocks of colour, arranged in petal-like formations which are taken to the canvas edge, giving the impression of continuity beyond the frame. The forms are also evocative of artists' palettes, prior to the mixing of paints. The poem's interpretation of this work jumps between these colours, like Mulford's 'Anecdotes', focusing on their emotional associations, but also linking them to linguistic associations through quotation. So Ayres' use of pink is associated with a sickly sense of desperation, tying in with a song lyric – 'barbaric pink singing, radiant weeping When/ will I be loved?'. The somewhat wry references to emotionally-charged songs are perhaps also an implicit allusion to the historical definition of the lyric as a poem written to be sung. 'Obsessive song. Ink tongues' blurs this line between song, printed text, and between the emotional and the corporeal, with the 'ink tongues' also serving as a particularly vivid visual interpretation of Ayres' rich blue-black forms. Elsewhere the colours provoke recollection of lines such

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<sup>100</sup> The poem quotes or rephrases song lyrics – 'The Great Pretender' written by Buck Ram, recorded by The Platters, 'The Wanderer' written by Ernest Maresca, sung by Dion, 'It's In His Kiss' by Rudy Clark, sung by Betty Everett, and the title of 'When Will I Be Loved' written by Phil Everly, recorded by The Everly Brothers. (*Selected Poems*, notes, p. 109)



as 'I'm just a crimson/ kid that you wont date' and 'don't ever make her blue'. The song fragments all relate the hackneyed, commodified language of relationships, a pertinent example of the common, inauthentic feelings alluded to in 'A shortened set'. Such expressions further reinforce the connection between artistic expression and an almost desperate desire for attention and communication, aims which Riley's poetry worries about achieving. In this vein, the poem ends 'And you're not listening to a word I say' (SP, p. 50). The language of relationships is also particularly fruitful in terms of popular quotation, thus enabling 'Lure' to demonstrate the process of linguistic internalisation. The poem aims to show how 'inner language', as Riley later argues in 'Bad Words', 'is not composed of graceful musing, but of disgracefully indiscriminate quotation, running on automatic pilot.'<sup>101</sup> The poem thus blurs the distinctions between the lingering, memorable nature of verbal expression, and the visceral, affective power of colour.



**Figure 4.** Gillian Ayres, *Lure*, 1963, oil on canvas, 153.5 x 152.5 cm<sup>102</sup>

'Lure' is perhaps the most effective example of Riley's impersonal use of personal life, the language of love songs representing 'snippets which could be from *any*

<sup>101</sup> Riley, 'Bad Words', p. 49

<sup>102</sup> From Mel Gooding, *Gillian Ayres* (London: Lund Humphries, 2001), p. 73



life marked by needs and disappointments and longings'.<sup>103</sup> The paintings that her poems engage with are suited to developing these aims, because they are expressive and suggestive of feeling, while their abstract nature helps to divorce them from anecdotal, individualised narratives. Despite her complaint that language can never replicate the sense of 'immediacy', 'speed' and 'brilliance' of abstract expressionist canvases, her poems do make some attempt; the enjambment and visual layout of several of those from *Mop Mop Georgette*, for example, are indicative of a broad painterly stroke, while their increasing verbosity and breathlessness creates a sense of speed and spontaneity. There is an element of equivalence in the non-linear, spatially juxtaposed phrases which make up 'Lure' and the form of Ayres' painting. Yet I would argue that unlike Mulford's use of form in *The Bay of Naples*, Riley's poems are harder to read as linguistic imitations of painting techniques. Instead, paintings become a way of theorising the intersubjectivity of artistic expression. They act as a stimulus for thinking about the properties of language and its relation to interiority: the intense, synaesthetic qualities of paintings such as 'Lure', become entangled with, and representative of, the physicality and affective power of language – the recurring subject of Riley's later linguistic works. They are also important in sketching out certain ideals of an expressive and somatic poetic address, and here the abstract nature of the paintings is again significant for, as with Mulford's poetry, it suggests the inadequacy of realist models of representation in communicating particular emotional experience.

## Conclusion

Mulford's and Riley's uses of paintings play a vital role in their reconceptualisation of the intimate lyric voice, their search for a language of the personal which avoids individualism. The paintings these poets draw on achieve their effects through suggestion rather than description or reproduction, encouraging viewers to engage with the materiality and affective power of paint, colour and form. What the poets seem to imply in evoking such works is that experimental forms of poetry which engage with the physicality of language should not be perceived as somehow coldly theoretical, for they

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<sup>103</sup> 'Denise Riley in Conversation', p. 17



are also capable of communicating feeling and emotional states. In attempting to find new, different ways of expressing the personal, Mulford's and Riley's poetry responds to certain cultural pressures. It is sympathetic to the importance attached to the private realm and to personal experience within Second Wave Feminism. The domestic sphere is acknowledged in their poetry as a site of gender inequality which needs to be contested. But their work differs from confessional modes of feminist poetry in its openness to non-realist modes of representation, and its questioning of the stability of the lyric voice and the reliance on individualised narratives of the self. Anxieties about claiming this kind of personal voice respond in part to conservative rhetoric, and its appropriation of the language of the individual for a politics which proved to be at odds with the aims of feminism. At the same time, this poetry also engages with tensions within feminist discourses surrounding notions of a female language and aesthetic. As with Riley's *Am I That Name?* their poetry considers some of the problems of assuming a collective voice and the dangers of mythologising an authentic sense of femininity. The shifting voices of their texts, and their integration of fragments of discourse, points to the importance of recognising the socially, culturally and historically constructed nature of experience, voice and identity. Yet their desire to maintain some form of first person poetic address reflects a conviction that selfhood cannot be totally explained as a discursive construction. So while they challenge the traditional authority, coherence and stable identity of the lyric speaker, both show a desire to hold onto a personal voice which is capable of expressing emotion and articulating subjectivity and interiority. Ultimately, Mulford's and Riley's poetry exemplifies the possibility of reworking rather than abandoning the lyric poetic self.

### Chapter Three

## Voices in Performance: Orality and Aurality in the Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Akure Wall

### Introduction

The textual voice has been at the centre of the formal experimentation in the poetry looked at so far. The breaking of the illusion of a coherent, unified voice by poets has been a way of questioning ideological investments in the expressive self and in authoriality. But this is not the only way in which contemporary poetry has articulated a politics of form through poetic voice. Using examples of recent black British poetry, this chapter considers the role of orality and aurality in the creation of an alternative textual politics. While voice is important as a trope for empowerment and collective representation within black diasporic poetics, the depiction of spoken voices has also become politicised, with non-Standard Englishes reworking the linguistic histories of colonisation. Furthermore, Caribbean and African American traditions of oral performance have been a significant influence on the aesthetics and dissemination of much of this poetry.

This chapter considers the complex and multifaceted positioning of voice in the work of two British poets and performers, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Akure Wall. It argues that the techniques deployed by these poets on both page and stage reinforce the need to expand critical notions of poetic innovation. The modes of acoustic performance used by Johnson and Wall take advantage of sound and recording technologies which mediate and manipulate the human voice. In doing so their work complicates readings of 'oral poetry' as a nostalgic desire for a mode of fuller or more authentic artistic expression. By examining some of the ways embodied and technologised voices help to construct meaning, this chapter provides insight into the wider value of performance to contemporary poetic practice. But I also want to consider how these poets engage with voice and identity through graphic and visual innovation. The role of visual and acoustic experimentation in black diasporic poetics has generated a growing body of critical interest in the United States. This chapter claims that such experimentation also warrants



analysis in a British context, and that this is essential in reconsidering the division between expressive, identity-based, and disruptive, modernist-influenced poetics. While Johnson is a highly established figure within black British poetry, the critical reception of his work often focuses on its realist representation and affirmation of a particular identity, and I want to develop such approaches by considering the significance of formal experimentation in articulating this identity. By contrasting this with the work of a lesser-known, emergent poet, Akure Wall, I also want to consider the increasing importance of visual forms of performance to more recent black British poets.

### 1. Contexts: Voice and Authenticity in Black Diasporic Poetries

The importance of the speaking voice to the poetics of African diasporic literature is widely accepted. In the field of African American literary criticism, Henry Louis Gates has traced the figurative role of voice in the “talking book” tropes of eighteenth-century narratives through to the “talking texts” of Alice Walker and Ishmael Reed, to “speakerly texts” which produce the illusion of oral narration, exemplified in Sterling A. Brown’s dialect poetry or the work of Zora Neale Hurston.<sup>1</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice* (1979) has been particularly influential on studies of Caribbean and black British poetry, for the importance it places on “nation language” in poetry, the structure of which is characterised by its origins in the spoken word, and a history of linguistic submersion.<sup>2</sup> Much contemporary black British poetry explores this politicised relation between language-use and changing national and intercultural identities. The subversive uses of creolised English provide continuities with other strands of British poetry, which draw on heterogeneous Englishes to consolidate particular class and regional identities. Like these, black British poetry has responded and contributed to the wider debates over notions of Britishness within both populist and political discourses. Enoch Powell’s pronouncements on race in 1968 and 1969 were evidence of a wider naturalisation of populist racism, what Hall describes as ‘the formation of an “official” racist politics at the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and ‘Writing, “Race,” and the Difference It Makes’, in Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 43-69

<sup>2</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984)



heart of British political culture'.<sup>3</sup> David Dabydeen argues that '[o]ne of the many ways in which young British blacks have resisted white domination is in the creation of a patois evolved from the West Indian creole of their parents', a 'broken' language in which 'English diction is cut up', so that it is 'uncomfortably raw'.<sup>4</sup> It is necessary then to consider how the poets in this chapter represent orality phonetically, and the extent to which they defamiliarise the structures and semantics of official written English. This is an important way in which their poetry claims a politics of form. The technical choices involved in representing the speaking voice and the use of the full linguistic continuum from Standard English to creole, also warrant attention. Such choices shape the poetry's address, suggest the position of poetic speaker, and are central to the poetry's attempts to forge or affirm communal identities.

Poetic representations of orality can only be realised through an engagement with print and typographic strategies. Yet as critics are increasingly pointing out, the critical emphasis on orality in black diasporic literature has often been at the cost of an attention to the text's more writerly characteristics. In 'African Signs and Spirit Writing', for example, Harryette Mullen questions the critical position represented by Gates' privileging of the 'trope of orality' and 'speech based poetics'. Like Nathaniel Mackey, who warns against a hasty canonisation of orality in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing* (1993), Mullen points to the significance of Jean Toomer's *Cane* in arguing that the requirement for a text to be "speakerly" excludes 'texts that draw more on the culture of books, writing, and print than they do on the culture of orality'.<sup>5</sup> Mackey's aim is to read 'the dislocating tilt of artistic othering' often ignored in work of African American writers, and in doing so he underscores a link between social marginality and formal innovation.<sup>6</sup> Both Mackey and Aldon Nielsen discuss the importance of graphicity in twentieth-century poetics. Nielsen,

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall 'Racism and Reaction' *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain: Talks on Race Relations Broadcast by BBC TV (1978)* (London: Commission for Racial Equality), pp. 29-30

<sup>4</sup> David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', in Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels eds., *The State of the Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 3-14, p. 9, pp. 2-3

<sup>5</sup> Harryette Mullen, 'African Signs', *Callaloo*, vol. 19 no.3 (1996), pp. 670-689, p. 671. Mullen's essay proceeds to question the 'erroneous Eurocentric assumption that African cultures developed no indigenous writing or script systems' by reading examples of African American spirit writing 'as precursors of complementary traditions of African-American literacy' (p. 671)

<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 284 and pp. 7-8



in emphasising that the strongly graphic properties of black poets such as Russell Atkins are not opposed to 'the 'oral' impulse', concurs with Amiri Baraka, who undermines the oppositions between an idealised orality and a devalued writing, and that between African-American poetics and modernity/postmodernity.<sup>7</sup> This chapter considers how such relations between orality and writing are negotiated in the poetry of Johnson and Wall. Both poets are self-reflexive in their approach to the graphic properties of their texts, but notions of the poem's visual performance become increasingly central to the multimedia work of Wall and other poets of her generation. Both poets use formal disruption as a way of questioning dominant discourses. Yet while Johnson uses representations of black vernaculars to achieve this, the disruptive element in Wall's poetry depends more on a language of the visual.

There are then two important sites of formal innovation that need to be considered: the printed properties of the text and the aurality of the poem in performance. Sounded performance necessitates an engagement with various non-representational devices, such as vocal style, rhythm, pace, silences, and choices of inflection, all of which contribute to the semantics of a poem. Ethnographic studies of oral poetry have distinguished live and immediate 'oral poetry', which is composed orally at the same time it is being received aurally by an audience, from 'voiced texts', which start out as written compositions, but whose aural performance becomes an important part of their definition.<sup>8</sup> As the poetry considered in this chapter mainly falls into this latter category, there is a need to consider the relation between script and performance, and the extent to which acoustic performance can develop or complicate the meaning suggested on the page. Although performances of all forms of contemporary poetry have flourished in post-war Britain, with poetry readings playing an ever-increasing role in securing audiences, what Charles Bernstein calls poetry's 'audiotexts' have, until recently, received very little critical attention.<sup>9</sup> This 'audible acoustic text of the poem' is

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<sup>7</sup> Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant: Language of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 19-22

<sup>8</sup> John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 38-45

<sup>9</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Introduction' in Bernstein ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 3-26, p. 12



foregrounded in its vocal performance.<sup>10</sup> Some recent critical works have started to analyse selected audiotexts of particular poets, and in doing so, have considered the role of sound in constituting another kind of textual politics. Kathleen Crown and Loretta Collins, for example, have discussed the dissonant uses of sound and noise in African American performance styles and provided insight into the politically charged status of the 'Jamaican soundspace', the sound systems which became 'a crucial site of contest' during the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Crown's approach to the performed voice is important for shifting the focus away from individualised expression and towards its role in a wider, decentred 'soundscape'. The focuses of some edited volumes suggest that the uses of sound, recording technologies and performance in contemporary poetry demand a reconfiguration of the terms of poetic innovation. *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (1997), *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998), and *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* (2002) all bring together essays on black performance poetics with those on modernist traditions, implicitly suggesting that an attention to performance can highlight continuities between the two.

In considering this poetry's experiments with voice and aural effects in performance, my chapter builds on the issues raised in these critical studies, widening their mainly American focus by applying them to black British performance traditions. One of the fundamental tensions it seeks to analyse is that between poetic performance and the avant-garde's suspicion of the lyric voice. It suggests parallels with the poetic performances of African American poets analysed by Crown and those of Johnson and Wall. It argues that rather than exploiting the performed voice as the 'expression of a

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<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, 'Introduction', *Close Listening*, p.12

<sup>11</sup> Loretta Collins, 'Rude Bwoys, Riddim, Rub-a-Dub, and Rastas: Systems of Political Dissonance in Caribbean Performative Sounds', in Adelaide Morris ed., *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 169-193. Kathleen Crown, 'Sonic Revolutionaries': Voice and Experiment in the Spoken Word Poetry of Tracie Morris', in Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue eds. *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* (Tuscaloo, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2002), pp. 213-226 and 'Choice Voice Noise': Soundings in Innovative African-American Poetry' in Romana Huk ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 219-245



personal sensibility', their performances configure soundscapes which instead 'rework conceptions of lyric presence'.<sup>12</sup>

The uses of the human voice as a medium by these poets rely partially upon collaborations with music and sound engineering. But as well as developing the multimedia nature of their poetry, music and sound technologies also feature as a subject of their poetry. Their thematic presence serves different purposes. As with the poetic engagement with other art forms and discourses in previous chapters, the reflection upon music traditions is indicative of a wider desire to reconfigure contemporary poetry's communicative potential. Collaborating with and reflecting upon musical expression emphasises poetry's interdependence with other art forms, and offers an aesthetic model in the development of new kinds of poetic address. In addition, Johnson's poetry comments on the role of music cultures in offering an alternative public space, essential to the forging of communal identities based upon class, race and gender. In its approach to identity, Wall's poetry represents shifts within black British cultural politics more widely, towards a politics of representation, a 'radical displacement of that unproblematic notion of the conception of representation', an understanding of representation as formative, not just expressive.<sup>13</sup> Wall collaborates with a broad range of music styles to articulate an intercultural and fluid identity. She also takes into account the historic significance of music styles in offering black identity models internationally, as a way of considering cultural constructions of blackness, and the gradual commodification of such models by the end of the twentieth century.

The kind of music cultures informing the work of Johnson and Wall point to some of the limitations of a national framework in analysing their poetry. The Jamaican tradition of reggae, and its subset, dub, provide the main musical influence on Johnson. Born in Jamaica but moving to London as a child in the 1960s, Johnson has performed

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<sup>12</sup> Crown, "'Choice Voice Noise'", p. 220

<sup>13</sup> Hall, 'New Ethnicities', *ICA Documents 1989*, pp. 27-31, p. 27. See also Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), chapter 8 'Black Art and the Burden of Representation', pp. 233-258, which discusses how certain films in the 1980s contested 'the supposedly "representative" voices of black politics ... a singularly black male heterosexual voice who assumed that "he" had the right to speak for the entire black community' and instead created 'space for dialogue about the complex play of differences within contemporary black communities, in the plural' (p. 250)



and recorded several albums with reggae bands. Wall is also from London but has spent time living in New York and Lagos, and her poetry and performance shows a greater influence of Nigerian as well as black American music styles including soul, hip-hop and rap. Paul Gilroy has used the international exportation and adaptation of music forms to support his call for a transatlantic approach to cultural studies. In Britain, a post-Windrush black community has appropriated international music styles, forging 'a compound culture from disparate sources.'<sup>14</sup> Reggae is a prime example of the syncretic adaptation of Caribbean forms from countries culturally, historically and politically diverse. Now ceasing in Britain to 'signify an exclusively ethnic, Jamaican style', reggae instead derives 'a different kind of cultural legitimacy from a new global status', part of the wider development of a 'pan-Caribbean culture'.<sup>15</sup> Gilroy's discussion in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) is important to the analysis of black British poetry and performance in various ways. It provides a framework for thinking about their 'cut 'n' mix' aesthetic, both in their appropriation of music styles and other artistic forms. It suggests the historic significance of the music traditions informing their work, and the importance of market innovations which have complicated simplified notions of 'authentic' and 'original' forms of black expression. It highlights that even while it engages with concepts of Britishness, it is important to recognise the international context for much poetic activity going on in Britain. Just as American poetry and aesthetic debates have influenced many of the poets looked at in previous chapters, here, the poetry's exploration of national and diasporic identity is influenced by African American and Caribbean aesthetics and criticism.

The comparison of Johnson and Wall in particular aims to gesture towards some of the wider shifts within black British performance poetics over the last thirty years. While Johnson first came to prominence in Britain in the 1970s, Wall represents an emerging generation of poets involved with performance, who are increasingly exploiting the use of multimedia formats. Wall's work signifies a movement away from the focus on the spoken voice and nation languages in articulating a black diasporic identity. By the time of her poetry, the dominance of the iambic pentameter had already been broken by

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London; New York: Verso, 1993), p. 15

<sup>15</sup> Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 82



poets such as Johnson, and those associated with avant-garde traditions. Yet her uses of visual and typographic disruption to explore unstable subjectivities and intercultural identities continues a tradition which is exemplified in Brathwaite's poetry, and which highlights the dialogue between modernism and African diasporic poetics. Brathwaite's later work aims to demonstrate that the wordly 'disequilibrium' created by slavery, is also enacted at the level of the word.<sup>16</sup> The use of linguistic, syntactic and graphic defamiliarisation becomes a way of exploring the disjointed heritage of a divided subject, typographically represented in the title of the 1987 collection *X/Self*.<sup>17</sup> This chapter's analysis of Wall suggests similarities with this tradition, and argues that her work's visuality performs the kind of opacity and untranslatable element of intercultural relations that Homi Bhabha and Edouard Glissant have both highlighted.

## 2. Sound Explosions and Collective Voices in the Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson

Johnson's approach to orality, both in the printed text and through his live and recorded performances, has been inseparable from his political activism. In the seventies he was a founding member of the Brixton publishers and pressure group, Race Today Collective, and a member of the Black Panther Youth League, and it was during this period that he published his first collection, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974). This was followed shortly by *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975), an album version of which was released in 1979, the first of many collaborations with the reggae musician and sound engineer Dennis Bovell. In the decades following he published the collections *Inglan Is A Bitch* (1980) and *Tings and Times* (1991), and his selected poems *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* have recently been published by Penguin Classics.<sup>18</sup> Discovering much black literature, sociology and cultural theory through John La Rose's London

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<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel Mackey 'An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite', in Stewart Brown ed., *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite* (Wales: Seren, 1995), pp. 13-32, p. 15

<sup>17</sup> Braithwaite's visual and linguistic experimentation can be seen in his collections *Mother Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), *Sun Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) and *X/Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and his collection *Middle Passages* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1992)

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (London: Race Today, 1974); *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1975), hereafter abbreviated to DBB; *Inglan Is A Bitch* (London: Race Today, 1980); *Tings and Times* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1991); *Mi Revalueshanary Fren: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2002), hereafter abbreviated to SP



bookshop New Beacon Books, he cites the significance of reading W E B DuBois, particularly *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Frantz Fanon, and the poets Aimé Césaire, Christopher Okigbo and Tchicaya U Tam'si.<sup>19</sup> One of the major ways in which orality helps to configure a politics of form in Johnson's poetry is through his uses of rhythms, syntax and lexicon based on spoken and musical forms. Here Brathwaite's trilogy *The Arrivants* (1973)<sup>20</sup> proved a decisive influence, for its integration of Caribbean, jazz, calypso and drum rhythms, and for having 'broken with that tradition of English poetry, where the iambic pentameter was the dominant mode'.<sup>21</sup> Brathwaite expounded the necessity of this break in *The History of the Voice* (1979). The use of nation language, with its origins in the spoken word, was part of this rejection of imposed metrical forms. Nation language embodied a historical-linguistic process, and represented the surfacing of the African languages of imported slaves, submerged by the official language of the conquistador. Describing it as a language that both is and is not English, sharing lexical similarities but unlike it in its contours, rhythms and 'sound explosions', Brathwaite demonstrates through aural readings of individual poems, the importance of noise to the construction of meaning, arguing that Anglophone Caribbean poets are increasingly using a language 'which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun'.<sup>22</sup>

In its uses of a Jamaican patois, Johnson's poetry was particularly important for the type of English to be represented in British poetry. The seventies and eighties saw the publication of many poets in Britain whose work can be read in terms of what Henry Louis Gates calls "speakerly texts", for their engagement with black vernaculars and their illusion of oral narration.<sup>23</sup> These include Mikey Smith, Jean Binta Breeze, James Berry, David Dabydeen, Valerie Bloom, Amryl Johnson and John Agard. The first major anthologies of Caribbean and black British poetry were also published in this period, including *Bluefoot Traveller* (1976), *News for Babylon* (1984), *The Penguin Book of*

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<sup>19</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Interview: Linton Kwesi Johnson Talks to Burt Caesar' (11 June 1996), *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1996), pp. 64 -77

<sup>20</sup> Braithwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Trilogy first published separately as *Rights of Passage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), *Masks* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) and *Islands* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1969)

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Caesar, p. 72

<sup>22</sup> Braithwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 13

<sup>23</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, p. xxv



*Caribbean Verse* (1986), *Hinterland* (1989) and *Voiceprint* (1989).<sup>24</sup> Johnson's mimetic representations of spoken Black English were largely innovative in Britain for appearing before such collections, and as such, provided a crucial influence on future generations of black British poets. The attempt to question and expand conceptions of British identity through the representation of speech overlapped with the representation of different class registers and dialects in other poetry of this period, which similarly opposed the cultural hegemony of Standard English. Tony Harrison, Tom Leonard, Tom Pickard, Maggie O'Sullivan, Bill Griffiths and Barry MacSweeney, for example, while varying in their allegiance to a politics of representation, all explored the politics of 'non standard' English. Though the heterogeneity of Englishes within poetry is now fairly commonplace, language's role as a site for political contestation in the seventies and eighties should not be underestimated. As Tony Crowley has argued, after the conservative victory in 1979, debates over Standard English became a crusade for specific types of contemporary values, with John Honey and educationalists such as John Rae inflaming debates over the relation of 'corrupt' forms of English to an alleged decline in education standards.<sup>25</sup>

Most critics who have discussed Johnson cannot fail to stress the cultural and historical specificity of his work. His poetry's concern with the experiences of black urban youth in a climate of racial hostility has been well documented. Critics recognise the need to situate the anger and prophesy of his early work in the context of an aggressive popular and political nationalism, evidenced in political discourses on nation and otherness, changing immigration policy, and the rise of the National Front.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> James Berry ed., *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of Westindian Poets in Britain* (London: Limestone, 1976) and *News for Babylon: The Chatto Book of West Indian- British Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984); Paula Burnett ed., *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* (London: Penguin, 1986); E. A. Markham ed., *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1989); Stewart Brown, Mervyn Morris and Gordon Rohler eds., *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean* (Harlow: Longman, 1989)

<sup>25</sup> Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). In the conclusion, Crowley discusses John Honey's attack on contemporary linguistic research into dialects in Honey's *The Language Trap: Race, Class and the 'Standard Language' Issue in British Schools* (Kenton: National Council for Educational Standards, 1983)

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Walder, 'Caribbean and Black British Poetry' in *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 116-151; Fred D'Aguiar, 'Have You Been Here Long? Black Poetry in Britain' in Robert Hampson and Peter Barry eds. *New British Poetries The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 51-71; Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England



importance of the New Cross Massacre of 1981, the 'sus' laws and related cases of police brutality and the inner-city race riots of the early eighties have also been highlighted. Within such a context, Johnson's forceful polemic expressed in 'the language of a sizeable section of Britain's Black working class ... signals a process of mobilisation of that class'.<sup>27</sup> His poetry, therefore, is often read for its politically agitational potential, and the limitations of dub as a genre perceived as 'the limitations of the time, when the frustrations of urban black communities were especially acute and the sounds and speech of the streets important to use in solidarity against the oppressor.'<sup>28</sup>

While Johnson's poetry and performances are clearly revealing of a particular social and political moment, the identity his poetry is concerned with cannot be defined simply as an oppositional one. Articles which draw on the theories of Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha, including those by Peter Hitchcock and Robert McGill, argue for the expression of a more complex, interstitial, transatlantic identity at the heart of Johnson's poetry.<sup>29</sup> Dub identity, argues Hitchcock, is 'not about the presence of being, but being in between, the "Middle Passages" that Brathwaite (among others) has elaborated, or the "black atlantic" model that Paul Gilroy has proposed.'<sup>30</sup> Hitchcock's work is important for offering a more developed theoretical consideration of the formal properties of dub than previous criticism. In his analysis of the way in which sound is employed as syntax, he makes a valid claim for Johnson's uses of irrational noise and a dread beat as an interrogation of authoritarian political discourse - the rationalism of Thatcher's 'monotonous "common sense"'.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, he credits Johnson's work with a more complex politics of form than is sometimes acknowledged in critical responses. However, this complexity is becoming more widely appreciated, and has more recently been referenced by Kwame Dawes and M. NourbeSe Philip. In arguing for a greater critical recognition of the dense and involved nature of many performance poets' work, Dawes

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Today'. Michael Keith also uses Johnson's poetry in his analysis of representations of the 1980s race riots in *Race, Riots and Policing: Lore and Disorder in a Multi-Racist Society* (London: UCL Press, 1993)

<sup>27</sup> Fred D'Aguiar, 'Introduction: Why Innglan is a Bitch', Johnson, *Innglan Is A Bitch*, pp. 9-10, p. 9

<sup>28</sup> Walder, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, p. 143

<sup>29</sup> Peter Hitchcock, 'It Dread Inna Innglan': Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dread, and Dub Identity', *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 4, issue 1 (1993). Robert McGill 'Goon Poets of the Black Atlantic: Linton Kwesi Johnson's Imagined Canon', *Textual Practice*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2005), pp. 561-574

<sup>30</sup> Hitchcock, 'It Dread Inna Innglan', p. 2

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.16



points to Johnson's intricate uses of sound and rhythm, and the complex relation his work constructs between voice and music.<sup>32</sup> NourbeSe Philip, though clear to distinguish her work as 'page bound and far more in the modernist tradition' from Johnson's, which is rhythmic and 'intended to be performed', alludes to a formally experimental dimension of his work. 'I would say that when a poet like LKJ uses a dub beat over his lyrics, I believe he is trying to accomplish the same thing I am trying to do when I fracture, fragment then put language back together again ... Refashioning it so that it can carry what you want it to say'.<sup>33</sup>

This fracturing is something that requires closer attention in Johnson's poetry and performance. Too often the public and political nature of his work is taken for granted due to the directness of its polemic. This is used as a way of differentiating it from the more formally disruptive textual politics of late modernist postwar poetry. But such a distinction can overlook the politics of representation that works alongside his poetry's more explicit argument. To consider the attempt of Johnson's poetry to intervene in the public sphere, his aesthetics and not just his polemic needs closer attention. Thus my analysis of Johnson examines the multifaceted way in which orality is bound up with his work's politics, and it will suggest that it is through experiments with voice that his work effects an artistic defamiliarisation. It considers how his representations of the spoken voice aim to consolidate and affirm a collective counterpublic identity through a particular type of community address. In this respect, orality is used to forge a representative identity. But it argues that like any counterpublic discourse, there is a doubleness inherent in this address, and that his poetry's appropriation and reworking of aspects of the dominant culture and language serve as a way of confronting this wider public.

Unlike NourbeSe Philip's comments, which reinforce the distinction between 'page bound' experimental and performance traditions, my analysis considers how Johnson's formal disruption works both graphically on the page as well as acoustically in performance. It suggests that the literate and the oral elements of his poetry are

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<sup>32</sup> Kwame Dawes, 'Dichotomies of Reading 'street poetry' and 'book poetry'', *Critical Quarterly* vol. 38, no. 4 (1996), pp. 3-20

<sup>33</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Interview with an Empire', in Romana Huk ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 195-206, p. 195, pp. 197-8



inextricably linked, for in addition to literal performance, different kinds of orality are represented through an engagement with poetry's graphicity. These incorporate not just printed representations of spoken black Englishes, but also reflections on the performed sounds of reggae and urban sound system cultures. The representation of music cultures becomes a means of reflecting upon the formation of black British and diasporic identities, as well as offering aesthetic models for Johnson's poetics. Several poems celebrate the non-semantic aspects of sound within musical expression. This is something Johnson develops in performance through an instrumental use of voice. By using it as part of a dispersed acoustic soundscape, Johnson foregrounds that the performed voice is not always complicit with humanist notions of lyric self-presence.

## **2.1 'Whe Wi a Goh Dhu Bout it?' Voice as Community**

On one level then, Johnson's poetry makes use of voice in a representative way, using it as a form of community address, while on another level, it is exploited as a technology. Both engagements reject Romantic notions of voice as self-expression, and the intimacy of the traditional lyric voice. In an interview, Johnson stresses that his poetry has never been about subjectivity or interiority. Rather than expressing 'any profound, deep inner emotion', he suggests he has always seen himself as 'giving voice to, and documenting, the experiences of my generation.'<sup>34</sup> This can clearly be seen in his poetry's direct and rapid response to specific events, such as 'New Craas Massakah', 'It Dread inna Ingran', about the wrongful conviction of Jamaican immigrant George Lindo, 'Forces of Victri', celebrating the continuation of the Notting Hill Carnival against state opposition in 1976, or 'Di Great Insohreckshan', on the Brixton riots of 1981. There are also more general poems documenting day to day conditions faced by many black immigrants such as 'Ingran is a Bitch', 'Sonny's Lettah (Anti-Sus Poem)' and 'Liesense fi Kill' which deal with police brutality targeted at the black population, and 'Fite dem back', which appropriates and subverts a common racist chant. Several elegiac poems throughout his career also seek to represent a community, rather than a personal, response to the death of particular figures, including Leroy Harris, Walter Rodney, C. L. R. James, May Ayim

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Caesar, p. 67



and Bernie Grant. As well as drawing on their rhythms in his poetry, reggae music and sound systems also provide the subject for many of Johnson's seventies poems, including 'Bass Culture', 'Five Night of Bleeding', 'Klassikal Dub', 'Dread Beat an Blood' and 'Street 66'. Within many of these, both the synaesthetic impact of the music on the individual body, and the nature of such experiences as part of a wider mode of communal consumption are explored.

Gilroy has argued that musical cultures in Britain have been significant in forming 'the basis of an authentic public sphere which is counterposed to the dominant alternative, from which, in any case, blacks have been excluded.'<sup>35</sup> Johnson's poems on reggae seem to concur with this, for the rhythm itself is seen as articulating a shared history of oppression: the heavy bass of dub represents 'a moving ... a hurting black story' ('Reggae Sounds', SP, p.17). At the same time music clubs and sound systems are configured as sites of communal participation, key to the rallying of an urban black counterculture against 'di wall/whe bar black blood' ('Bass Culture', SP, p. 14). Critical definitions of 'counterpublics' are relevant to the kind of alternative public sphere that Johnson's poetry represents. Michael Warner has suggested that counterpublics are constituted through a conflictual relation to a dominant public.<sup>36</sup> They are marked by an awareness of their subordination by a dominant culture, unlike groups which merely separate themselves off as a subset of a wider public. The recognition of such subordination permeates Johnson's poetry, from the 'wall' of oppression in 'Bass Culture', to 'New Crass Massakah', which attacks the inadequate response of the dominant public to the arson attack which killed fourteen black teenagers. The poem questions the representation of this case in the dominant public sphere, a representation governed by the role of the press and a problematic police investigation, sardonically asking 'but wait/ yu noh remembah/ how di whole a black Britn did rack wid grief ...but stap/ yu noh remembah' (SP, p. 55).

Clearly linguistic choices have a significant role to play in consolidating this conflictual relation to the dominant public sphere. Vocabulary tied to specific musical cultures such as the names of particular music clubs, record shops, DJs and terms all

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 215

<sup>36</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 119



elicit recognition amongst a certain group while excluding those outside of it, an exclusion which the addition of explanatory footnotes in the 2002 Penguin edition points up. The forceful language of prophesy and vengeance in many of Johnson's earlier poems draws on a particular vocal tradition – the 'dread talk' of Rastafarianism, and shows the influence of the Jamaican DJ Big Youth (to whom 'Bass Culture' is dedicated), famed in the 1970s for his intense and brooding style of chanting (toasting) over reggae records. Prime examples of this style are Johnson's allusions to 'babylonian tyrants', the direct addresses to 'oppressin man', and warnings that 'di time is nigh', 'get yu ready/ fi war', 'it soon come', 'I did warn yu', and 'it is time to explode, my people!' Invocations of brooding electrical storms, 'thunda' and 'lightening', recall the apocalyptic tone of Bongo Jerry's 'Mabrak', a poem which epitomised the 'dreadness' of early Rasta dub poetry, in its announcement of the 'BLACK ELECTRIC STORM' which is 'righting the wrongs and brain whitening'.<sup>37</sup> But while it draws on certain oppositional aspects of Rastafarian culture and identity, his poetry has distanced itself from some of the central tenets and religious principles of it, as his rebuke to those who cling to 'mitalagy' and 'antiquity' in 'di age af reality' highlights ('Reality Poem', SP, p. 35). Notably he rejected Rastafarianism's ideology of return to Africa, which distinguished him from Jamaican dub poets such as Mutabaruka. Instead his poetry was focused on confronting the realities of contemporary British life and on affirming that 'African/ Asian/ West Indian/ an Black British/ stan firm inna Ingran ... we are here ti stay/ inna Ingran' ('It Dread inna Ingran', SP, p.25).<sup>38</sup>

This assertion is central to understanding the function of voice as public address within Johnson's poetry. For while his work invokes a dominant public to forge a community identity based on common experiences of exclusion, it also seeks to address that public. This is one of the ways in which his poetry functions as a counterpublic discourse, something Nancy Fraser argues militates against separatism, by 'assuming a publicist orientation.' As with any public, members of a counterpublic 'aspire to

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<sup>37</sup> 'Five Nights of Bleeding', SP, p. 7; 'Bass Culture', SP p. 17; 'All Wi Doin is Defendin', SP p. 11; 'Time Come', SP, p. 24; 'Time to Explode', *Dread Beat & Blood* (London: Bogle L'Overture, 1975), p. 38; 'Reggae Sounds', SP p. 17. Bongo Jerry, 'Mabrak', *Savacou* 3 /4 (Dec 1970/March 1971), pp. 13-15. A quotation from 'Mabrak' also provides the epigraph to *Dread Beat & Blood*

<sup>38</sup> In the article 'Cutting Edge of Dub', *The Guardian*, 27 August, 2005, Johnson describes the 'dubious honour' of having a Mutabaruka poem dedicated to him (p.7). The refrain, 'it no good fi stay inna white man country too long', was a direct response to Johnson's 'Ingran is a Bitch (SP, pp. 39-41)



disseminate one's discourse to ever widening arenas'.<sup>39</sup> Thus the 'parallel discursive arenas' of the subaltern counterpublics have a dual function in society. 'On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential presides.'<sup>40</sup> The different kinds of address in Johnson's poetry, and the varying and sometimes complicated positions occupied by the speaker, reflects this dialectic at a discursive level. An awareness of the tension between differing publics, and his own location as a poet within them, becomes particularly acute in his nineties poem, 'If I Woz a Tap Natch poet' (SP, pp. 94-97). But even in earlier work, from a more directly polemical period of writing, different levels of address suggest an engagement with different publics.

There are several examples where Johnson's poems, speaking on behalf of a militant 'wi', make direct appeals to the 'yu' of the wider dominant public, as in 'All Wi Doin is Defendin', 'Time Come', 'Forces of Victri', and 'Mekin Histri'. The structure of these poems are among the most simple of Johnson's; they work a bit like chants, relying on repetition and call and response, and they have an anthem-style power in performance. In such a context, the direct address serves mainly as a rhetorical device, doing more to consolidate a collective identity united against the addressee than confronting the proposed 'yu'. It is perhaps through the materiality of print that Johnson more effectively addresses and challenges a wider public while simultaneously affirming the counterpublic identity. Rendering creole in print brings with it certain choices, and as Mervyn Morris has shown, poets have differed in the style and degree of their defamiliarisation of standard written English.<sup>41</sup> Johnson's system of spelling proves fairly consistent, typically replacing 'th' with 'd', eliding consonants from the end of many words, shifting vowel sounds, and substituting 'fi' for 'to', as in 'wen I hear anadah yout-man say' (p.34) 'di soun woz muzik mellow steady flow' (SP, p. 9) 'dem haffi let him go' (SP, p.

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<sup>39</sup> Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 109-142, p. 124

<sup>40</sup> Fraser 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 124

<sup>41</sup> Mervyn Morris, 'Is English We Speaking' *West Indian Literature: A lecture delivered 21 October, 1992* (London: The British Library, 1993)



26). The syllables of words are sometimes compacted, as in 'satdey', or 'facktri'. Typographically, Johnson's lack of apostrophes to signify elisions avoids representing creole as a deviation of standard English. This works to suggest a particularly strong relation between speaker and community, in contrast to the sense of alienation implied in some typographic renditions of creole, such as that in the work of Amryl Johnson, in which the poet's sense of estrangement becomes a major theme.<sup>42</sup>

The ways in which creole are represented is intrinsic to the kind of identity being asserted or explored. In Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry, the creolisation of English aims to re-articulate English identity, something encapsulated in the textual shift from 'England' to 'Inglan'. Kobena Mercer highlights a "'syncretic' dynamic' across a range of diasporic cultural forms which 'critically *appropriates* elements from the master codes of the dominant culture and "creolises" them'.<sup>43</sup> Creole and Black English are a powerful example of the subversive power of this counter-appropriation, for through their 'strategic inflections' and 'reaccentuations' of the syntactic and semantic codes of Standard English, they exemplify the Bakhtinian process of "dialogism". These practices are self-conscious of Bakhtin's notion that '[t]he word in language is half someone else's', continually appropriated by speakers for different intentions.<sup>44</sup> The dialogic principle posits that 'the possibility of *change* is prefigured in collective consciousness by the multiplication of social dialogues'.<sup>45</sup> In Johnson's poetry, creolised forms of English 'others' notions of English identity, and works towards transforming such conceptions. These transformations were particularly important during a period of intensive nationalism, in which conceptions of Britishness were being officially revised and narrowed through the Nationality Act of 1981 which, in conjunction with populist political discourse, helped to set up the exclusivity of blackness and Britishness as

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<sup>42</sup> See Amryl Johnson, *Tread Carefully in Paradise* (Coventry: Cofa Press, 1991). This collection deals with her return to Trinidad after growing up in England. The typographic rendition of patois and the more standardised spellings (as in 'All shades o'folk in perfec' harmony', (p. 19)), along with the use of explanatory notes and translations, all develop the sense of alienation from the communities she observes, and her recurring questioning of 'where was I in all this?' (p.33)

<sup>43</sup> Kobena Mercer 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain', Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins ed., *Blackframes: Critical Perspective on Black Independent Cinema* (London; Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 50-61, p. 57

<sup>44</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed., Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 293

<sup>45</sup> Mercer 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination', p.57



separate terms. Within such a context, his poetry's assertion that 'we are here to stay' is made both polemically and structurally, by drawing on the codes of spoken languages to defamiliarise written traditions.

Johnson's syntactic and lexical disruption of 'official' English, then, serves different purposes. Phonetically, the alternative spellings encourage a strongly aural reading which imagines a performed, spoken voice. They also exploit homophonic puns, as in the repeated allusions to 'mi ruff base line' in 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', which plays on the hierarchical assumptions of literary criticism. Ultimately the creolised forms of English language serve to defamiliarise discourses of national identity. But it is also important to note that Johnson has made use of a linguistic continuum, especially in his earlier work, which moves between Standard English and creole. While writing in a Jamaican patois is an important aspect of his community address, this continuum undermines its association with an *authentic* voice and identity. Instead it suggests that it is a resource, one kind of voice that his poetry exploits for particular effects. bell hooks, recounting her experience of creative writing classes at university, describes how she was praised for finding a 'true' authentic voice when using the dialect of southern black speech, but that this seemed 'to mask racial biases about what my authentic voice would or should be.'<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Johnson makes use of different voices, and just as he appropriates cockney in 'Fite dem Back', or speaks through the persona of the 'goon poet' in 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', his uses of creole should not necessarily be aligned with a single or 'true' identity.

The position of poems along the creole-Standard English spectrum seems to correspond to particular speakerly positions. Those closest to the creole end of the spectrum are often written in the first person, and seem to perform a community identity, whether in the direct addresses and warnings from 'wi' to the 'yu' of the dominant public, or else by presenting the speaker as part of a group, as in 'Yout Scene', 'Double Scank' and 'Street 66'. In contrast several poems from *Dread Beat & Blood* are written wholly in Standard English.<sup>47</sup> But it is those which sit somewhere in the middle of this

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<sup>46</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), p.11

<sup>47</sup> These include 'Rage', p. 18, 'Same Way', p. 31, 'For Those who Go Down Always an Under', pp. 32-33, 'Two Sides of Silence', pp. 36-37, 'Time to Explode' p. 38, and the long sequence 'John De Crow' pp. 41-47. None of these have been reproduced in *Selected Poems*, though whether this is suggestive of a



linguistic continuum that are perhaps the most interesting, and these encompass poems on music cultures. Here the speaker's position in relation to the scenes he describes is slightly more reflective, and sometimes ambivalent. I would argue that such poems are closest to demonstrating the dual address of counterpublic discourse that Fraser discusses, for they seem to be aimed to resonate with those who are part of the musical culture described, while at the same time, they are concerned to outline the relation of Johnson's poetry to music and to justify his aesthetics to a wider public.

'Five Nights of Bleeding', 'Reggae Sounds' and 'Bass Culture' exemplify this linguistic middle ground. Self-reflexive about modes of artistic communication, the latter two are also the poems that come closest to outlining a politics of form. All three explore the link between the high tension of reggae rhythms and violence, but assume a more distanced perspective to do so, avoiding the first person. In 'Five Nights of Bleeding', which recounts the 'war amongst the rebels', resulting in the death of Leroy Harris, each night of 'cruel in-fighting' is set against the backdrop of a different music venue. The dread rhythms coming from the 'soprano B sound system' and 'neville king's music iron' gives way to the violence of 'rebellion running down the wrong road'. As with the scenes describing the police attack on Jim in 'Sonny's Lettah', this violence seems to forge its own distinct rhythm: 'so with a flick/ of the wrist/ a jab an a stab/ the songs of blades was sounded' (SP, p. 7). 'Five Nights of Bleeding' thus seems to complicate the representation of rhythm in 'Bass Culture' as a mobilising force with the potential to alter a racist culture. However it does develop the association between music, sound and madness which is also found in 'Bass Culture': 'an is a whole heappa/ passion ../giving off wild like is madness' and 'latent powah/ in a form resembling madness' (SP, pp. 14-15). This proves important to Johnson's own poetics, because it emphasises the significance of aesthetic form, and not just argument, as a disruptive force. While the spoken voice plays an essential role in his poetry, and is in fact often used to define his poetics, this should not occlude the role of nonsemantic sound and noise in his work, which gestures to an irrationality beyond speech, such as the 'clamour of sounds' that cannot be stilled in 'Two Sides of Silence' (DBB, p.36). In 'Reggae Sounds', 'Bass

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particular retrospective marketing of Johnson's work, or of his disavowal of some of his earlier poetry is unclear.



Culture' and 'Two Sides of Silence', the history of slavery is expressed in terms of sounds, noise, or the 'SHATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK' of a bass rhythm. Such moments foreground the historical importance of music as an expressive power, and translate into print the 'topos of unsayability' which critics have frequently identified within slave music.<sup>48</sup>

Johnson's poetry appropriates and performs the sounds and rhythms he describes. As a result, the politics of form he ascribes to the music is equally applicable to his poetics. The intense rhythm of a 'tropical electrical storm' (SP, p. 17) is seemingly a reference to Bongo Jerry's 'Mabrak' but also to Brathwaite's reflection on the inadequacies of imposed metrical forms to capture the environmental experience of the Caribbean, and his protestation that 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameters'.<sup>49</sup> Johnson acknowledges the history of colonialism entangled with certain poetic forms. What the reggae and sound system culture offer is not just a site of community, but also a model for the creation of new poetic forms based on its rhythms. The undertones of violence and madness inherent in the 'bubblin bass' (SP, p. 14) symbolise the action of 'burstin outta slave shackle' (SP, p. 15), and this energy is something his poetry seeks to emulate.

## 2.2 'Wid Mi Ruff Base Line': The Voice as Technology

The layout and visual dimension of the poems serve as a guide to their sounding aloud and their rhythm. For example the use of capital letters suggests changes in volume, lines are positioned to denote drops in pitch ('Reggae Sounds'), spaces between words are stretched out to signify silences ('Dread Beat and Blood'), or dashes are used to replicate sections of a more monotonous, brooding reggae beat, as in 'shock-black bubble-doun-beat bouncing' (SP, p.17). Full stops are also used non-semantically to imply an abrupt fracturing, as in 'slow drop. make stop. move forward.' (SP, p.17) or 'hot. hot heads' ('Five Nights', p. 8). The visual dimension of the printed page, then, helps to evoke varying, largely non-iambic rhythms.

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<sup>48</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 74

<sup>49</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 10



But although in some ways the printed poem appears as if it is a score for performance, it is also important to consider the performed and printed poem as separate texts which constitute different sites for poetic meaning. Just as the printed poetry exploits devices less congenial to performance, such as alternative spellings, typography, layout, visual puns, and epigraphs, so performance brings into play its own set of formal effects, which provide different opportunities for poetic innovation. Dub poetry as a form builds upon Caribbean musical traditions in which, as Dick Hebdige has argued, ‘versioning’ is a central principle.<sup>50</sup> With the development of the twelve-inch record in the 1970s, tracks were often released and accompanied by several variations and remixes, thus devaluing the idea of a single original. While Johnson’s brand of dub poetry takes its name from speaking over dub versions – instrumental variations of reggae tracks in which the bassline and drums are emphasised – his recorded tracks come with dub versions of their own. On his 1998 Island anthology, for example, ‘Sonny’s Lettah’ is followed by ‘Iron Bar Dub’, ‘Fite Dem Back’ by ‘Brain Smashing Dub’, ‘Bass Culture’ by ‘Cultural Dub’, and so on.<sup>51</sup> Generally these versions simply cut out the voice and give a more prominent role to the bass, following the deconstructive aesthetic of dub which, as Mercer describes “‘distances” and lays bare the musical anatomy of the original song through skilful re-editing which sculpts out aural space for the DJ’s talk-over’.<sup>52</sup> Occasionally, however, these recorded dub versions rework the original spoken poetry, as in ‘Iron Bar Dub’, which performs a condensed version of the poem ‘Sonny’s Lettah’.

The versions of Johnson’s recorded dub poetry collaborations work to suggest parallels between the voice and the bass – the position of the bass in the dub version echoes that of the voice in the preceding track. This parallel is intensified in the recording of ‘Reggae Sounds’, where the spoken voice is given prominence and sets the rhythm, effectively replacing the bassline and making a claim for the human voice as an instrument. Even when directly alluding to instruments, as in ‘Thunda from a bass drum sounding/ lightening from a trumpet and a organ/ bass and rhythm and trumpet double-up’, they are only sounded quietly in the background, maintaining the voice’s precedence. Similarly, ‘Two Sides of Silence’, the title and structure of which allude to

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<sup>50</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Cut ‘n’ Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (London: Comedia, 1987), pp. 12-16

<sup>51</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Independent Intavenshan* CD (Island Records, 1998)

<sup>52</sup> Mercer, ‘Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination’, pp. 54-55



the record format and culture of versioning (B sides), is thematically *about* noise, but gives prominence to the spoken voice. The music is again relegated to the background, where it quietly but discordantly enacts the poem's 'clamour of sounds' in the style of free jazz, distinct from the instrumentation of other tracks. The analogies implicit in these recordings between voice and instrumental noise build upon the printed poem's attempts to represent non-semantic sound, such as the bouncing 'jucky-jucky-jucky juck-ee' bass of 'Klassikal Dub' (DBB, p.61). In doing so, performance is able to develop the notion of the depersonalised voice as a technology and form, and not just as a vehicle for speech and self-expression.

Whether music plays a role or not, through its vocal stress patterns, the performance of poetry can encourage particular interpretations. As Bernstein argues '[i]n performance, metre is eclipsed by isochrony – the unwritten tempo (rhythmic, cyclical, overlapping) whose beat is audible in performance as distinct from the text.'<sup>53</sup> The patterns of inflection used in the performance of 'Bass Culture', work to foreground a wider prevalence within Johnson's poetry which emphasises action through a privileging of the verb. The enunciation of the opening lines as '*muzik of blood/ black reared/ pain rooted/ heart geared*' (my italics) stands out, as the printed poem seems to encourage an expectation that, as with 'blood', the nouns 'black', 'pain' and 'heart' would be prioritised, which would fit in with the poem's focus on the origins and affective power of the reggae rhythms. Instead, stressing the verb of each line shifts the focus somewhat and helps to draw attention to the prominence of verbs as a distinctive feature of Johnson's poetics. 'Dread Beat an Blood' is perhaps the clearest example of this. Here verbs are listed paratactically, 'music blazing sounding thumping fire blood/ brothers an sisters rocking stopping rocking/ music breaking out bleeding out thumping out fire burning' (SP p. 5). Mackey offers a useful framework for considering such verb-al intensity, for his discussion of African-American aesthetics analyses the relation between an artistic and social othering of particular artists and writers. He argues that the accentuation of variance and versioning within much black music and literature constitutes a form of artistic othering, and suggests this is a way of reacting to and reflecting critically upon this other kind of social othering. Drawing on both Amiri

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<sup>53</sup> Bernstein, 'Introduction', *Close Listening*, p. 14



Baraka's and Zora Neale Hurston's critical discussions on the importance of verbs in black artistic expression, he argues that literary techniques privileging the verb 'linguistically emphasis[e] action among a people whose ability to act is curtailed by racist constraints.' Such an argument relies on a reading of language as 'symbolic action, frequently compensatory action, addressing deprivations it helps its users to overcome.'<sup>54</sup> This seems particularly relevant to Johnson's poetry, for it fits with both his versioning in recordings, and his juxtaposition of intensely active language with the images of 'di wall/ whe bar black blood' (SP, p.24). This develops the idea that his poetry's mobilising potential works at a representative, symbolic level, and not only in a direct, exhorting way.

### 2.3 Diasporic Canons and the Poetics of 'Hawtenticity'

The analysis in the previous two sections has aimed to highlight the complex location of orality and voice within Johnson's poetics, and to suggest that the elements of formal experimentation in his work are enabled by an engagement with different possibilities of voice. This experimentation configures a formal politics which works alongside his poetry's more obvious political polemic. Although often defined through his performances, his experiments with voice have served to complicate rather than reinforce distinctions between orality and literacy. A more recent poem, 'If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet', provides an extended self-reflexive comment on the role of formal innovation, political activism, and performance in constructing his own poetic identity and ideals. It also questions wider critical perceptions of orality and literacy within black diasporic poetry, considering the impact of these perceptions on notions of authenticity, and critiquing the marketing of ethnicity. Disrupting some of the assumptions of eurocentric literary evaluation, the poem proposes its own international 'black atlantic' poetic canon by bringing together poets from Jamaica, Guyana, Barbados, Cuba, Nigeria, the Congo and America. While the 'goon poet' subject of the poem consistently stresses his distance from the various 'tap natch' poets listed, Johnson is to some extent claiming this

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<sup>54</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement*, p. 268



diasporic poetic tradition, for his relation to the persona of the goon poet is not a straightforward one.

'If I Woz' undermines the separation of oral, realist and page-bound, formally experimental poetics. It does this through the choices of poets it brings together, but also formally, by incorporating devices associated with performance alongside literate and visual poetic effects. Through the invocation of poets as diverse as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Chris Okigbo, Derek Walcott, T S Eliot, Nicholas Guillen, Jayne Cortez and Amiri Baraka, Johnson seems to be stressing the dialogue between European, African, and American aesthetic traditions, thus making a case for the same kind of black atlantic model Gilroy argues for. Though not compared in the same stanza, the classification of both Eliot and Brathwaite as 'tap natch', conjures up this reciprocal influence of aesthetic traditions, particularly the dialogue between modernism and black diasporic literature. Brathwaite in *The History of the Voice* foregrounds this relation, arguing '[w]hat T S Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone.'<sup>55</sup> But equally, Eliot's work was influenced by jazz and musical as well as dramatic performance; Brathwaite recalls hearing a recording of a poetry reading by Eliot, in which 'the riddims of St Louis (though we didn't know the source then) were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dissociations of Bird, Dizzy and Klook.'<sup>56</sup>

Eliot's location in the poem, as McGill has pointed out, also serves to subvert Eurocentric constructions of the literary canon which lean towards tokenism: here Eliot can be read as the 'token' white poet.<sup>57</sup>

if I woz a tap-natch poet  
like Chris Okigbo  
Derek Walcot  
ar T. S. Eliot. (SP, p. 94)

Yet Eliot, like all the other poets featured, is a transatlantic figure, and the comparison of these three poets in the opening stanza, reinforces the idea of transatlantic continuities. The poetry of Okigbo, Walcott and Eliot has all shared a fascination with classical or

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<sup>55</sup> Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 31, n. 41

<sup>57</sup> Robert McGill 'Goon Poets of the Black Atlantic', p. 562



Greek mythology, which it deploys as a structuring device, with Okigbo's *Heavensgate* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* in particular using myths to articulate a spiritual quest. This desire for spiritual wholeness, and the importance of the epiphany to modernism is summed up simply by the goon poet, 'I woulda write a poem/ soh dyam deep/ dat it bittah-sweet/ like a precious/ memari/ whe mek yu weep/ whe mek yu feel incomplete' (p. 94). Meanwhile, Walcott has sometimes been criticised within Caribbean literary studies for his reliance on Western literary tradition in his poetry. The alteration of his name to make it more like Eliot's perhaps alludes to the latter's conception of aesthetic tradition within European terms, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to Walcott, the next poets, Brathwaite, Martin Carter, Cortez and Baraka write 'rude/ an rootsy/ an subversive' poetry (p. 95) which celebrates an African cultural heritage, and oral poetic traditions:

like a candhumble/voodoo/kumina chant  
 a ole time calypso ar a slave song  
 dat get ban  
 but fram granny  
     rite  
     dung  
     to  
     gran  
     pickney  
 (pp. 96 – 97)

While it is the oral roots of their poetry that are stressed here, it is perhaps also significant that Johnson exploits the visual layout of the page to evoke the linear bestowal of such traditions from one generation to the next. Indeed, an increasing engagement with the graphic, visual properties of the printed word has been important to the later work of Brathwaite and Baraka. Though their poetry may be 'rootsy', it has also been influenced by and contributed to international avant-garde movements, as has Cortez, whose poetry and performances unite the influence of African American music rhythms, the poetics of the Beats, and Charles Olson's projective verse.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1945), pp. 47-59. Here Eliot conceptualises tradition as that which 'compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order' (p. 49)

<sup>59</sup> Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant*, pp. 221-232



The poem's form demonstrates the influence of oral traditions: its basic structure is repeated with variations ('if I woz .... I woodah write a poem soh...'), and the goon poet's disclaimer provides a refrain, the strong, third beat stress marking it off in performance from the poem's other sections.<sup>60</sup> Yet it also integrates print-dependent literary traditions, not only in its layout but in its use of epigraphs. The first of these comes from the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* 'dub poetry has been described as ... "over-compensation for deprivation"', and the second from Bongo Jerry's 'Mabrak', 'mostofthestraighteningisinthetongue'. The sources of these epigraphs suggest a juxtaposition of English literary tradition at its most institutionalised, with a popular, performance tradition aligned with protest – the 'high' literate and the 'low', oral (or 'base') cultures that the rest of the poem claims to be contrasting. In fact the poem's challenge, rather than reinforcement of the assumptions of such a separation, is set up in these epigraphs. Not only does the effect of Bongo Jerry's quotation rely to some degree on its printed appearance, but the quotation about dub actually comes from an entry on Johnson in the *Oxford Companion*.<sup>61</sup> As with his representation by Penguin Classics, Johnson's inclusion suggests a partial acceptance of his poetry by the dominant literary establishment, though the terms of this acceptance remain highly conditional.

The figure of the goon poet, referred to in the third and first person, seems partly a caricature of the *Oxford Companion*'s denigrating definition of dub poetry. His use of the very phrase 'tap natch' satirises the 'demotic' nature of dub that the *Oxford Companion* entry also describes, and the refrain seems to overstate his formal simplicity in contrast to the other poets:

inna di meantime  
 wid mi riddim  
 wid mi rime  
 wid mi ruff base line  
 wid mi own sense a time

But at the same time, Johnson uses the goon poet to defend his own involvement with political activism, and its priority over a concern for literary acceptance:

<sup>60</sup> A recording of Johnson's live (unaccompanied) performance of this poem, recorded at Ronnie Scott's in 1994 can be found on *LKJ a capella LIVE* CD (LKJ Records 1996) and is included on *Poetry in Performance Volume 1* CD (57 Productions, 2002)

<sup>61</sup> Ian Hamilton ed., *Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 257-258. Johnson's entry quotes James Berry on dub poetry



goon poet haffi step in line  
caw Bootahlazy mite a gat couple touzan  
but Mandela fi him  
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

The repeated reference to divisions within the anti-apartheid struggle, contemporary to the poem's composition in the early 1990s, is a reminder of the immediacy of Johnson's poetry in responding to and garnering support for social and political causes.

The status of the other poets, like the goon poet, is also not straightforward. For while they are being revered, and Johnson has elsewhere praised their work and stressed its formative influence on him (particularly that of Tchikaya U'tamsi, Brathwaite and Baraka), he is cynical about the marketing of 'ethnicity' within poetry, something the poem implies literary criticism has helped to facilitate.

still  
me nae goh bow an scrape  
an gwaan like a ape  
peddlin noh puerile parchment af ethnicity  
wid ongle a vaig fleetin hint af hawtenticity  
(SP, p. 97)

The rhyming of 'ethnicity' with 'hawtenticity' seems important, for it points to the entanglement of these terms in critical discourses surrounding black poetics. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* provides an example of this in its pronouncement that Johnson's dub poems 'display the authentic voice of young urban blacks in Britain today'.<sup>62</sup> In reality, Johnson's poetry rejects the association of voice with notions of authenticity. His work is less concerned with tracing an authentic voice, envisaged as a point of origin, than it is with appropriating diasporic cultural forms, using a cut and mix aesthetic, to respond to a more immediate political climate. His experiments with the human voice in performance also emphasise its capacity for formal manipulation rather than exploiting appeals to an authentic or original mode of expression. Thus Johnson's own poetry, and the choice of poets juxtaposed in 'If I Woz', challenge racial assumptions about the role of orality within modern poetry. The poem also challenges assumptions that performance poetry is clearly independent of and somehow more authentic than written forms of poetry, by suggesting the dialogue

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<sup>62</sup> *Oxford Companion*, p. 257



between orality and literacy in the work of many transatlantic poets. In doing so, 'If I Woz' brings to the fore some of the tensions that have implicitly structured his own poetry between realism and formal experimentation, orality and literacy, and it calls for a recognition of their interdependency within poetry more widely.

### 3. Akure Wall: Performing Displacement

The dialogue Johnson's work negotiates between orality and literacy, page and stage, is developed in new directions by the recent poetry and performances of Akure Wall. Wall's work shares with Johnson's an urban focus, and a close relation with music cultures, both in terms of generic collaboration and as poetic subjects. But whereas music in Johnson's 1970s work was represented as helping to construct an alternative public sphere, Wall's *Afromorph Text* (1998) charts, and at times critiques, the global commodification of music styles and the racial identity models with which they are associated. The role of Johnson's poetry in the forging of a counterpublic identity is indicative of a particular stage within black cultural practices, that of the 'struggle to come into representation'.<sup>63</sup> Wall's engagement with cultural constructions of 'blackness' represents a wider shift that Stuart Hall identifies within black cultural politics, a change from 'a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself'.<sup>64</sup> Such a shift entails 'an awareness of the black experience as a *diaspora* experience', evidenced aesthetically in the kind of hybridising and syncretic dynamic that Hall and Mercer examine in black British film production, and that Gilroy discusses in black British music.<sup>65</sup> As Johnson's poetics also demonstrate an appropriative and hybridising aesthetic, it would be misleading to suggest a comparison with Wall signifies a straightforward shift from realist modes to more disruptive and intertextual techniques. However, my analysis of Wall does aim to suggest that her transgression of the

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<sup>63</sup> Hall, 'New Ethnicities', *ICA Documents 1989*, pp. 27-31, p. 27

<sup>64</sup> Hall, 'New Ethnicities', p. 27

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 29. See Kobena Mercer 'Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation', *ICA Documents 1989*, pp. 4-14, 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination' and *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994). Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) and *The Black Atlantic* (1993)



boundaries between different media and genres develops a more pronounced version of a diasporic aesthetic identified by these critics.

The remainder of this chapter, then, considers how the function of voice and orality has shifted by the time of Wall's performance poetics, and how such shifts relate to different models of identity. It suggests that there are parallels with Johnson in her appropriation of various sounds and voices to produce a 'soundscape', and that, like Johnson's performances, this serves to challenge rather than exploit phonocentric association of the orality with self-presence and authenticity. At the same time, Wall's poetry represents a break with the more stable speaking subject of Johnson's poetics, and with the uses of oral vernaculars to configure an oppositional identity. Her poetry's linguistic indeterminacy and the displacement of a dominant authorial voice provide clear formal parallels with British avant-garde poetics of the last three decades. However, Wall's poetry takes a slightly different route in its questioning of the expressive self and of identity politics. Comparing the role of national mythologies of selfhood in constructing different environments for black writing in the U.S. and the U.K., Romana Huk situates Wall's work in relation to Language-oriented poetry in Britain, arguing that it 'conducts the same sort of investigation into slippery linguistic footholds while retaining the specific positioning of its raced speaker.'<sup>66</sup> My analysis concurs with this distinction, but focuses on how the uses of sound technologies and visual experimentation develop the scope for such an investigation.

### 3.1 Multimedia poetics

Wall can be contextualised within an emerging generation of poets and performers whose approach to poetic sites is inseparable from their engagement with what Homi Bhabha has called the 'interstitial' or 'in between' spaces 'beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities' in which cultural differences are articulated.<sup>67</sup> Their

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<sup>66</sup> Romana Huk, 'In AnOther's Pocket: The Address of the "Pocket Epic" in Postmodern Black British Poetry', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2000), pp. 23-47, p. 38. This forms part of a wider argument for a more current critique of national imaginaries and the need to recognise that the 'conception of (non)selfhood' so central to American Language poetics is itself culturally-specific (p. 27)

<sup>67</sup> Homi Bhabha, introduction to *The Location of Culture* (London: New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 1 and pp. 212-235



interdisciplinarity becomes a major way of articulating these spaces of cultural difference, and of formally constructing structures of 'undecidability' which emerge 'at the frontiers of cultural hybridity'.<sup>68</sup> The aesthetic syncretism of many of the younger British poets featured in anthologies of contemporary black writing such as *Bittersweet* (1998), *The Fire People* (1998), and *IC3* (2000), encompasses print, visual art, live performance, new media and video and audio recordings.<sup>69</sup> For example, Mannafest, the performance company created by two of *The Fire People* poets, Vanessa Richards and Kehfri Riley, specialises in 'multi-medium productions' encompassing theatre and film alongside publications. Readings from Anthony Joseph's latest work, *Liquid Textology*, have been published as a spoken word CD, and videos of Patience Agbabi's and Joseph's contributions to the 'Modern Love' spoken word performance tour have also been published as a CD Rom.<sup>70</sup> Agbabi has collaborated on polyvocal performance pieces at the ICA, and was part of the touring poetry group Atomic Lip, and both she and Wall contributed to the 1998 Channel 4 series Litpop, which fused contemporary poetry with video art.<sup>71</sup>

The daughter of a Nigerian mother and an English father, Wall grew up in Croydon, and has spent time living in New York and Lagos. She established herself as a performer in the mid 1990s through London poetry performance scenes. Associated with the Urban Poets Society, and performing alongside Jean Binta Breeze and Máighréad Medbh, at events organised by Apples and Snakes, she published a small collection of poems, *Croydon Soul Patrol* in 1995, and her work has been included in *The Fire People* and *Bittersweet*.<sup>72</sup> *Afromorph Text* brings together both printed and audio texts of her work, circulating as a CD with the poetry presented in the form of a CD booklet. Publishing the two as a single work discourages their separation into different generic

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<sup>68</sup> Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in Bhabha ed., *Nation and Narration*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322, p. 312

<sup>69</sup> Karen McCarthy ed., *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry* (London: Women's Press, 1998); Lemn Sissay ed., *The Fire People: Collection of Contemporary Black British Poetry* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1998); Courttia Newland and Cadija Sesay eds., *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000)

<sup>70</sup> Anthony Joseph, *Liquid Textology: Readings From The African Origins of UFOs* (London: Poison Engine Press, 2005); Modern Love Tour, 2001, anthology and CD Rom produced by Renaissance One, London, 2001.

<sup>71</sup> Agbabi collaborated with Adeola Agbebiyi and Dorothea Smartt on the performance piece FO(U)R WOMEN, which premiered at ICA in 1996

<sup>72</sup> Akure Wall, *Croydon Soul Patrol* (London: One Inc., 1995), now out of print



categories of poetry, spoken-word performance and music. Its title announces Wall's semantic and structural engagement with boundaries and identity.<sup>73</sup> 'Afromorph' alludes to her anti-essentialist treatment of identity as fluctuating, as well as to her work's generic morphing, emphasised in the designation of both printed poetry and recording as a single 'text'.

Wall's musical collaboration is syncretic in its wide range of styles, combining the influence of American, British and Nigerian traditions. 'Travelling Through', for example, fuses the rapid internal rhymes and morphemic shifts characteristic of American rap, with a slower-paced free jazz style of music. 'The Only Way is Down' has a more insistent rap delivery; its instrumentation and rhythm seems to allude structurally to Gil Scott-Heron's 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised', while its content responds to the message of this 1974 rap. Tobias Döring identifies the influence of the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti on her work, known for his 'Afrobeat' style, which combined American jazz with West African percussion and vocals.<sup>74</sup> Wall collaborates with different musicians for particular tracks, including husband Keziah Jones, and the percussionist Richard Olatunde Baker, distinctive for his hypnotic style of drumming. On one of these collaborations, 'Oyindamola', the music dominates over the spoken voice, while in other pieces, including 'Defying the Linear', 'Someone', 'Lullaby Ganesh', 'Cold Storage' and 'Umbrella', the music element is more subdued, with the cello, acoustic guitar, Nigerian spoken drum or Indian tabla accompanying the spoken voice. As this section goes on to consider, Wall also uses sound technologies to distort, overlap and sample various voices throughout *Afromorph Text*. In her appropriating fusion of a diverse range of sounds and voices she configures an aural equivalent of a collage or bricolage aesthetic. In this respect, her work provides continuities with Johnson's depersonalised use of the performed voice as sound to construct a dispersed acoustic environment, something that ultimately undermines the association of the performed voice with individual self-expression.

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<sup>73</sup> Wall, 'Identity Hairpiece', *The Fire People*, pp. 155-158

<sup>74</sup> Tobias Döring, entry for Akure Wall in Alison Donnell ed., *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 320



### 3.2 Poetry's 'Eyeway'

While sharing an engagement with the dehumanising potential of the physical voice, the desire to examine and displace what Mercer terms 'the burden of representation' has shifted other poetic functions of voice and orality. For Wall and many of her contemporaries, the mimetic representation of creolised forms of language, whether Jamaican patois or Nigerian pidgin English, no longer play such a prominent or radical role in forging oppositional identities. Instead it can be argued that creole's role in defamiliarising and rearticulating language has been replaced by a different kind of formal disruption. The work of poets such as Wall, Agbabi, Joseph, Mallissa Read and Andria Smith, represents an increasing engagement with the visual performance of poetry on the page.<sup>75</sup> While it often shares the creolising impulse towards alternative spellings as a means of creating semantic instability and double meanings, these poets are more occupied than previous generations with manipulating typographic effects and the spatial arrangement of the text. If creole's dislocation of Standard English was a way of interrogating wider assumptions surrounding national identity, more recent poetry exploits visual devices and opacity to explore fluid and contingent models of intercultural and sexual identities.

The nature and implications of visual experimentation in contemporary black British poetry is an area that remains under investigated particularly in the work of poets who are known for their oral performances. Yet as Mackey has demonstrated, graphic experimentation has served as a device for realising the demands of the 'oral impulse' within postwar American poetry, as in Charles Olson's use of the page in *The Maximus Poems*. Arguing that '[o]ne of the most significant features of the quest for an open poetics is the effort to circumvent the closure of either/or propositions', he examines the co-existence of the oral and the graphic in Olson's poetry.<sup>76</sup> Nielsen takes a similar approach to his study of the experimentalism of African American poetics. Considering

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<sup>75</sup> All except Anthony Joseph are represented in *The Fire People*. See also Patience Agbabi, *R.A.W* (London: Gecko, 1995) and *Transformatrix* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000); Anthony Joseph, *Desafinado* illustrated by Adrian Owusu (London: Poison Engine Press, 1994), and *Teragaton* (London: Poison Engine Press, 1997); Mallissa Read, *Open* (Edinburgh: Payback, 2001)

<sup>76</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, 'That Words Can Be on the Page: The Graphic Aspects of Charles Olson's Poetics', *Discrepant Engagement*, pp. 121-138, p. 138



the integration of oral and graphic traditions in the Julia Fields' poems which 'play between eye, ear, and tongue', the 'psychovisualism' developed by Russell Atkins and the multimedia works of De Leon Harrison, he criticises the limitations of 'an ethnopoetics that awards primacy to orality', which misses 'a great deal that black poets are doing and have always done'.<sup>77</sup> He also draws historical parallels between Atkins' experimentation with concrete and sound texts and innovations in black American music during the early 1960s. Mackey's and Nielsen's works are important for critiquing the polarisation of orality and literacy in critical approaches to poetry, and for highlighting continuities between black and white avant-garde poetics in their attention to the graphic materiality of text. What remains to be developed is an understanding of the coexistence of orality and graphicity in black British poetry, and the role of more contemporary culture, media and music in inflecting poetic approaches to graphicity.

Although not so straightforwardly linked with speech, this increased visibility of recent black British poetries sustains the desire to represent vernaculars. What these poetries underline, whether explicitly or implicitly, is the increasing role of visual forms of media in the creation and circulation of vernaculars. As one critic has pointed out, the typography, lexicon and sentence structure of Wall's *Croydon Soul Patrol*, draw upon the styles and pace of 'electronic and street culture' such as the 'dense vernacular of cyber-prose', and in doing so highlight 'the changing relationship between speech and text in contemporary culture'.<sup>78</sup> The 'hinternet eyeway' as the opening poem of *Afromorph Text* phrases it, has encouraged new perceptions of the visual materiality of text. Such perceptions seem to inform the appearance of the printed poems, several of which fill the squat, screen-shaped page of the book from left to right margin.

Wall's visually dense poetics exemplify the kind of performance that Johanna Drucker articulates in her contribution to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. A pioneer in the field of visual poetics, Drucker stresses the need to pay attention to 'all of the elements that make the work an instantiation of a text, make it specific, unique, and dramatic because of the visual character through which the work comes into

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<sup>77</sup> Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant*, p. 26, p.27, p. 25

<sup>78</sup> Nicky Marsh, "Peddlin Noh Puerile Parchment of Ethnicity' Questioning Performance in New Black British Poetry', *Wasafiri* no. 45, (2005), pp. 46-51, p. 49



being' and of understanding this as a form of performance.<sup>79</sup> In 'The Interior Eye: Performing the Visual Text', she argues for a 'visual gestalt' on the premise that many texts have spatial and graphic relations that have no verbal analogue.<sup>80</sup> This is particularly applicable to Wall's use of variable fonts and sizes of typeface, different colours, the use of text to create shapes, the visual fragmentation or elongation of words and sentences, and the placement of text over graphics or other layers of text. This spatial approach to the text creates a visual analogue to her destabilisation of the speaking subject, via the avoidance of a coherent expressive speaker. Her poetry bears similarities with Denise Riley's for its representation of the self's internalisation of public discourses – the 'inrush of voices', and, associated with this, a self-conscious irony about shifting positions to speak from. 'Travelling Through' for example, resists fixed locations within 'priceless pockets' in favour of 'curling rambling journeys' and the assuming of whichever position 'suits my disposition.'<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile the critique in 'The Only Way is Down', of 'REVOLUTION INC' and 'we! who talk of AFRICA THE DIASPORA UNITY' is quickly undercut with the questioning of her own privileged position, 'who the fuck is she? who is she to be believed? what pain did she ever feel?' Wall's manipulation of visual effects intensifies this concentration of dissonant voices. This is encapsulated in 'Someone' which represents subjectivity as 'a sadistic gospel choir/ of smudge-lipped mouths,/ varying perversions,/ singing in every key ever heard', and which visually performs this through the overlapping layers of text.

Drucker's acknowledgement of the untranslatable element of visually performed texts suggests one of the ways in which the visual experimentation of Wall and her contemporaries is used to reflect upon perceptions of cultural difference. In his essay on 'Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics', Edouard Glissant argues for the development 'in defiance of a universalising and reductive humanism', of 'the theory of specifically opaque structures.' Opaqueness, 'the irreducible density of the other' needs to be accepted 'in the world of cross-cultural relationship, which takes over from the

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<sup>79</sup> Drucker, 'Visual Performance of the Poetic Text', in *Close Listening*, pp. 131-161, p. 131

<sup>80</sup> Johanna Drucker 'The Interior Eye: Performing the Visual Text', in Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics* (New York City: Granary Books, 1998), pp. 103-109, p. 105

<sup>81</sup> Akure Wall, *Afromorph Text* (FreakStreet Records, 1998), book unpaginated. Unless otherwise stated, all future quotations taken from this text.



homogeneity of the single culture'.<sup>82</sup> This idea of opaqueness is also evident in Bhabha's theory of cultural difference based on Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'foreignness of languages'. Alluding to the 'the nucleus of the untranslatable that goes beyond the transparency of subject matter', Bhabha theorises the uncanny, disturbing effect that cultural and linguistic translation involves, where 'the 'given' content becomes alien and estranged.'<sup>83</sup>

At times, Wall's approach to graphics visually performs this opaqueness and estrangement of content, which seems a way of developing her poetry's concern with the ambivalence and tenuousness of particular cultural representations. Such representations are the subject of 'Defying the Linear', which questions African perceptions of 'the West' as a saviour, and, in contrast, 'Come See' which sets up a romanticised Eurocentric image of the African 'Other'. Objectified through its definition as a place of 'fufu yam and juju blues', a hazily-defined Africa here becomes a fetishised site which bears the weight of 'our scarred up dreams our S and/ M knees'. Meanwhile 'Superniggasoulsista' provides a cynical reflection on the fetishisation of revolutionary figures and black sexuality within popular culture. The speaker laments the disappearance of her 'heroes', ranging from a gender shifting Che Guevara, to black female American TV icons including Lieutenant Uhura, Christy Love and Foxy Brown, 'sexy revolutionar[ies]' characterised by their 'luscious lips/ pneumatic tits' and 'wishbone thighs'. Moments of textual opacity within the printed text provide a critical response to this instinct to simplify or eroticise cultural difference. The most visually opaque poem, 'Travelling Through' represents a more extreme use of a spatial technique within *Afromorph Text* which stretches lines out so as to obstruct horizontal readings of the text, used to a lesser degree in 'Defying the Linear' (figure 1). Other poems including 'The Only Way is Down' and 'Sticky' elide spaces to create a different kind of density, while others use sections of impossibly small print, or set white type against a pale background. In part, such a move foregrounds the need to hear as well as view these texts, for the acoustic text of 'Travelling Through' is much clearer than its printed version. But the combination of graphic experimentation and the thematic concern with representations of cultural

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<sup>82</sup> Edouard Glissant, 'Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics' (1975) in Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 120-134, p. 133

<sup>83</sup> Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', pp. 314-315



identity also implies parallels between linguistic and cultural literacies. The creation of an ‘irreducible density’ within the printed text becomes a way of foregrounding the estranging element within cross-cultural relationships.

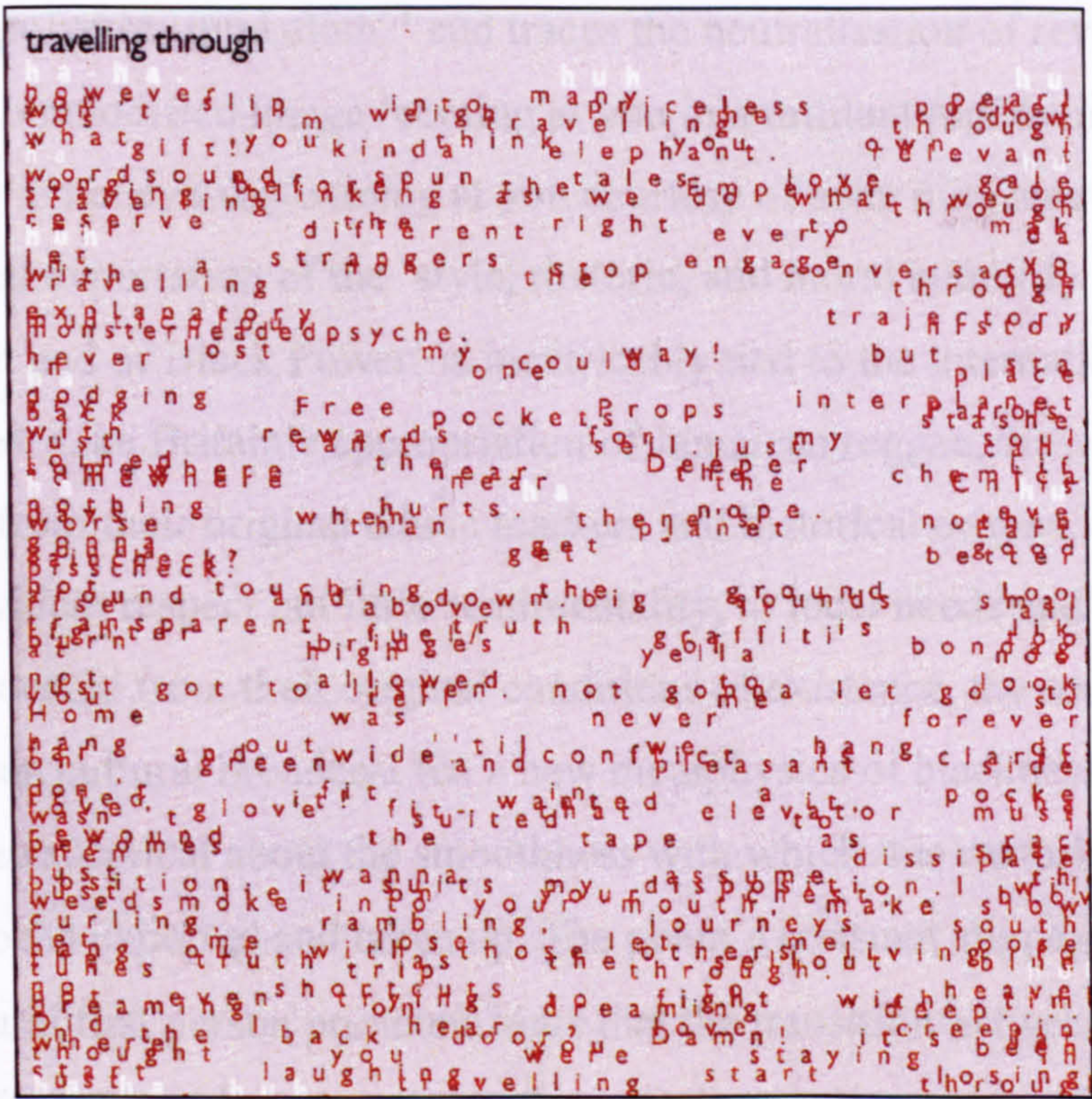


Figure 1 Akure Wall ‘Travelling Through’, *Afromorph Text*

3.3 ‘As I’m Trapped by the Searchlights of My Own Pen’: Wall’s Textual Identities

Wall’s poetry then, can be most explicitly differentiated from Johnson’s in its approach to identity. Speaking out of a later historical and political moment, her critique of essentialised notions of blackness in part responds to the late-capitalist consumer culture of the nineties, and its appropriation of identity politics as a marketing strategy. But while Wall reflects upon the instability of blackness as a concept which is subject to changing political and cultural constructions, there is also a lingering anxiety in her poetry surrounding pluralist positions which seem too eager to transcend issues of race altogether. The rest of this section considers how this tension is played out in her printed and audio texts.



Wall's cynicism about the fate of black identity politics is most directly articulated in 'The Only Way is Down', which opens by 'calling all spear chuckers! all hail zulu yout!'. It goes on to question the authenticity of these apparently militant positions, 'is our aim true? are we African Anarchists or sheep in wolf's clothing? maybe businessmen in polyester mud cloth?' and traces the neutralisation of revolutionary ideals into a globally commodified image 'coming at you in a militant rap/ on mtv coming at you on the hinternet eyeway/coming at you courtesy of sony nike mac d's'. As Gilroy argues, the global exportation of the 'style, rhetoric, and moral authority of the civil rights movement and of Black Power' is inextricably tied to the international movement of music cultures. Like Britain's appropriation of Jamaican reggae, these discourses have been 'detached from their original ethnic markers and historical origins, exported and adapted, with evident respect but little sentimentality, to local needs and political climates... Dislocated from their original conditions of existence, the sound tracks of this African American cultural broadcast fed a new metaphysics of blackness'.<sup>84</sup> Wall, however, is more sceptical about the smoothness with which this rhetoric and moral authority have been exported and taken up. The poem's constant slippage between singular and plural first person pronouns hints that the transition between individual and collective identity was made too easily, with too little attention to significant social differences. To imply the performative nature of a unified black identity, Wall draws on the assumptions of authenticity still surrounding orality. References to the lip-synching performances of an eighties pop group serve to ridicule the quest for the authentic more broadly: 'come back Milli Vanilli! you weren't the sham! it was me! we! who talk of AFRICA THE DIASPORA UNITY'. But in the use of the first person, the speaker acknowledges her own collusion with the identity positions she critiques and she satirises the complacent belief in being able to fully escape such positions, with the weary 'yeah yeah yeah I'm so free no rhetoric on me as/ I'm trapped by the searchlights of my own pen'.

In describing the decline of unifying models of identity, 'The Only Way is Down' and 'Superniggasoulsista' emphasise the temporality of blackness and black femininity as changing cultural constructions. But her poetry also guards against the complete erasure

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<sup>84</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, pp. 82-83



of race in the understanding of identity. 'Identity Hairpiece', a poem recounting a childhood incident plays with the image of identity as a glacier, which appears as a threatening force 'advancing frozen slow/over Crystal Palace Tower .... Towards me petrified'; 'A sea of ice. Croydon from Lagos'.<sup>85</sup> The speaker's understanding of her self is again negotiated through images of TV icons and the sleek 1970's 'purdy' hairstyle of actresses in *The Avengers* becomes the ultimate goal, a way of staving off the 'recurring nightmares' of the advancing glacier, linked to her alienation as part of 'the only black blend family in town'. But it only succeeds in enhancing an abject, divided sense of self, 'I saw a purdy/on top of me/ Groomed a purdy/ on top of me' (p. 157). The act of 'Moving moving moving so fast,/ beyond race', has entailed an erasure not of race but of blackness, as the child views her reflection 'Blond it was./ White I was'. Against such an erasure, the poem ends with the journey to the 'Gates of the Afrodisiac Salon' situated 'along the path to enlightenment', a journey enabled by the accepting action of 'swimming through glaciers'.

Though its tone may be tongue-in-cheek, 'Identity Hairpiece' relates to a recurring thread within the poems of *Afromorph Text*, which undermines nineties' discourses of multiculturalism the 'explanatory trajectory multicolour history' traversed in 'Travelling Through', where 'race becomes space and dissipates'. The collection implicitly suggests that such positions can translate as a way of ignoring historical and contemporary forms of racial subordination. Thus while some poems point up the limitations of a diasporic identity built upon fetishised images of 'African Anarchists' or 'romantic/ black martyrs' ('The Only Way is Down'), they are also wary of the trivialising of anti-racist struggles as an outmoded trend. This is implied by the lone computerised voice at the very end of the CD which can be heard saying 'black angst just won't sell. I'm a song and dance man myself. Black angst is just so ... boring ... I'm a post racist myself.' This echoes the words of one of the voices in Wall's untitled poem in *Bittersweet*, 'black angst is just/ so boring and I'm a song and dance man myself:/ slay veree! slay ver ahh!/ slay ver ah ha ha ha ha ha!' <sup>86</sup> This laughing-off of slavery implies

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<sup>85</sup> Akure Wall 'Identity Hairpiece', in *The Fire People*, pp. 155-158, p. 155

<sup>86</sup> Wall, untitled poem, *Bittersweet*, pp. 155-156, p. 156



that rather than moving beyond racism, the 'post-race' position represented by these speakers merely constitutes a different kind of racial suppression.

This synthesised voice represents one of the ways in which recording technologies used in *Afromorph Text* contribute to the poetry's semantics. Its sinister power comes from its neutralisation and complete lack of inflection. The text's anxiety surrounding a view of identity as a completely constructed illusion is thus acoustically performed through this mediation of the speaking voice. As well as drawing on international musical styles (not unlike the 'music workshop' a musician's voice welcomes us to at the opening of 'Oyindamola', which enacts an 'evolution of my musical cultural heritage'), Wall's use of sampling and sound effects develop her poetry's critique. The experimentation with her poetry's soundspace in performance configures a highly mediated form of orality, which undercuts the association of the physical voice with authenticity, with lyric self-presence, and at times, with authoriality.

This can be seen in the audiotext of 'The Only Way is Down', which at one level uses a defamiliarising pronunciation to break down words. Questioning if 'there's anyone out there who still believes in as-*sim*-ilation *int*-eg-ration *rev*-ol-ution?' (my italics), implies a homology between their linguistic fracturing and a breakdown in their ideological value. But it also exploits sound engineering to vary the output of the spoken voice in the first half of the recording, so that it continually shifts speaker outputs. This creates a disorienting and fractured effect, which aurally realises the loss of stable positions to speak from. In addition, by splitting the location of the single voice to create the impression of being surrounded, the track performs the kind of rapid sensory bombardment that it comments upon, the spectacle of marketed images and sounds 'coming at you' through multimedia channels.

This plurality is developed through the sampling of other voices before or within certain tracks. These include the male voice opening 'Oyindamola', the grainy American voice before 'Merman' insisting on the need to be 'formless, shapeless like water', and the discordant, chaotic choir of voices in the middle of 'Someone'. The use of different sampled voices in 'The Only Way is Down' provide contrasting perspectives on economic migration, opening and closing with that of a child who has been waiting years for her father to return to 'the compound', and who lists the financial rewards he will



bring back with him. A tension is established between his status back home as 'that father provider, that village shaman', and a more dehumanised image of him as an 'unidentified illegal alien', 'scuttling across borders. stashing himself into minuscule cracks at the corners of great civilisation. storing scraps', a 'sweatshop sorcerer'. Other voices interrupt this narrative to suggest movement in the opposite direction – a Nigerian voice reiterates that 'you are welcome. come. yes, you' and the poet's enunciation of 'but i's too 'ot innit?' mimics a Londoner's sense of displacement in Africa. The multiple dubbing of the poet's voice, overlapping and distorted to sound like weak radio signals, asks 'Croydon to Lagos?/ South Norwood to Ubiaja?/ do you read me?/ can I claim thee?/ can you claim me?'. The sampling and distortion of distinctly different voices in this poem displaces the central authority of the poet as a speaking subject and it accentuates the poem's articulation of intercultural estrangement. But the arrangement of these radio voices so as to interrupt a narrative of dehumanising economic migration also creates an uneasiness, and seems to hint at the indulgence of this quest for roots and identity.

The sense of unease created in 'Defying the Linear' lingers in much of Wall's poetry, and is achieved partly through the lack of an overriding authorial voice and frequent shifts in subject positions, a disorientation which acoustic devices enhance in performance. Unease and uncertainty are also created by her poetry's irony and the tensions it establishes regarding perceptions of cultural and racial identity. The tension between conflicting perceptions becomes a way of questioning the search for an authentic identity, and the mythologizing impulse this is entangled with. But in the process of critiquing it, the layers of irony in Wall's poetry also seems to acknowledge the power of this romanticising inclination, tacitly suggesting both her own and her audience's susceptibility to it. The role of her work's visual and acoustic opacity in this respect helps to guard against a simplification or commodification of cultural identity by stressing the acceptance of untranslatable elements within the world of cross-cultural relationships. Textual opacity thus becomes a way of countering the search for authenticity.



## Conclusion

The works of both poets considered in this chapter address the kind of investments identity politics makes in voice as a form of collective address and representation. Wall and Johnson respond to such investments in distinct ways, but in both cases, voice is at the heart of their poetry's textual politics. The speakerly aspect of many of Johnson's texts helps to affirm a black British working class identity, defined in part through a conflictual relation to the dominant public sphere. The poetic representation of black vernaculars comes with its own formal politics, using the spoken voice as a way of challenging dominant poetic tradition, and defamiliarising language to constitute the kind of dual address characteristic of counterpublic discourse. While he engages with the conceptual notion of voice as an act of power, his performances and recordings also approach the physical voice as a material, or a 'vocabulary to be processed'.<sup>87</sup> Bridging these two uses of voice and orality are his poetic representations of music cultures, the non-semantic sound explosions of which provide a model for his own aesthetics.

Although no longer drawing on the features of the spoken voice to represent and address a collective identity, voice remains at the centre of Wall's politics of representation. For it is through her decentring of the single, coherent authorial voice that her poetry, speaking from a post-identity politics moment, articulates the instability and contingency of contemporary black British identities. Yet Wall's poetry also suggests certain continuities with Johnson's. Notably, both demonstrate an integration of print-dependent and oral performance traditions, and the graphic possibilities of print become a way of achieving their poetry's exploration of the voice and orality. Such a move emphasises the interdependence rather than opposition of the written and the oral within poetry, and stresses the importance of reading the printed text as more than a score for performance. A further similarity between Johnson and Wall lies in the use of the performed voice to contribute to a soundscape, in which it becomes inseparable from other mediated, technologised and instrumental sound. This depersonalised use of voice is significant to

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<sup>87</sup> Bernstein, 'Stray Straws and Straw Men' (1976), *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), pp. 40-49, pp. 44-45



the consideration of contemporary poetic performance more broadly. It points to the possibilities performance offers for innovation and for a self-reflexive engagement with sound and voice as a poetic medium, emphasising the need to rethink the terms of experimentation in contemporary poetry. Both poets use the performed voice to interrogate rather than reinforce the association of orality with authenticity, and with self-expression. The following chapter considers how the tension between voice and presence is further complicated in the performances of poets whose work is more explicitly suspicious of voice for its complicity with a logocentric tradition.



## Chapter Four

### Multiple Sites of Performance: Transitional Voices in the Poetry of Maggie

#### O'Sullivan and Caroline Bergvall

##### Introduction

As chapter three demonstrated, the performance of poetry, rather than referring solely to the live event, can take a number of different forms. This chapter develops the investigation of performance's multifaceted significance to contemporary British poetry. It focuses on examples of late-modernist poetry which remain suspicious of voice's links with self-presence, but which are nonetheless intensely preoccupied with voice both as a signifier and as a technology. Taken together, the work of Maggie O'Sullivan and Caroline Bergvall represents something of the diversity of performance practices embraced by contemporary innovative poetries. The breadth of these 'inter- and multi-media' practices has been demonstrated in the important collection *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & The UK* (1996), which was edited by O'Sullivan and features samples of both poets' work.<sup>1</sup> As well as experimenting with various modes of textual inscription, the poetry of O'Sullivan and Bergvall also engages with linguistic and cultural theories of performance. This chapter examines how their poetry makes use of different sites and understandings of performance, from the visual performance of the page, to the more ephemeral poetry reading and the site-specific installation, and considers how these intersect with a formal sensitivity to the performance of the reader, and a thematic exploration of the performance of identity. I will suggest in this chapter that the nonverbal dimension of many performance practices is key to this poetry's investigation of voicelessness and the borders of articulacy and legibility.

Voice dominates the poetry of O'Sullivan and Bergvall in a number of ways, and is frequently entwined with the exploration of liminal subjectivities and cross-cultural identities. While O'Sullivan's poetry aspires to express 'unofficial voices', searching for a means of communicating multivocality, error, and muteness, much of Bergvall's poetry

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie O'Sullivan, 'To the Reader', in O'Sullivan ed., *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North American & the UK* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996), pp. 9-10, p. 10



is concerned with translation, bi- or multi-lingualism, and the impact of different languages on one another. Her work also draws on notions of speech as agency in considering cultural representations of the gendered body. Both poets share a fascination with the physicality of the embodied voice, and both use their texts and performances to explore how enunciation can be used as a marker of social identity. An engagement with the conceptual and the material voice is central to Bergvall's and O'Sullivan's articulation of linguistic borders and states of inbetweenness. In this chapter I will use analyses of their texts to build on some of the observations of the previous chapter, and to argue that the interdisciplinary nature of many contemporary performance practices renders them particularly suited to the articulation of diasporic identities.

Bergvall and O'Sullivan represent different diasporas in their poetry. O'Sullivan's work is influenced by what she calls her strong 'sense of the ancestral self', the Irish heritage of her parents.<sup>2</sup> The representation of physically difficult acts of speaking throughout her poetry relates to a broader attempt to recover a silenced history, something she alludes to in her biography. 'I was born in 1951 in England of southern Irish agricultural poor parents and it is their oral culture / the struggle for voice despite centuries of repression which I feel has a lot to do with my poetics.'<sup>3</sup> Bergvall's poetry, meanwhile, represents a more metropolitan and privileged intercultural identity. Born in Germany to a Norwegian father and a French mother, she has lived in various European cities and New York, and studied at the Sorbonne, but has been based in Britain since the 1990s. Bergvall's polylingualism informs her poetry's interrogation of language structures: many of her works integrate French phrases, and make homophonic puns which play on the relation between French and English words. She has described her critical and artistic interest in 'the crossing points between languages. The way languages and cultures meet, can or cannot meet', and her choice to write in English, her second language, has become essential to her understanding of the very 'idea of writing'.<sup>4</sup> Thus

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<sup>2</sup> O'Sullivan, in conversation with Andy Brown, in Brown ed., *Binary Myths 1 & 2: Conversations with Poets and Poet-Editors* (Exeter: Stride, 2004), pp. 155-160, p. 156

<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Commentary', in Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris eds., *Poems for the Millennium: Volume 2: from Postwar to the Millennium* (Berkley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 835

<sup>4</sup> Bergvall, 'Speaking in Tongues', interview with John Stammers, first published in *Magma 15*, Autumn (1999), reprinted in *Jacket 22* (2003) <<http://jacketmagazine.com/22/bérgv-stamm-iv.html>> [accessed August 2006]



O'Sullivan and Bergvall configure different linguistic diasporas in their poetry which reflect different positions of powerlessness and privilege. While O'Sullivan weaves a historic Celtic tradition into her work, and is concerned with reclaiming and voicing a repressed history, the focus in Bergvall's poetry is on transnational movement as a dynamic, productive, aesthetic force. In this way, their poetry and performances, along with those of Johnson and Wall considered in chapter three, gesture towards the complexity of diasporic and cross-cultural identities within Britain today.

The texts and performances considered here are all from the 1990s and the twenty-first century, making this final chapter the most contemporary in its focus. These include O'Sullivan's *In the House of the Shaman* (1993), *That Bread Should Be* (1997), the visual-verbal crossovers *Red Shifts* (2001) and *Murmur* (1999 – 2004), and the audio CD *her/story: eye* (2004).<sup>5</sup> Bergvall's texts under analysis include *Goan Atom, I* (The Doll) (2001), the related web-animation, *Ambient Fish* (1999), and her most recent collection *Fig* (2005), which brings together a range of works and projects, including processual poems and textual traces of performances such as the site-specific installation *Say: "parsley"* (2001, 2004).<sup>6</sup> As well as representing new and under-theorised forms of performance practice, these works also provide particularly relevant material for the concluding chapter of this study because they intersect with several of the debates opened up around voice within British poetry of the last three decades. As the chapter will consider in more detail, these texts question voice as authoriality, whether by rejecting a unified sense of authorial presence, or in Bergvall's case, through collage, word games and collaboration with other artists. Like Mulford and Riley, this poetry aspires towards a visceral and synaesthetic form of address. Whereas the poets in chapter two formulated an affective aesthetic through a meditation on painting, Bergvall and O'Sullivan do so

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<sup>5</sup> O'Sullivan, *In The House of the Shaman* (London: Reality Street, 1993) hereafter abbreviated to HS; *That Bread Should Be*, published in *Etruscan Reader III: Maggie O'Sullivan, David Gasgoyne, Barry MacSweeney* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 1997) hereafter abbreviated to BSB; *Red Shifts* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2001) hereafter abbreviated to RS; *Murmur*, excerpts published in *How2*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2004) <[http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/stadler\\_center/how2/current/workbook/murmur.shtm](http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/stadler_center/how2/current/workbook/murmur.shtm)> [accessed August 2006]. Full text on O'Sullivan's website, <<http://www.maggieosullivan.co.uk/>> [accessed August 2006] hereafter abbreviated to M; *her/story: eye*, recordings of *Murmur*, *Red Shifts*, and *WATERFALLS* (Stem Recordings, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> Bergvall, *Goan Atom, I* (The Doll) (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2001), hereafter abbreviated to GA; *Ambient Fish* (1999), available at <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bergvall/amfish/cbflash.html>> [accessed August 2006], hereafter abbreviated to AF; *Fig: Goan Atom 2* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005), hereafter abbreviated to F



through more literal collaborations with other artforms, such as O'Sullivan's painting-text hybrids which articulate a 'saturated language of red' (RS, unpaginated). Like that of chapter two, the poetry considered here also explores the discursive construction of the subject and of gender, which Bergvall's poetry claims as a form of performance. Finally, as with the work of Johnson and Wall, this poetry engages with the voice both on and off the page. Like the soundscapes of chapter three, these poets use the human voice as a technology, while they also engage with visual literacies of the page, and make use of opacity to articulate intercultural estrangement.

O'Sullivan's and Bergvall's texts, then, reflect the multifarious importance of voice to recent British poetry, as a signifier for authoriality, selfhood, expression, and, in a more material sense, as an instrument or poetic vocabulary. Their work also represents the most fractured and linguistically disrupted poetics of all the poetry considered in this thesis. I thus want to use the analysis within this chapter to reinforce the central claims of my study: that radical poetics can be a highly effective means of expressing unofficial voices; that the blanket terms 'experimental' or 'linguistically innovative' poetry can often occlude quite distinct poetic projects and *modes* of experimentation; and that an engagement with other artforms has become a way of reassessing the parameters of contemporary poetry and of re-theorising its status as a wider cultural force.

### 1. Contexts: Reading Performance

Before considering in more detail how each poet experiments with voice, this section outlines some of the emerging critical fields which propose ways of reading the kind of performance practices deployed by O'Sullivan and Bergvall. Many of the critical contexts outlined in chapter three remain significant here, particularly work on performance as the creation of 'soundscapes' rather than the expression of a personal sensibility, Johanna Drucker's work on the visual performance of the poem on the page, and critical arguments for the value of close listenings to poetry's 'audiotexts'.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>7</sup> Loretta Collins, 'Rude Bwoys, Riddim, Rub-a-Dub, and Rastas: Systems of Political Dissonance in Caribbean Performative Sounds', in Adelaide Morris ed., *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 169-193. Kathleen Crown, "Sonic Revolutionaries": Voice and Experiment in the Spoken Word Poetry of Tracie Morris', in



addition, Bergvall's and O'Sullivan's texts necessitate an engagement with other media and traditions, including electronic text, traditions of live poetry readings, and site-specific installations which cross over with visual and performance arts.

### 1.1 From Visual to Verbal Performance

Although both poets share an interdisciplinary aesthetic, their work has quite distinct performance genealogies. O'Sullivan started performing and publishing poetry in the late seventies, when she was an active member of Bob Cobbing's experimental Writer's Forum Workshops in London, and her work reveals the influence of Cobbing's Sound and Concrete poetry. Emerging later, Bergvall's poetry is the product of her involvement with visual and live art scenes, and the Performance Writing programme at Dartington College of Arts, which she directed between 1994 and 2000.<sup>8</sup> Started by the poet John Hall, this course encouraged hybrid, cross-media and collaborative art, 'work that contested tensions between the terms *writing* and *performance*' and destabilised oppositions between 'the ephemerality of performance and the fixity of print'.<sup>9</sup> Bergvall's contribution to the understanding of performance writing concurs with Drucker's attention to 'the ways in which a visual work performs itself on the page, on the head, through the eye'.<sup>10</sup> Bergvall, however, takes this further, extending it to take into account other nonverbal elements across live as well as print-based performances. Thus a work's performance comes down to its 'points of impact'; 'any treatment, any font, any blank, any punctuation, any intonation, any choice of materials, any blob, however seemingly

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Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue eds., *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* (Tuscaloos, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2002), pp. 213-226 and "Choice Voice Noise': Soundings in Innovative African-American Poetry' in Romana Huk ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 219-245. Johanna Drucker, 'Visual Performance of the Poetic Text', in Charles Bernstein ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 131-161, p. 131, and Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics* (New York City: Granary Books, 1998). Bernstein, 'Introduction', *Close Listening*, pp. 3-26

<sup>8</sup> Bergvall, interview with Marjorie Perloff 'ex/Crème/ental/eaT/ing', from *Revue d'études Anglophone* 2000, <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bergvall/Perloff-Bergvall-Interview-2000.pdf>> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>9</sup> cris cheek 'Caroline Bergvall: Writing and Reading, the Sites of Performance', 2003, <[www.slang.demon.co.uk/CarolineBergvall.pdf](http://www.slang.demon.co.uk/CarolineBergvall.pdf)> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>10</sup> Drucker, 'The Interior Eye: Performing the Visual Text', in *Figuring the Word*, pp. 103-109, p. 105



peripheral to the work, is part of the work, carries it, opens it up, closes it in, determines it.’<sup>11</sup>

O’Sullivan’s work also exploits the visual and spatial potential of the page. She claims that ‘For me – Writing/Mark Making/ Image Making is Performance.’<sup>12</sup> But this is something closely entangled with the suggestion of a vocal performance, whether the inner vocalisation of the reader, or that of the poet, for she describes how in ‘using different typefaces, capitalised words, underlinings, varying sizes & darknesses of letter & words’ she aims to ‘pictorialise something of the soundnesses and weights of the words’, and to bring out ‘the breathing sound & all the other complex vocal shiftings in the word-language.’<sup>13</sup> The role of graphics and the poetry’s layout has always been important to the generation of meaning in her work, but the integration of the verbal and the visual is intensified in her most recent works. The visual collage techniques of *Red Shifts* and *Murmur* blur the boundaries between image and text in a way that links them to Drucker’s definition of ‘the quintessential twentieth-century artform’, the artist’s book.<sup>14</sup>

Drucker clearly distinguishes the visual performance of a poem from the event of the poetry reading, defining it as ‘an instance of expressive means creating effects without direct connection to the presence of the artist.’<sup>15</sup> As this chapter will discuss in relation to O’Sullivan, Drucker’s critical work implies a suspicion of poetry readings, because unlike visual performance, part of their pleasure seems to come from ‘the sense of auratic selfhood’ and ‘the compelling quality of the poet’s presence’.<sup>16</sup> According to this view, the attention seems to be drawn away from the poem itself, and back toward the self-presence and authority of the poet, an authority much experimental poetry of recent decades had sought to deconstruct. However, I want to suggest that O’Sullivan’s

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<sup>11</sup> Bergvall ‘What do we mean by Performance Writing?’, Keynote Speech, 1996 Dartington Performance Writing Symposium, <[www.dartington.ac.uk/performancewriting/keynote.html](http://www.dartington.ac.uk/performancewriting/keynote.html)> [accessed August 2003]

<sup>12</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘So - ’, text of a talk given at a seminar on ‘Different British Voices – Poetry, Locality, Plurality’ in the Czech Republic, 13<sup>th</sup> September, 1997, and again at the Sub Voicive Colloquium, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1997 (unpublished), p.4

<sup>13</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘So - ’, pp. 9-10. This section of the text makes use of many of the different effects O’Sullivan lists – different fonts, sizes, weights, and capitalisation of words.

<sup>14</sup> Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York City: Granary Books, 1995), p. 1

<sup>15</sup> Drucker, ‘Visual Performance of the Poetic Text’, p. 160

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



poetry readings demonstrate that the presence of the author does not necessarily distract the audience's attention from the materiality of the poetry.

O'Sullivan belongs to a generation of poets whose writing practices have been influenced by attending poetry readings. In Britain, as in the United States, the sixties and seventies was a period in which the image of the poetry reading was reformulated. Katharyn Howd Machan argues that, largely due to the Beat poets in the 1960s, '[s]uddenly poetry readings were no longer only ivy-bound showcases for famous writers ... but also moving vehicles for artistic and political expression.'<sup>17</sup> Key figures in Britain included Adrian Henri, Adrian Mitchell and Michael Horovitz, who organised the 1965 Poetry Incantation at the Royal Albert Hall.<sup>18</sup> O'Sullivan describes how readings had a more decisive impact on her desire to write than published texts, suggesting that 'it was going to the readings that gave [poetry] a physical, tangible, palpable reality for me'. She cites the significance of seeing Henri at a young age, and then later being inspired by a poetry reading given by Robert Duncan. Attending regular reading series in London provided 'phenomenal nourishment and input for me. I feel that was my education – listening to poets.'<sup>19</sup> It was her involvement with Cobbing's experimental Writer's Forum Workshops that has perhaps had the most significant impact on O'Sullivan's approach to verbal performance. The artists and poets involved with Cobbing since these workshops started in the 1950s has also included Lawrence Upton, Tom Raworth, Bill Griffiths, Paula Claire, Clive Fencott, Jeff Nuttall and cris cheek. In the Writer's Forum, the reading aloud of poetry to others was seen as an integral part of the composition process, rather than the recitation of a finished poem. There was also, amongst these poets, a

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<sup>17</sup> Katharyn Howd Machan, 'Breath Into Fire: Feminism and Poetry Readings', *Mid-American Review*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1992), pp. 120-126, p. 121

<sup>18</sup> An event which brought together several American and British poets including Allen Ginsberg, Harry Fainlight, Ernst Jandel, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Adrian Mitchell, Christopher Logue and Tom Raworth. See *Wholly Communion: Poetry at the Royal Albert Hall, June 11<sup>th</sup> 1965*, Dir. Peter Whitehead. Lorimer Films. 1965. For accounts of the seminal importance of this event to the British poetry performance scene, see Josephine A Johnson 'Return of the Scops: English Poetry Performance Since the 1960s' in David W. Thompson et al eds., *Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives* (Lanhan; London: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 301-316, and Martin Booth's *British Poetry 1964 to 1964: Driving Through the Barricades* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). As an audience member, the poet Chris Torrance cites the importance of this event in learning different voicing styles, 'I was picking up cadences: the Ginsberg long line and prophetic rant; ... the pensive silences and dramatic commitments of Harry Fainlight; ... the deadly cryptic voice tones of William Burroughs.' Essay on 'Poetry and Performance' (unpublished), p. 5

<sup>19</sup> O'Sullivan, interview with Peter Middleton, November 2003, Southampton University (unpublished)



desire to forge an alternative to what was seen as a standardised delivery of poetry, which Cobbing described as 'the concept of one voice scarcely making use of the physical possibilities of the body – almost disembodied – reading with attention only to intellect and syntax to an audience ranged in rows.'<sup>20</sup> Instead, an engagement with the space of the room was encouraged, as was an attention to the poet's movement and body language, and to voicing techniques and the use of different media within the poetry reading. O'Sullivan is a frequent reader of her work, and, as well as the Writer's Forum, she has appeared regularly at other series including the King's College and SubVoicive readings. The influence of the Writer's Forum workshops on O'Sullivan can be seen in her continuing approach to poetry readings as an interactive event and as a multidimensional space.

Like Cobbing's work, O'Sullivan's poetry is sensually rich both acoustically and visually. Raworth argues that Cobbing's establishment of his own printing press in conjunction with his regular performances, 'meant he could heal a split in concrete poetry between those who presented silent icons, most famously Ian Hamilton Finlay, and those who developed the art of pure sound, such as Henri Chopin'.<sup>21</sup> O'Sullivan's poetics play with the aural suggestiveness of language, often breaking words down into fragments and reconstructing them into compound neologisms. 'Ear-Loads I Sing!' announces the poetic essay 'Riverrunning (Realisations)', while elsewhere she suggests that 'it's the ear my work is organised or danced around.'<sup>22</sup> Yet this acoustic dimension cannot be easily separated from the visual experimentation of her printed texts. *Murmur* declares the synaesthetic aim to 'be from my ear - my eye', and the visual performance of language becomes a way of pictorialising its sounds. Similarly her poetry readings rarely rely on sound alone, but instead incorporate visuals such as the projection of text, or else make dramatic use of the space of the room.

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<sup>20</sup> Bob Cobbing 'Some Statements on Sound Poetry', from Steve McCaffery and bp nichol ed. *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue* (Toronto: Underwich Editions, 1978), this section reproduced on ubuweb, <<http://www.ubu.com/papers/cobbing.html>> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>21</sup> Tom Raworth, 'Bob Cobbing Obituary', <[www.tomraworth.com/cobit.html](http://www.tomraworth.com/cobit.html)> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>22</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Riverrunning (Realisations)', in *Palace of Reptiles* (Canada: The Gig, 2003), p. 62; 'So -', p. 7



## 1.2 Shifting Environments of Writing – Translations, Installations, New Media

Like O'Sullivan, Bergvall also makes use of various media simultaneously, establishing a multi-sensory poetics. But Bergvall's writing often inhabits quite different environments. Although she does perform her work at poetry readings, many of her performances take the form of site-specific installations. Several of her printed works started life as dramatic performances. The book *Strange Passage* is the script for a choral performance that took place in 1993.<sup>23</sup> The original performance of *Éclat* took the form of a tour around a house, listened to on a personal stereo, but adapted versions are now available in different forms, as a book, journal and internet piece.<sup>24</sup> A more recent work, *Say: "parsley"* (2001, 2004) was an installation at the Spacex Gallery in Exeter, and then later adapted for the Liverpool Biennial Arts Festival. Photographs and the text of this piece have since been published in *Fig*.<sup>25</sup> As well as sections from her printed works circulating online, she has also produced web-poetry and hypertexts, including *Flèsh* (2001), and *noth'rs* with John Cayley (1999).<sup>26</sup> *Ambient Fish* (1999) originated as a sound-text installation, before being adapted as an interactive piece for the web, and the refrain from this has been published as part of *Goan Atom 1* (The Doll).<sup>27</sup> These works, then, are constantly being rewritten and adapted to different media, often co-existing in a variety of textual conditions.

Bergvall's poetry is thus preoccupied with translation on more than one level– as a movement between linguistic spaces, cultural spaces, and different textual sites and media. This is foregrounded in *Via: 48 Dante Variations* (2000), an Oulipian processual work produced with the composer Ciarán Maher. *Via* takes up 'the most translated work

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<sup>23</sup> Bergvall, *Strange Passage* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993)

<sup>24</sup> The performance was commissioned for *The Institution of Rot*. The book form has been published by Sound & Language (1996). A different, more condensed version appears in *Performance Research Journal* vol. 1, no. 3 (1996), pp. 70-71. A poetry e-book of *Éclat*, in collaboration with designer Marit Muenzberg, is available via ubuweb, <[http://www.ubu.com/ubu/bergvall\\_eclat.html](http://www.ubu.com/ubu/bergvall_eclat.html)> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>25</sup> Bergvall, *Fig*, pp. 50 -60. See also Bergvall, 'Marks Of Speech: On Siting Writing – The Making of the Site-Specific Piece 'Say: "parsley"', in David Kennedy and Keith Tuma eds., *Additional Apparitions: Poetry, Performance and Site Specificity* (Sheffield: The Cherry on the Top Press, 2002), pp. 191-2000. cris cheek provides an account and photographs of this installation in 'Caroline Bergvall: Writing and Reading, the Sites of Performance'

<sup>26</sup> Bergvall, *Flesh*, in *How2*, vol.1, no. 5 (2001), <[http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v1\\_5\\_2001/current/new-writing/bergvall/index.html#](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v1_5_2001/current/new-writing/bergvall/index.html#)> [accessed August 2006]; Cayley and Bergvall, *noth'rs*, <<http://www.heelstone.com/meridian/cayley.html>> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>27</sup> Bergvall, *Goan Atom, 1* (The Doll), pp. 72-73. Online version at <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bergvall/amfish/cbflash.html>> [accessed August 2006]



of the English language', Dante's *Inferno*, and alphabetically arranges forty-eight English translations of its opening tercet.<sup>28</sup> While it is explicitly about the instability of linguistic translation, it also represents a translation between different media, appearing first online as an audio work, and later as a printed text.<sup>29</sup> Through such translations, Bergvall's works endorse an understanding of writing as an ongoing activity, rather than a finished product. In *The Textual Condition*, Jerome McGann argues that texts should be considered as a series of events with no stable original rather than as a fixed object. Even with the same linguistic constitution, different contexts socially constitute texts in different ways.<sup>30</sup> Bernstein draws on this argument to suggest that the various appearances of a poem 'in magazines and books, with changes in wording but also in spacing, font, paper, and, moreover, contexts of readership' might also be interpreted as different performances of the poem.<sup>31</sup> Bergvall similarly discusses the publishing of a text as a re-writing of it, and argues that much installation and performance art uses an exploration of these 'differential contexts and environments of writing as part of the work's formal and conceptual methodology'.<sup>32</sup>

Not unlike poetry readings, the ephemerality of site-specific performances raises questions about the possibility of analysing them after the event. Cathy Turner has suggested that the language of archaeology provides one way into the interpretation of site-specific works: 'Archaeology offers theatre a vocabulary of strata, fragments, ruins, narratives, traces, monuments, past and absence'. Furthermore, an archaeological approach allows for 'layered' viewpoints from which to read site and artwork, rather than a single authoritative perspective.<sup>33</sup> This chapter adopts a similar approach, and where a temporal performance has not been witnessed first hand, I make use of its various strata and traces in the form of accounts, reviews, recordings and interviews.

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<sup>28</sup> Bergvall, 'Working note on *Via*', on *Here, a showcase for audio work @ Camberwell College Library 4 October - 17 December 2004*, <<http://www.internetelective.co.uk/HERE/artists/bergvall.php>> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>29</sup> Bergvall, *Via: 48 Dante Variations* in *Fig*, pp. 62 - 71; MP3 version at <<http://www.ubu.com/sound/bergvall.html>> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>30</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991)

<sup>31</sup> Bernstein, 'Introduction', *Close Listening*, p. 8

<sup>32</sup> Bergvall, 'In the Place of Writing', in Romana Huk ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 327-337, p.333

<sup>33</sup> Cathy Turner, 'Palimpsest or Potential Space? Finding a Vocabulary for Site-Specific Performance', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 20, issue 4 (2004), pp. 373-390, p. 377



In analysing the shifting sites of both poets' work, this chapter also takes into account their recent use of electronic media. While Bergvall has used the internet to develop hypertext poetry (*Flèsh*) and text-animations (*noth's*, *Ambient Fish*), O'Sullivan's *Murmur* is also published online rather than in a printed format. In some cases, these works cross the boundary between visual and temporal performances, and I want to consider how both poets engage critically with electronic media, exploiting it to develop ongoing engagements with the viscosity of speech and writing. In doing so, I concur with theories of digital media proposed by McGann and N. Katherine Hayles. Against fears that electronic media heralds the death of the book, they argue that new technologies assert the need for renewed attention to all forms of materiality.<sup>34</sup> Thus instead of a teleology of disembodiment, electronic texts can promote a self-conscious engagement with the materiality of a work's media, not dissimilar from the engagement implicit in artist's books. Electronic text, argues Hayles, has 'its own specificities, and a deep understanding of them would bring into view by contrast the specificities of print, which could again be seen for what it was, a medium and not a transparent interface.'<sup>35</sup>

### 1.3 Performing Identity

A final concept of performance which is significant, more so in Bergvall's than O'Sullivan's work, concerns understandings of identity construction. Within certain cultural, feminist and queer theories, 'performance' has been used to discuss the idea of gender as an effect, rather than an inner essence. Judith Butler has adapted theories of linguistic performativity, which examined the conditions under which language becomes

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<sup>34</sup> See Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), especially Chapter 6 'Visible and Invisible Books in N-Dimensional Space', pp. 167-191. Here he argues that in contrast to the informational function of the book, the aesthetic function of the book is not threatened by electronic media; 'we have much to learn from those older, more highly evolved forms of textuality that are now being joined and modified by our new media. Not since the first period of its emergence has the study of the book been a more imperative need' (p. 171). See also N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge; London: The MIT Press, 2002), which argues for media specific analysis in literary studies. This kind of analysis skates across different media, and it is particularly interesting for its analysis of certain artist's books as forms of hypertext.

<sup>35</sup> Hayles, *Writing Machines*, p. 43



an action, to apply to the interpellation of gendered identity.<sup>36</sup> In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) she makes use of Derrida's reworking of J. L. Austin, in which he argues that the meaning of speech-acts is in their iteration, their capacity for citation. Butler relates this to the series of ritualised, citational acts that effect the performance of gender, 'the mundane ways in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds contribute the illusion of an abiding, gendered self.'<sup>37</sup> Her later work, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) also uses speech-act theory, here to interrogate the relation constructed between speech and action in recent U.S. hate speech legislation.<sup>38</sup> Thus her theoretical work makes a case for considering the linguistic, discursive construction of the subject as a form of performance.

The performance of writing and the performance of gender come together in Bergvall's exploration of the uses of language 'to construct or de-structure assumptions about gender, about sexuality, about female gender.'<sup>39</sup> This suggests parallels with the poetry of Mulford and Riley considered in chapter two, but here the thematic engagement with the performance of a gendered identity becomes part of a wider network of interlocking performances. Bergvall shares with Butler an anti-essentialist position, a desire to question the whole idea of identity, but without falling into an identity-based form of writing.<sup>40</sup> She cites the influence of writers who have managed to bring 'those aspects of the body and of sexualised, unstraightened bodies into language', such as Kathy Acker, Monique Wittig and Nicole Brossard.<sup>41</sup> In her interest in the relations between text and the physical body, Bergvall's work also references visual artists, particularly those who share the constructivism of Butler. Postmodern art's obsession with constructions and reconstructions of the human (and post-human) form can be seen, for example, in the work of Cindy Sherman, the Chapman brothers, Stelarc or Della

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<sup>36</sup> J. L. Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), proposed 'performative speech acts' as utterances which are neither true nor false, but which *do* something by being spoken.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), p. 140. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work also destabilises fixed definitions of sexuality to suggest that gender is instead a form of performance. See *Epistemologies of the Closet* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994); Sedgwick and Andrew Parker eds., *Performativity and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995)

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

<sup>39</sup> Bergvall, interview with Stammers

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Bergvall has also translated Brossard's *Typhon Dru* into English (London: Reality Studios, 1997)



Grace. Bergvall draws on this tendency along with the disarticulated surrealist dolls of Hans Bellmer in her ongoing project *Goan Atom* in which the body as an anagram is a central motif.

Although informed by differing traditions and practices, performance plays a central role in both O'Sullivan's and Bergvall's poetry. The rest of this chapter seeks to analyse the ways in which performance is intrinsic to both poets' engagement with the politics of voice. Parts two and three examine the different ways in which each poet engages with voice in its material and more figurative forms, considering how this relates to the expression of cross-cultural, diasporic experience. In the case of both poets, their print-based works, which are visually performative in different ways, are contrasted with live performance, whether in the event of the poetry reading, or other audio, installed or site-specific work. My analysis examines the way in which both poets engage with the materiality of the writing and speaking processes, their deployment of different media to interrogate the relation between text and the body and to explore how enunciation can be used as a marker of social identity. Throughout the remaining chapter, my analysis aims to show that an interdisciplinary approach to media and performance intensifies this poetry's thematic interrogation of borders, and foregrounds the importance of gaps and states of in-betweenness to their work.

## **2. Mutability, Diaspora and the Struggle for Voice in the Intermedia Performances of Maggie O'Sullivan**

### **2.1 Unofficial Soundings**

Asked what social and political interests motivate her work, Maggie O'Sullivan points to two interconnected preoccupations. The first is 'the materiality, the primacy of language', and what can be done 'underneath, behind, with-in' language's multidimensionality. The second driving force behind her poetics is 'the spoken, sounded or breathing voice':

Particularly I have always been haunted by issues of VOICELESSNESS – inarticulacy – silence – soundlessness – breathlessness – how are soundings or voices that are other-than or invisible or dimmed or marginalised or excluded or without privilege, or locked out, made UNofficial, reduced by ascendant systems of centrality and closure, configured or Sounded or given any form & potency: how can I body forth or configure such sounds, such tongues, such languages, such muteness, such multivocality, such



error -- & this is perhaps why the non-vocal in mark & the non-word in sound or language – make up much of the fabrics & structures of my own compositions.’<sup>42</sup>

This account of O’Sullivan’s poetics of voicelessness and unofficial soundings helps to explain the importance of different performance practices to her work. Visual and acoustic performances provide strategies for expressing the non-semantic elements of language, the ‘non-vocal in mark & the non-word in sound’. Importantly, this quotation also makes explicit the connection between experimentation with language in all its forms, ‘whether regular, pre-existing or newly-made – mis-spelt, mis-heard, mis-read, compound - contraction or part of a word’<sup>43</sup> and a broader, political exploration of powerlessness. As she has stated, this is something that stems from her own background, and the marginalised history of her parents. Like many recent British poets, including Tony Harrison, Douglas Dunn and Tom Leonard, O’Sullivan uses non-standard orthographies to evoke working class and regional vernaculars she has grown up with, and she does so to contest ‘ascendant systems of centrality’. But while poets like Harrison and Dunn foreground their own class backgrounds through personalised narratives, constructing a strong sense of authorial presence in the process, O’Sullivan’s use of autobiography is more indirect and dispersed. Like Leonard, with whom she has performed readings, she incorporates the mimetic representation of marginalised vernaculars, but also suggests that the dominance of expository language is complicit with this very marginalisation. Indeed, to close her discussion of the politics of voice, she quotes Leonard’s argument that ‘[i]t’s not simply a matter of class register, but the politics of the dominant narrative language as would-be encloser of the world, language as coloniser. For this the language has to be presumed ‘invisible’ to its reference. I like to make it visible in different ways.’<sup>44</sup>

O’Sullivan uses different strategies to configure multivocality and unprivileged or marginalised voices. Her poetry draws attention to ‘other-than-human voicings’ in an attempt to open up that which is considered as voice and as language.<sup>45</sup> This entails the creative invention of words, which work suggestively through sound symbolism or else

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<sup>42</sup> O’Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1 & 2*, p. 159

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp. 159-160

<sup>44</sup> Leonard quoted by O’Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1 & 2*, p. 160

<sup>45</sup> O’Sullivan, interview with Dell Olsen, *How2*, vol. 2 no. 2 (2004),

<[www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v2\\_2\\_2004/current/workbook/writing.shtm](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v2_2_2004/current/workbook/writing.shtm)> [accessed August 2006]



by conflating various meanings, so that they are ‘not deprived of semantic meaning but charged with it – double treble entendre quadruple’.<sup>46</sup> A second strategy is the representation of difficult speech, of struggling utterances, marked by hesitations, stuttering and misspellings. Such ‘inexact locutions’ (*Red Shifts*, unpaginated) are often accompanied by a self-consciousness and frustration. While providing a broad comment on the acquisition of language as a process of socialisation, this frustrated speech can also be read as a response to a specific diasporic history. In both these cases, her poetry makes use of visual techniques, and it is visual performance’s *removal* from a linguistic equivalent that seems to make it an effective mode of expressing states of voicelessness and inarticulacy.

Firstly, then, O’Sullivan’s unofficial forms of language incorporate many neologisms. These vary from portmanteaus conflating different meanings, (‘tonguescape’<sup>47</sup>), archaic words (‘thrine’), and those which are mis- or phonemically spelled (‘veneared’, ‘winzdroppt’, ‘sorra’<sup>48</sup>) to unofficial forms of familiar words (‘snoutily’, ‘colliderings’, ‘dreamdery’, ‘intricateliness’<sup>49</sup>) or aurally evocative, non-semantic words (‘her quilliver tint’, ‘jowldish’, ‘winderby Gorple’<sup>50</sup>). Discussing the poem ‘Naming’ from *In the House of the Shaman*, Robert Sheppard argues that, in contradiction to its title, it ‘enacts the primacy of evocation over ‘naming’, of connotation over denotation’, and demonstrates a preference ‘for the saying over the said’.<sup>51</sup> This observation seems to have wider application to O’Sullivan’s poetics. An inclination towards the process of saying over the finality of the said reflects her poetry’s concern with transitional energies, with the flux of what she calls a ‘trans-somatic environment’.<sup>52</sup> The blurring of linguistic and morphemic boundaries in many of her unfamiliar words seems part of her work’s wider questioning of physical and metaphysical boundaries, of

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<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Upton, ‘Regarding Maggie O’Sullivan’s Poetry’, first published in Robert Sheppard ed., *Pages* (Liverpool, 1998), also available at <<http://www.maggieosullivan.co.uk/upton.htm>> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>47</sup> ‘Riverrunning (Realisations’, *Palace of Reptiles*, p. 65

<sup>48</sup> All from *Red Shifts*, unpaginated

<sup>49</sup> From ‘Doubtless’ and ‘Riverrunning (Realisations’, *Palace of Reptiles*, p. 37 and p. 63; *Red Shifts* and *Murmur* (both unpaginated)

<sup>50</sup> From ‘Doubtless’ and ‘Theoretical Economies’, *Palace of Reptiles*, p.38, p. 39 and p. 20

<sup>51</sup> Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950 – 2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 239

<sup>52</sup> O’Sullivan, interview with Olsen



the limits of the self, and the relation between the human and the non-human. This is something that book two of *In the House of the Shaman*, 'Kinship with Animals', pays particular attention to. A section of the poem 'Of Mutability' from this book exemplifies the transformative use of sound patterns and compound words, 'SWANSOAK SOILSLOOK SALVELIGHT SKY-I' (HS, p. 36). Linguistically 'unofficial', these words work to suggest something of the individual's position in a trans-somatic environment, reversing the idea of the subject's colonisation of nature through description. The first person pronoun, not a common feature in O'Sullivan's poetry, is placed tellingly at the end of the line, after the action of the bird, the gaze of the earth and the healing properties of the sky are all suggested through the composite words. Furthermore, there is here a subtle transmutation of one word into the next, the s-s-k pattern of 'swansoak' picked up and adapted in 'soilslook', the s-l of which is then echoed in 'salvelight' and 'sky-I', uniting the hard 'k's of previous words, and the softer 'i' of 'light'. This aural morphing is indicative of O'Sullivan's search for a language 'of mutability' capable of evoking the transitional processes of the natural world. It is also an example of the way her poetry draws attention to the physicality and fluidity of language as a way of stressing its creative possibilities. This concurs with the vision of the artist/poet's role, as outlined in the Joseph Beuys epigraph which opens this section of *In the House of the Shaman*: 'To stress the idea of transformation and of substance. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development' (HS, p. 28).

Beuys has proved an enduring influence on O'Sullivan's work. Working for the BBC in the eighties, she describes her involvement on a television film about the artist as a 'transformative experience', which motivated her move to Yorkshire, 'away from the city to the moorland impress of tongue.'<sup>53</sup> She shares with Beuys a deep reverence for the natural world and a desire to communicate its physical and spiritual energies. She also shares an aesthetic practice which blurs the distinctions between different art forms, and a keen interest in Celtic myth and shamanic legends. As Marjorie Perloff has pointed out, while O'Sullivan's work has been compared to American language poetry,<sup>54</sup> its use of 'Celtic myth and ritual and ... medieval folk motifs rather than contemporary pop and

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<sup>53</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Riverrunning (Realisations)', *Palace of Reptiles*, p. 67

<sup>54</sup> O'Sullivan has also collaborated with the American poet Bruce Andrews on *eXcLa* (London: Writers Forum, 1993)



media imagery' distinguishes her from her American counterparts.<sup>55</sup> A Celtic heritage is also given a presence through O'Sullivan's strong sense of poetry as song. She talks about being brought up on her father's 'rousing performances of Irish rebel songs', of the 'going in & out of word & song in traditional Irish culture' and the influence of 'the shape-shifting creative/magical/transformational nature of word-song – song-word in early Irish shamanic society'.<sup>56</sup> However, my focus here is the relation between an Irish diaspora and O'Sullivan's articulation of a 'struggle for voice', the articulation of a specific silenced history, which is the second way in which her poetry seeks to express unofficial, marginalised voices.

## 2.2 'The Lot of Long Silent Letters': Visual Performance and Irish History

A specific social-political history is referenced most explicitly in *That Bread Should Be*. Three brief explanations introduce this work and identify it as a response to the nineteenth century Great Irish Famine, one of the major causes of the Irish diaspora. The title is taken from an 'oft repeated phrase' during the famine, 'that bread should be so dear and human flesh so cheap' (BSB, p. 23). The opening pages show staves of music and Gaelic words which come from 'Old Skibbereen the famous ballad written after the famine.' O'Sullivan's preface also explains that this town was 'one of the most severely stricken areas of Ireland during the continuous famine', and that half of her family originate from here (BSB, p. 23). Yet despite the directness and autobiographical slant of this preamble, *That Bread Should Be* does not offer an individualised, expository narrative. Instead it is a series of lines and half-lines which bring together shards of recollections and thwarted attempts at a narrative, as in the stuttering 'going about of a story or/ shows that i – i'd to do – i ——' (BSB, p.33). Several images evoke a pained search for language, in both its written and spoken forms, such as the 'low ground long black crêpe rolled in the mouth's threshing' (BSB, p. 26), the 'W I R E nettle / in the

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<sup>55</sup> Marjorie Perloff "'The Saturated Language of Red": Maggie O'Sullivan and the Artist's Book', *No: A Journal of the Arts*, issue 3 (2004), pp. 191-204, p. 191. Perloff discusses the importance of the Níon Ash tree in Celtic legend, using it to read a section of *Red Shifts*, where 'the voiceless breathless speaker draws sustenance from the Ash's "aquacity staltic" – its water magic', p. 198

<sup>56</sup> O'Sullivan, 'So-', pp. 6-7



mouth' (BSB, p. 37), and 'a few scrapes of the shovel ——— / searching in our soils / the lot of long silent letters / searching / searching ———' (BSB, p. 36).

In *That Bread Should Be*, a process of elision is foregrounded through visual effects – most notably in the long horizontal lines after many words, which draw attention to absence, to that which has not been said, as in the page which reads:

whole families without a trace my ———  
dealt ———  
it occurs: ———  
the unstory  
— that bread should be —  
(BSB, p. 39)

Like the title, many phrases in this work are incomplete, and this implies both the silencing and removal of this particular history, and the difficulty of finding a language for articulating it. The elisions enact a comment on the political and humanitarian failure of the English government to respond to 'ACENTURY'S/ hard plain howl -' (BSB, p. 40). While the work makes some attempt at expressing the scale of the horror of the Great Famine, in lines such as 'their own filthy rots hanging/ screamsticks – white skull over bone -' (BSB, p. 31), that which is not described, or cannot be described, is awarded equal weight. The gaps within this poetry help to configure a fragmented language of negation, a 'haemorrhage of uns' (BSB, p. 34), which point to the limitations of descriptive language to communicate this experience and this history, as encapsulated in 'the unstory'. As well as drawing attention to absence, the spatial relations of the text on the page also perform a diasporic sense of cultural movement and dislocation, by spreading out the letters of certain pertinent words diagonally down the page, such as 'scattered' (p. 30) 'many' (p. 34) 'SEVERED' (p. 36).

O'Sullivan's most recent works, *Red Shifts* and *Murmur*, continue the focus on frustrated speech while developing an increasingly visual poetics. Unlike *That Bread Should Be*, these works are not shaped so explicitly by a specific historical moment. Yet their broader concerns with the physicality of speech, and the relation between voicelessness, error and social identity, remain implicitly informed by an Irish diaspora.



This is made apparent in an extract from a talk O'Suillivan gave at a conference on 'Different British Voices – poetry, locality, plurality':

The sonic arrangements of my own voice – brought up in the East Midlands of England to Southern Irish parents – whose tongues, whose body of speaking sounded and felt so different to everyone around us – this sense of belonging to/coming from 'a different place' – being 'outsiders' – was reinforced in numerous ways and in particular, vocally, by growing up in what was, by flat-speaking Lincoln standards, a charged & voluble household.<sup>57</sup>

This sense of standing out through 'INEXACT/ locutions' (RS, unpaginated) is highlighted in *Red Shifts*. Speech is often marked off in bold typeface, as in the following two passages:

**d'not d--- d--- d--- falling arownd – do not –**

**dooooaaan noa –**

**do speech**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Vom itting –**

**Whatter Ye Fukkas**

turning flesh in a

red flower seething, seen -----

Vocalisation is here described with violence in the use of the misspelt 'vomitting', which suggests eschewing rather than manipulating language, and recalls a previous page which describes 'averting utt/ err fasting/ many. a sour suffix – wove, unwove -/ FLED)/ in the hand'. Again there is a sense of a lack of control over language, with the 'hand' perhaps drawing on the metaphor of having a 'grasp' of language, reinforcing the sense of not being able to 'do speech'. The struggle for voice in *Red Shifts* is also stressed for its relation to social identity. Embarrassment and anxieties about exposure are implied in the red flesh, seething and exposed in the extract above, while Marjorie Perloff reads the

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<sup>57</sup> O'Sullivan, 'So - ', p. 6



rhyme in 'any bare syllable STARE' as linking voicelessness to the fear of being seen.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the lines '- purra notch in the wood - / purra notch in the throat -' describe the process of a physical inscription, and suggest the ways in which voice (presented here as a regional, 'unofficial' voice) and articulation can be used as a form of measurement, of physical inscription ('notch'). The reminder that voice is a corporeal act, and one which can also mark bodies with a social identity is perhaps further suggested in the choice of spelling in the line 'hard guttural'.

The repeated fragmentation of the words 'utter' and 'stutter' throughout *Red Shifts* and *Murmur* becomes a verbal motif for the boundary between articulation and inarticulation. In *Red Shifts*, a line break separates 'utt' and 'err', while stutt ERR becomes a repeated phrase in *Murmur*. In performance, O'Sullivan's carefully emphatic reading further brings out 'err' as a separate word and sound, and not just a suffix.<sup>59</sup> The first effect this has is to draw attention to the link between the sounds of words and their meanings, so that 'err' here foregrounds a fear of failure and mistake, of not being understood which haunts the process of spoken communication. 'err' can also be a sound of hesitation and uncertainty in between spoken words, and thus represents the border between articulation and inarticulation. This is something similarly suggested in the title of *Murmur*, a word which denotes 'undifferentiated aural material trembling on the brink of meaning, but sometimes never resolved into verbal being.'<sup>60</sup>

An interrogation of borders thus becomes an essential part of O'Sullivan's poetics. In *That Bread Should Be*, *Red Shifts* and *Murmur*, many words represent the border between the semantic and the non-semantic, wavering between the audible and inaudible, or the legible and illegible. These works also create a sense of being between cultures. In *Red Shifts*, certain sounds of language or 'speaking' are aligned with an acute sense of standing out, of being seen as different. While the specific history behind this sense of outsiderism is less prominent here than in *That Bread Should Be*, certain visual and verbal details ensure that it still has a presence. The phonetic spelling of particular words or phrases evokes an Irish pronunciation, such as 'AccursZ'd',

<sup>58</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "'The Saturated Language of Red": Maggie O'Sullivan and the Artist's Book', p.196. This line follows 'hurrish ---/-upped -up -up - up-'

<sup>59</sup> O'Sullivan, *her/story:eye* CD, tracks 1 and 2

<sup>60</sup> Isobel Armstrong, 'Maggie O'Sullivan: The Lyrical Language of the Parallel Tradition', *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2004), pp. 57-66, p.59



‘Whatter Ye Fukkas’, and ‘the lightnin’’. Meanwhile references to ‘emerald’, to the Níon Ash of Irish legend, the repetition of feathers which allude to Celtic fairy tales, as in ‘embraced/ one single feather/ to thatch a house/ is/ in many/ Irish stories’ and the visual motif of concentric circles associated with ancient shamanistic rituals, all draw on a historic Irish tradition.<sup>61</sup> Another way in which cross-cultural identity is alluded to is through a concern with mourning and remembrance, which permeate these sequences in different ways. *That Bread Should Be* is in large part an elegy for those who disappeared ‘without a trace’. The sobbing breathless body alluded to in *Red Shifts* (‘can’t hold my breath/ my breath/ sobbing ----’, and the lines set vulnerably amidst a cavernous double page: “sometimes she cries & sometimes she is again”) anticipates *Murmur’s* preoccupation with grief, particularly the impact of grief and suffering on the body. The work’s occasional subtitle is ‘Tasks of Mourning’, and it draws on a long female tradition of Irish keening, the improvised poetic lamentation of the dead. As Jenny Gough has argued in relation to O’Sullivan’s poetry, this tradition is also significant for its resistance to various forms of social authority.<sup>62</sup> In an introduction to the poem ‘Ellen’s Lament’, at a 1993 poetry reading, O’Sullivan makes explicit the link between an elegiac tradition and a history of migration. She calls this poem a ‘Gaelic lament’ for her paternal grandmother. Ellen O’Donovan’s sons all moved to England for economic reasons, after which she never heard from them again, a scattering which, as O’Sullivan suggests, was typical of many Irish families. Assuming them dead, O’Donovan’s grief led to a nervous breakdown from which she never recovered. O’Sullivan describes ‘Ellen’s Lament’ as an ‘attempt to deal with loss in and through language’, and I would suggest that this is an aim that has continued to inform her most recent works.<sup>63</sup>

*Murmur’s* images of mourning are built up through repeated phrases such as ‘grief the living strain’, ‘cardiac load’, ‘Erasure askew body distress’, ‘dis-accretion’ and ‘raw sutures’. But it also relies for its effects on a strongly visual language. This is not

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<sup>61</sup> See David Whitley, *The Art of the Shaman* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000)

<sup>62</sup> Jenny Gough describes how keening challenged church and state authorities, as well as the social authority of men and the family. Entry on Maggie O’Sullivan in *Contemporary Women Poets* (1998) quoted in Keith Tuma ed., *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 795

<sup>63</sup> Transcription from introduction to ‘Ellen’s Lament’, recorded at SUNY – Buffalo on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1993. Audio file available at Penn Sound < <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/OSullivan.html> > [accessed August 2006] ‘Ellen’s Lament’, *Palace of Reptiles*, p. 40



just through an unconventional use of typography and placement of text on the page, but as with *Red Shifts*, through an intense use of colour, paint, watercolour washes, sketched patterns, and visual collage of found materials. *Murmur* opens and closes with close up photography of embroidery, possibly a reference to the weaving and lace tradition of Ireland, a cottage industry which was encouraged in the wake of the Great Famine. Images of stitching perform the poem's concern with 'salvaging' (another repeated phrase is 'savaging salvaging body'), such as in the two 'chain crate ilate' sections, in which 'ilate' is an obsolete word for 'entomb' or 'bury' (figures 1 and 2). These sections are central to *Murmur*'s configuration of a visual literacy. The text takes the form of a crumpled page of paper, torn but with thick cross-stitching arranged as if sealing the torn edges. This assemblage is visually evocative of a corset form, suggesting the restricted breathing of the sobbing body. Elsewhere in *Murmur* this sense of constraint is reinforced through the thickly painted purple boxes surrounding the phrase 'cardiac load', a twist on the cliché of a 'heavy heart'. Yet the 'chain crate ilate' pages also suggest healing and transformation, for the crumpled 'wounded' text is contrasted with flowers suggestive of recovery.

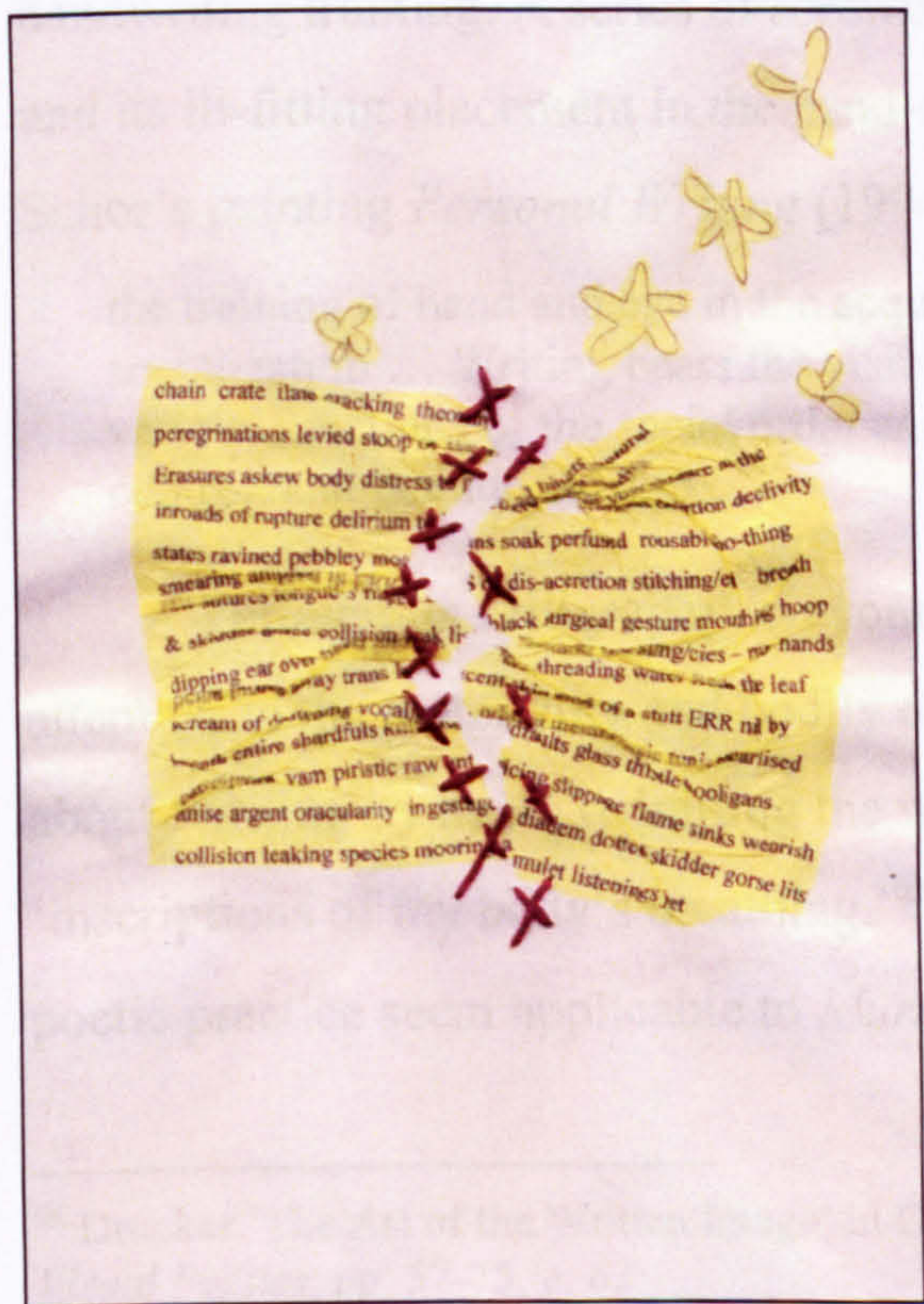


Figure 1: From *Murmur*

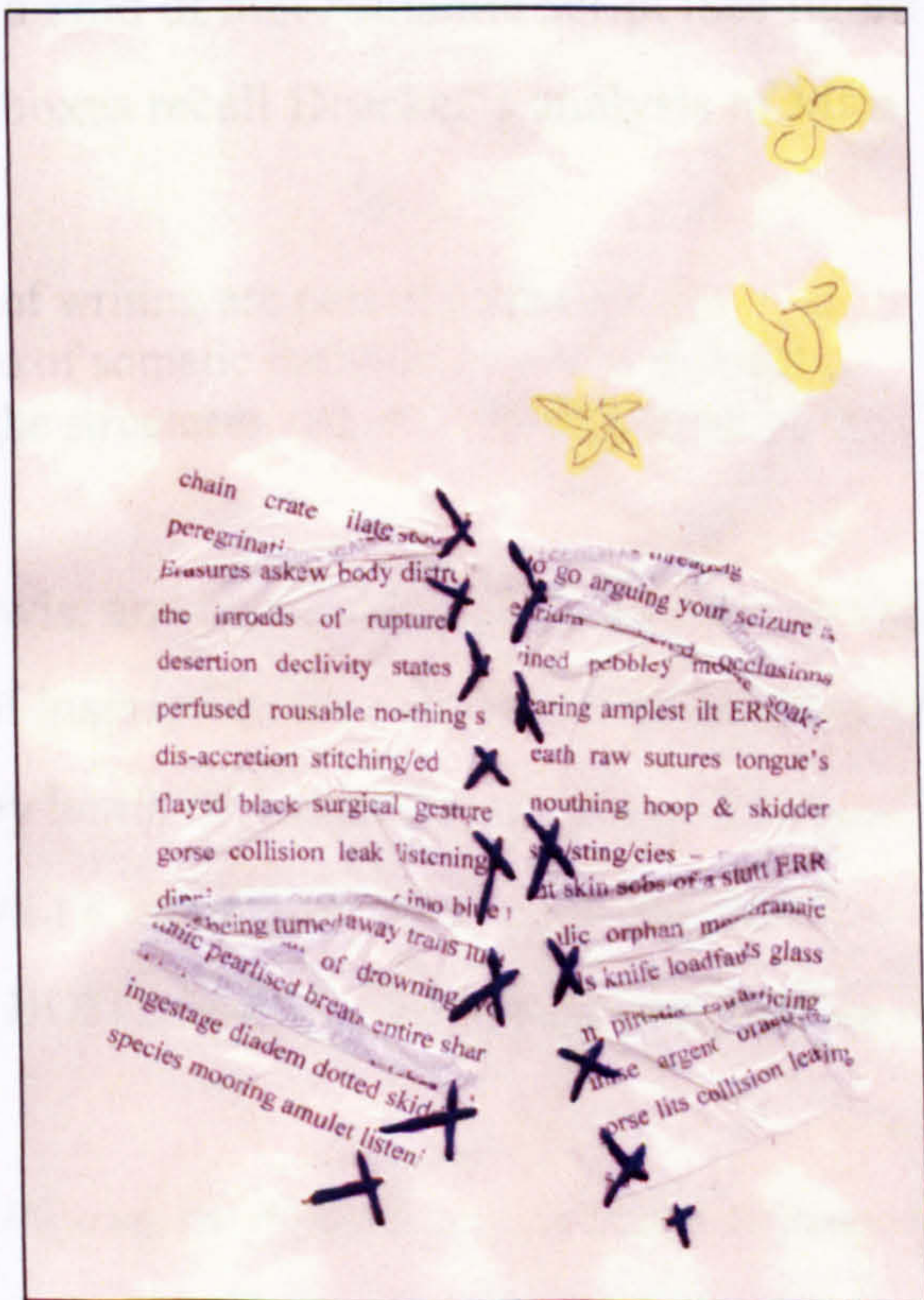


Figure 2: From *Murmur*



As well as finding a language for the emotional ‘tasks of mourning’, this work also develops a visual counterpart to the stuttering speech of *Red Shifts*. Words are made illegible, scribbled out by thick red crayon, creating the impression of an ongoing work in progress (as in figure 3). But these crossings-outs are also indicative of a more foreboding, corrective measure by another hand, particularly given the use of red. In this respect they seem to parallel the dismissive hushing of the speaker who is shown in *Red Shifts* trying out his/her voice:

sh--- sh --- sh --- sh -----

hurrish ---

- upped – up – up – up -

(RS, unpaginated)

The Joycean portmanteau ‘hurrish’ brings together the meanings of both ‘hurry’ and ‘rubbish’ as adjectives, creating a sense of humiliation and diminution. Just as *Red Shifts* connects the experience of voicelessness to the marking out of social identity, defamiliarised writing within *Murmur* is perhaps suggestive of the social process of handwriting training. A series of scrawls form a kind of non-semantic script (see figure 3) and its ill-fitting placement in the hand-drawn boxes recall Drucker’s analysis of Mira Schor’s painting *Personal Writing* (1994):

the training of hand and eye in the acquisition of writing are part of a process of socialization ... Writing bears the visible traces of somatic individuation and encodes various functions of the social order and law, the structures and strictures of permission, control, and bounded identity.<sup>64</sup>

Through its calligraphy, crayoned scrawls, and sketched shapes, *Murmur* draws attention to the materiality and bodily origin of inscription (see figure 4). O’Sullivan talks about ‘writing by hand, redrafting the words by hand’ as a significant part of *Murmur*’s ‘inscriptions of my body’s breathing.’<sup>65</sup> Bergvall’s comments on the handwritten line as poetic practice seem applicable to *Murmur*’s ‘BODYTEXT’. ‘Where typeset writing is

<sup>64</sup> Drucker ‘The Art of the Written Image’ in Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics*, pp. 57-75, p. 62

<sup>65</sup> ‘writing by hand, redrafting the words by hand – bending, sticking, cutting, shaping marks, shaping sounds into the recorder, pain(t)ing and building – all inscriptions of my body’s breathing. This heuristic trans-forming has become paramount in *murmur* where I am using the sight/site of the ear/page as a foundational textu(r)al, sonic, visual bodily dimension to move out from.’ O’Sullivan, interview with Olsen







### 2.3 Poetry Readings: A Displacement of the Page

If, as Drucker posits, performance can refer to 'all of the elements that make the work an instantiation of a text, make it specific, unique, and dramatic because of the visual character through which the work comes into being', then O'Sullivan's poetry is clearly performative at the level of the page.<sup>68</sup> But how is this kind of performance affected when the poem becomes part of a real-time poetry reading or sound recording? Inherent in Drucker's distinction between the visual performance of the poetic text and the event of the live poetry reading, and her celebration of the former over the latter, are anxieties about the authority of the speaking voice. Her work gestures towards a wider critical fear that poetry readings might threaten the critique of authorship and authorial domination that much contemporary poetry has been engaged in. This seems particularly evident when she argues that in visual performance, it is the poem and 'not the poet or reader that offers an object of scopic fascination', for here she seems to suggest that the poetry reading is somehow less democratic than the private reading.<sup>69</sup> The poetry reading, according to this view, shifts the emphasis away from the creative work the reader undertakes when confronted with a poem, onto the more old-fashioned allure of the author as origin and dictator of meaning.

In contrast to the view that the presence of the poet reading their work somehow imposes closure on the poetry, it is possible to argue that O'Sullivan's performances (and those of others engaged in similar work) actually do more to open up the investigation of language. Her literal authorial presence does not necessarily distract the audience from engaging with the materiality of the poetry itself. Her use of movement and of different media involve and encourage the audience to find new ways of interacting with the poetry, by providing choices 'between different types of attention, different involvement, where to focus their attention'.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile the sounding of the poetry enacts an aural defamiliarisation of language. In this final section on O'Sullivan's poetry, examples of spatio-temporal poetry readings and the audiotexts of performance are drawn on as

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<sup>68</sup> Drucker, 'Visual Performance of the Poetic Text', *Close Listening*, p. 131

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 160

<sup>70</sup> O'Sullivan, interview with Middleton



evidence that such events offer a site for fusing different understandings of performance, rather than enforcing their separation.

One way in which these different modes of performance are fused is through the visual projection of O'Sullivan's texts onto a screen or wall behind her as she reads. At an event at Southampton University in November 2003, for example, the audience had to decide whether to focus their attention on the sound or the sight of the text, particularly given that the pages being projected did not correspond to those being read out. In this way, the avoidance of a dominant self-presence in her poetry was translated into the live performed situation, and a 'scopic fascination' with the poet was diverted somewhat by the use of visual media. Other readings have made use of different media. In a performance of *Murmur* at Birkbeck College in November 2003, the seventy separate A3 sheets of the work were laid out on the floor among the audience as each one was read aloud.<sup>71</sup> O'Sullivan describes how 'For the 'purpled madder' section I used a keening by Kittie Gallagher made in Gweedore, County Donegal, 1952 – her lament, muffling out from the tiny cassette/recorder in my jacket pocket as I moved among the pages around the floor.'<sup>72</sup> So as with the performance of *Red Shifts*, the audience were presented with the text itself, and thus offered more than one kind of involvement with the poetry. The use of this recorded keening adds yet another dimension or focus for attention, as well as developing the preoccupation with grief and its effects on the voice and body which were suggested in the text. The keening also helps to configure a particular authorial identity, by linking this specific reading event with a historic Irish tradition of female performance.

O'Sullivan has also used recordings of herself in performances, such as a much earlier event in 1983, where she read from *From the Handbook of That & Furriery*, while weaving a red net around the room and down the aisle between the rows where the audience sat, accompanied by slides and a tape recording of her voice.<sup>73</sup> She reflects on her desire to include the audience in the action of the performance, 'I never have this

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<sup>71</sup> See O'Sullivan interview with Olsen, and Armstrong 'Maggie O'Sullivan: The Lyrical Language of the Parallel Tradition'. O'Sullivan also describes an improvised performance of *Murmur* in *How2* vol. 2, no. 2 (2004) <[http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/stadler\\_center/how2/current/workbook/murmur.shtml](http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/stadler_center/how2/current/workbook/murmur.shtml)> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>72</sup> O'Sullivan, interview with Olsen

<sup>73</sup> See O'Sullivan interview with Adrian Clarke, *Angel Exhaust*, issue 6 (1986), pp. 10-14, p. 14



concept of “it’s me and them”: I want us all to make collectively what is happening in some way.’<sup>74</sup> The overlapping embodied and disembodied voices in O’Sullivan’s readings are a way of translating her poetry’s avoidance of a single speaking narrative voice. They also complicate the metaphoric investments in the spoken voice’s association with presence and with authorship, which poetry readings are sometimes seen as strengthening.<sup>75</sup> Further, in using recordings of her *own* voice, the poet reminds the audience of a divided and inconsistent authorial self, and so reinforces the sense that to witness a poet perform their work is not necessarily a way of arriving at a final meaning of it.

Such practices suggest certain correspondences between the performance of the page and performance as a temporal event. Just as the space of the page is seen as constitutive of meaning in O’Sullivan’s poetry, so the space of the room is considered and made use of in a reading. This attention to space can be seen as reflecting her vision of the poetic text as an event, and as ‘a multidimensional, kinaesthetic, sentient terrain or environment for the body to enter and move through’.<sup>76</sup> Her movement around and involvement of the audience during performance is one way in which she challenges the conventions of a particular mode of poetry reading. In doing so, and in her pursuit of an alternative practice, she aligns herself with a wider poetic community, one in which Bob Cobbing’s Writer’s Forum workshops have played a central part. Her approach to readings acknowledges their shared, collective nature, an activity which is ‘beyond your own little interiorised reality.’<sup>77</sup> When contrasting different types of performance, it is important to remember this shared, interactive nature of poetry readings, and the key role they have played in forging poetic communities. It suggests visual performance and the poetry reading cannot always be quite so easily separated. If Cobbing’s workshops can be considered as a form of interpretive community, then they have been integral not only in the development of certain approaches to poetic delivery, in the live performance, but in

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<sup>74</sup> O’Sullivan, interview with Clarke, p. 14

<sup>75</sup> For an analysis of tape recording’s relation to changing subjectivities and its impact on voice’s relation to presence and authenticity, see N. Katherine Hayles ‘Voices out of Bodies, Bodies out of Voices: Audiotape and the Production of Subjectivity’, in Morris ed., *Sound States*, pp. 74-96 and Michael Davidson, ‘Technologies of Presence: Orality and the Tapevoice of Contemporary Poetics’, in *Sound States*, pp. 97-125, 99

<sup>76</sup> O’Sullivan, interview with Olsen

<sup>77</sup> O’Sullivan, interview with Middleton



the formal features of the poetry itself. The highly visual nature of the work of other poets in this community, such as Bill Griffiths, Paula Claire, and Cobbing himself, suggests a symbiotic relation between visual and live forms of performance.

In many of her live performances then, O'Sullivan helps to create a homology between the space of the page and the space of the room, and often reinforces this relationship by having the visual texts on show to the audience. But the sounded voice on its own can also develop the text, as a further opportunity in the 'continual figuring out process'.<sup>78</sup> Several live and studio audio recordings of her readings have been published either online or as CDs, and these evidence O'Sullivan's distinctive and dramatic style of voicing.<sup>79</sup> She stresses words and syllables in an almost consistently equal way, constructing a mode of aural parataxis, which encourages attention to the constituent sounds and morphemes of each word. She does this with both fragmented and with more conventionally syntactic phrases, so that, for example, each word in 'I have found this red' or 'clay pipes red spouts' from *Red Shifts* is given equal weight. Similarly, in *Murmur* the syllables within individual words are stressed equally, so that 'peregrinations', 'intricateliness', and 'decompositioning', are pronounced 'per-e-grin-a-tions' and so on. As with the typographic fracturing of 'stutt ERR', the effect is to focus attention on the relationship between the sound and semantics of language. A pronounced syllabic style of delivery confuses the boundaries between words in such a way as to encourage multiple meanings and greater indeterminacy than is created on the printed page. For example, to listen to *Murmur*'s sequence of words, 'persisting/ ingested/ inhering/ so figurate/ so sutured' without reading them leaves the middle word(s) in question – it could either be 'inhering' or 'in hearing'. To *hear* or listen is to 'ingest' or internalise, but in blurring the two meanings, perhaps sound and hearing are also being stressed as something essential, foundational, and inherent. In this way, O'Sullivan's

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<sup>78</sup> O'Sullivan, 'So - ', p. 10

<sup>79</sup> Online works include readings from *In the House of the Shaman*, *eXcLa* and *Palace of Reptiles*, recorded at SUNY- Buffalo, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1993 <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/OSullivan.html>> [accessed August 2006]; 'Ellen's Lament' and 'Chain Crate Ilate' section of *Murmur* available on the British Electronic Poetry Centre, <[www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc/poets/OSullivan.htm](http://www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc/poets/OSullivan.htm)> [accessed August 2006]. O'Sullivan's website has a recording of 'Own Land' from *Waterfalls* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2006) <<http://www.maggieosullivan.co.uk/works.htm>> [accessed August 2006]. CDs include *her/story:eye* (Stem Recordings, 2004) and *States of Emergency: Poems 1982–1988* (Optic Nerve/Birkbeck College, 2005)



enunciations draw attention to the physicality of language, and the semantic traces of sounds.

A further effect of the poet's pronounced style of voicing is that the occasional phrases that *do* follow more traditional rhythms stand out. These include the pronunciation of the lines 'leaf nailed on the waves nailed on the unheard and inaudible selves' in *Murmur* and the dactylic rhythm of 'paddy.took.after.my.grandmother's./people' in *Red Shifts*.<sup>80</sup> Thus fragments, which could be described as being lyrical and biographical or driven by narrative, appear even more decontextualised in their performance, as if they are borrowed quotations, or outside voices. Considered in conjunction with her occasional use of an Irish enunciation and the taped keening in the performance of *Murmur*, this is something which seems to support Isobel Armstrong's observation that '[i]n Maggie O'Sullivan's highly individual writing the unique voice has not disappeared, but the *poetic* 'self' is a composite of other voices and sounds, a permeable kinaesthetic state, a condition of awareness that converges with outer sounds and sights'.<sup>81</sup>

The poetry reading's process of 'sounding out' a poem can develop a text's semantics in different ways. Vocalisation is able to capture more powerfully the embodied nature of sound that is implied by the visual texts. It can also emphasise the indeterminacy of language and the ways sound helps to structure meaning. There are certain analogous relations between the aural and visual performance of a text. The distinctively fast, almost breathless delivery of the first 'chain crate ilate' section of *Murmur*, for example, could be interpreted as an aural equivalent of its visual layout, the text of which is dense, and arranged in a form evocative of bodily restriction. But the sounding of a text can also perform it in a separate way, offering new perspectives on its printed form. In the audio recording of *Red Shifts*, the sequence is read through first in order and then backwards (using the page as a unit), which produces verbal echoes, a mirroring which performs a kind of drawn-out breathing motion. Furthermore it contests the linearity inherent in the book form and refuses a narrative or climactic structure. In considering the impact and uniqueness of her performances, extra-vocal elements play a

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<sup>80</sup> O'Sullivan, *her/story: eye* CD, track 1

<sup>81</sup> Armstrong 'Maggie O'Sullivan: The Lyrical Language of the Parallel Tradition', p. 61



significant role, including the use the poet makes of her body, her movement around the room and interaction with the audience, as well as the use of other media such as recorded sound or slides. These factors are important to O'Sullivan's aims of enlarging the perceiving field of the audience during a performance. In contrast to Drucker's distinction, O'Sullivan's readings suggest that live performance can be just as open to interpretation as visual performance. Rather than shifting the focus of attention from the poem onto the poet, O'Sullivan's interweaving uses of sound, vocalisation, space, movement, and visuals, show that the poetry reading can be a way of extending the multidimensionality that is already inherent in the printed form of her poetry.

### **3. 'Full of Joins': Constructions of the Body, Cross-Art Performance, and the Gatekeeper of Speech in the Work of Caroline Bergvall**

There are several crossovers between the poetry and performances of Bergvall and O'Sullivan. As well as the use of a highly atomised, disarticulated language and multidimensional performance practices which cut across different artforms, both poets explore the experience of migration with particular attention to the sounded voice as a marker of social identity. Yet there are also a number of important differences in the practices, perspective and thematic focuses of each poet. Both respond to the idea of the visual, graphic performance of the printed page, but when it comes to more spatio-temporal forms of performance, their poetry represents different directions. Where O'Sullivan experiments with the poetry reading, Bergvall often works with site-specific installations, or uses electronic media to construct other forms of temporal performance such as hypertext or text-based animation. Furthermore, although both poets share a preoccupation with liminal states, the nature of these 'inbetween' subjectivities varies. While O'Sullivan's poetry questions the boundaries between the self and the other by blurring human, environmental and animal consciousness, Bergvall considers the impact of science and new technologies on understandings of the human and the 'post-human'. This is frequently entwined in her poetry with an attention to mutable sexual identities. Finally, there are differences in the models of migrancy informing each poet's writing practice. Much of O'Sullivan's work considered in this chapter has dealt with diasporic



movement and displacement from a perspective of loss, and has been concerned to recover a specific socio-political and class history. While also between cultures, Bergvall's work is positioned somewhat differently, representing a more privileged and cosmopolitan perspective, in which dislocation becomes valued for the heightened cultural and linguistic awareness it enables. The recurrence of the non-native speaker figure in her work also allows Bergvall to address very contemporary, twenty-first century political debates about immigration, language-use and Britishness.

My analysis of Bergvall first considers how notions of travel and translation inform her poetics and her problematisation of identity. It draws on evidence from *Goan Atom 1* (The Doll), a work which plays with linguistic gaps and bilingual shifts, while also exploring ideas of the unfixed body and the mutability of identity. *Goan Atom 1* takes as its starting point Hans Bellmer's surrealist visual art of the 1930s, but uses his work for a quite different agenda, appropriating it to address more contemporary ideas about the performance of gender, sexuality, and questions surrounding aesthetic and scientific creation. The various formats of *Goan Atom*'s circulation continue its concern with fragmentation, rearrangement and translation. Each format draws on differing performance practices, from the experimental visual performance of the printed book, to the audio and kinetic performance of the web version of *Ambient Fish*. My analysis examines how these varied practices enact *Goan Atom*'s preoccupation with voice, agency, changing subjectivities and the construction of identity. This is contrasted with the techniques and effects of an installed performance, *Say: "parsley"*, which focuses on voice's physical demarcation of identity.

### 3.1 A Poetics of Crossing Points

Drawing on a metaphor of travel, Bergvall indicates the shaping influence that an intercultural and international perspective has had on her poetics. Her theorisation of '[t]he wandering structure, the transitional architectures, the airport of writing', moreover, frames this perspective in distinctly metropolitan terms.<sup>82</sup> In an interview, she elaborates on the productivity of her movement between countries and languages,

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<sup>82</sup> Bergvall, *Binary Myths 1 & 2*, pp. 49-56, p.56



suggesting that it was through the transition to English that 'writing became a public project to me ... it became the fact that I am not English but I am writing in English. This throws up a number of questions. How do I read English culture? How do I situate myself in it? Am I a foreigner to it? All that becomes the project of writing'.<sup>83</sup> Bergvall's bilingualism has encouraged 'a critical and an artistic interest in the crossing points between language', and an interest in literary works written in more than one language, which her own poetry increasingly draws on. She argues, though, that this is 'not necessarily to create mongrel or hybrid languages, but is actually to show up the impact that languages have against, or into, each other. That also indirectly, I think, can explain my interest in installation art, in kinds of cross-art forms, an interest in mis-spellings, in idiosyncracies of all kinds, kinds of mis-translations.'<sup>84</sup>

*Goan Atom 1* offers a prime example of these crossing-points between languages and art forms. Exploring the idea of the unfixed body, and unfixed identity, it sustains parallels between linguistic and corporeal articulation and disarticulation. The central motif of the rearranged body comes from the Hans Bellmer's artworks based on dolls, particularly his series of photographs *Les Jeux de la poupée* (games of the doll). *Jets-poupee*, the title of an earlier version of *Goan Atom 1*, is a direct allusion to Bellmer's work, which photographed a life-sized female doll rearranged into misshapen forms, made up of different combinations of detachable body parts, including four legs, three pelvises and four breasts. Bellmer's problematic and misogynistic treatment of the female body is to some extent re-appropriated as a way of thinking about the construction of the body and of gender through representations.<sup>85</sup> In doing so, the work draws on more recent theories of gender construction, such as Butler's, as well as twentieth-century traditions of montage photography, from Hannah Hoch and Claude Cahun to Cindy Sherman, that all deal with identity as performance. The use of Bellmer can be seen partly as an acknowledgement of the strongly male, heterosexual bias of avant-garde movements

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<sup>83</sup> Bergvall, interview with Stammers

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> For an up to date summary of critical debate surrounding Bellmer, see Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Massachusetts; London: MIT press, 2000). This takes into account Therese Lichtenstein's and Rosalind Krauss's attempts to redeem Bellmer for contemporary (and to some extent feminist) audiences. See also Therese Lichtenstein, 'Games of the Doll', *Art in America* (1999), pp. 96-99, for a reading of Bellmer's dolls in the context of 1930s Nazi Germany, for their critical 'questioning of the conventionalized forms of femininity represented in German high art and popular culture' (p. 98)



including Dada and surrealism, while at the same time, *Goan Atom*'s fondness for word games and anagrams, and its allusions and tributes to female surrealist artists such as Unica Zürn ('Unica-House' subtitled 'Homage Louise Bourgeois', GA, p. 50), suggests a re-appropriation of certain Dadaist and surrealist techniques for a feminist poetics.

*Goan Atom*'s continual linguistic morphing bears relation to the malleable identities and the cases of biological/genetic metamorphoses that feature in the poem. A prominent formal device involves the shifting of the gaps between words, a severe use of enjambment, and the forging of new linguistic combinations as a result, such as 'Sgot uP/elvis' (GA, p. 41). This is combined with polylinguistic shifts which play with associations and sound symmetry, a good example being the first appearance of Dolly:

Enter DOLLY  
Entered enters  
Enters entered  
Enter entre  
en train en trail  
en trav Ail Aïe  
[...]

Sgot  
A wides lit  
Down the lily  
Sgot avide slot  
Donne a lolly to a head (GA, p. 23)

As well as a shift between English and French, 'enter' to 'entre' (between), 'A wides' to 'avide' (voracious), 'down' to 'donne' (give), and 'entail' to 'travail' (work), the language used is, like the doll, 'full of joins' (GA, p. 30). That these joins are consistently manipulated draws attention to the role of spacing in the constitution of sound and meaning. In this way, Bergvall emphasises the aural nature of reading and the subvocalized performance of the reader that Garret Stewart argues for in *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*. Stewart reconceptualises voice in literature, to talk about the receptual site rather than the source of a text. We read in the body, and the literary work is 'reembodied' in the reader's act of evocalization, equally applicable to the silent reading as to reading aloud. In this embodied, aural reading, suppressed sound and homophonic variations are important in constructing alternative meanings to printed words – creating a tension between phonemic and graphic signification. The



transformation of words or sounds by the changing of a letter or of spacing, and the sexual innuendo of much of the atomised language in *Goan Atom* is perhaps a way of consciously acknowledging this, by bringing a portion of suppressed sounds and meanings to the surface. In particular, the attention to spacing corresponds to the work's engagement with the physical production of speech. As Stewart argues, 'Acoustic production – material, substantial, *full* – only becomes language, speech or otherwise, with the introduction of breaks, fissures, cuts. In other words, absence is the catalyst of the system of traces that converts the activity of sound into the formal pattern of speech.'<sup>86</sup>

Less disjointed, but similarly unstable is the linguistic mutation of the 'Ambient Fish' section of *Goan Atom*. Suggestive of a fluid and multifarious sexuality, this section starts as a refrain, 'Ambient fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth will choke your troubles away'. It is then subjected to gradual linguistic and acoustic transformations, which bring into play French words and meanings, such as 'alien fuck fish fad goose in your bouch suck your oubli away', 'alien phoque fresh fat ease in your touche watch a ramble away' and 'to fish your face in the door ador ador' (GA, p.72-3). The metamorphosis of 'will shock your double away' into 'will soak your dwelling away' is particularly apt in highlighting this work's concern with different kinds of liminality – whether cultural, linguistic or sexual. The linguistic morphing and the strongly visceral language used in this section points to the connections between desire and language, between text and the body, something which is communicated more forcefully in its original format. The text comes from the refrain of the 1999 electronic text piece *Ambient Fish*. Making use of visuals, sound and moving text, the online animation is activated when the viewer clicks on one of the series of 'green nip' spherical breast buttons, one of which also provides the cover image for *Goan Atom*. These provide visual allusions to a Hans Bellmer drawing in which a limbless, headless doll operates as a kind of peep show: when its nipple is pressed, the rotating disk in the abdomen is lit up for the viewer to see, something also referenced earlier on in *Goan Atom*, 'good dottersum/ presses titbutt/ on

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<sup>86</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (California: University of California Press, 1990), p. 104



for the Puppe's/ panoRama' (GA, p. 24).<sup>87</sup> The multi-sensory *Ambient Fish* draws on the sense of spectacle and sexual voyeurism of Bellmer's peep show, and the printed version retains an element of this through its thick, bold, sans-serifed typeface, which, as Bergvall describes, aims to retain the 'viewing pleasure of the animation' while also emphasising a feeling of confrontation and menace.<sup>88</sup>

Through its engagement with spectacle, *Ambient Fish* seems self-reflexive about the literary-critical debates surrounding electronic art, particularly around the passivity of the reader's role in animated or programmed work. As Bruce Andrews has argued, '[t]hinking about the computer's interface and mode of address, the distinction between *looking through* and *looking at*, between the beholder's immersion and the reader's active use is still (unfortunately) relevant.'<sup>89</sup> Bergvall's piece seems almost to flaunt this sense of immersion and passivity, partly a continuity of *Goan Atom*'s concern with various forms of agency, but also a way of critiquing the deceptive nature of electronic media. In the animated version of *Ambient Fish*, the spoken refrain is complicated by interruptions, overlapping recordings and echoes, which combine with disappearing/reappearing visuals, words which swing round and move into one another, and phrases that transform faster than they can be read to culminate in a sensory overload. The viewer's experience of the piece can be seen as a comment on digital media's capacity for passive immersion. Bergvall has commented on the artistic responsibility of exploring 'how we are tricked by materials and by the status quo', and *Ambient Fish* seems to provide a critical reflection on the increasing penetration of technology into various kinds of social space.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time, the visceral nature of this electronic text is also a way of articulating changing subjectivities and experiences of the body as impacted upon by new technologies. The ungraspable nature of the morphing and moving text creates a form of illegibility. N. Katherine Hayles' discussion of the borders of legibility in electronic texts such as Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* seems equally applicable to *Ambient Fish*, especially in the context of Bergvall's interrogation of borders. Hayles argues that

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<sup>87</sup> See Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, p. 26, fig. 1.7

<sup>88</sup> Bergvall, interview with Perloff

<sup>89</sup> Bruce Andrews, 'Electronic Poetics' from John Cayley and Loss Pequeño Glazier eds., *Ergodic Poetry: A Special Selection of The Cybertext Year Book 2003*. Available on ubuweb, <[http://www.ubu.com/papers/andrews\\_electronic.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/andrews_electronic.html)> [accessed August 2006]

<sup>90</sup> Bergvall, interview with Students at the University of Pennsylvania, April 6, 2005 <<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bergvall.html>> [accessed August 2006]



occluded representations onscreen, 'mark the limits of what human perception can discern ... reminding us that the computer is also a writer, and moreover a writer whose operations we cannot wholly grasp in all their semiotic complexity.' This has further significance in suggesting the changing uses of the body and new models of subjectivity. Hayles' conception of the posthuman develops Donna Haraway's cyborg icon, a post-gender boundary creature that dissolves the boundary between the human organism and the machine.<sup>91</sup> Hayles suggests that the uses of illegibility in electronic texts 'hints that our bodies are also undergoing metamorphoses ... the occluded display signifies a trajectory in which we become part of a cybernetic circuit. Interpolated into the circuit, we metamorphose from individual interiorized subjectivities to actors exercising agency within the extended cognitive systems that include non-human actors. In this broader context, illegible text reminds us of the changes our bodies are undergoing as they are remapped and reinterpreted by intelligent machines working within networks that bind together our flesh with their electronic materiality.'<sup>92</sup>

### 3.2 'Sheeped Like a Dolly': Genetics, the Rearrangable Body, and the Performance of Gender

An engagement with developments in genetic technologies is another way in which Bergvall's work questions the boundaries between the human and the non-human. As well as referring to a powerful cultural representation of femininity and to the works of specific artists, 'Dolly', the central figure of *Goan Atom*, is also the name of the first cloned sheep, created in Britain in 1997. On its penultimate page, the poem integrates quotes from the controlled language of a 1998 'Someday Independent' article on genetic engineering and stem cell research: "'finely structured mesh"/ "suitable scaffolds"', "'growing an arm and hand"' and the rather chilling acknowledgement that "'The hurdle is the nerve tissue"' (GA, p. 75). This gestures towards the prominence of new forms of genetic determinism in the 1990s. Much media publicity has surrounded biotechnological research, not only that associated with cloning, but also studies which purport to explain a

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<sup>91</sup> Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-181

<sup>92</sup> Hayles, *Writing Machines*, p. 51



whole range of conditions and human behaviour through genetics. Against what Lynne Segal describes as 'the current cultural hegemony of genetic anti-culturalism', arguments which foreground the social and cultural construction of identity take on renewed significance.<sup>93</sup>

*Goan Atom* brings together some of these debates, and interweaves external authorial voices as a way of questioning new forms of biological essentialism, as in the following extract:

but sheeped  
like a dolly  
part out part ed  
partout prenante  
every little which way  
Right through the mid-  
Come 'n  
gain a bit  
Come a kiss  
(is made of this)  
: it's a girl  
Come a kiss  
: and its not  
In fact it was  
inconvenient  
Colon italics  
*Come again a bit freddy*  
(Nov 18 1819)

(GA, p. 54)

Again, there is a textual morphing from English to French, where 'part out part ed', suggesting a process of rearrangement or editing, perhaps the genetic engineering of body part, shifts to the certainty of 'partout prenante' (everywhere agreeing), which also puns aurally on *parti pris* to mean view or bias.<sup>94</sup> This is a scene of creation, but one which questions the boundaries drawn between the artificial and the natural. The cloned sheep is juxtaposed with the announcement 'it's a girl', what Butler has called the 'founding interpellation' of the subject: 'Consider the medical interpellation which ... shifts an

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<sup>93</sup> Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism?* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999). Chapter three, 'Genes and Gender: The Return of Darwin', pp. 78 – 115, considers 'Science versus Culture' debates in the U.K. and the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s. She analyses the 'new quasi-religious rhetoric coming from molecular biologists today working on the 'human genome project'' (p. 104), and draws on a number of arguments from biologists who question the value of the large-scale investment DNA research.

<sup>94</sup> Translation from Tuma ed., *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*, p. 915



infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he”, and in that naming, the girl is “girled”, brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that “girling” of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm.’<sup>95</sup>

The movement from ‘sheeped/ like a dolly’ to ‘:it’s a girl’ thus suggests certain parallels between scientific and cultural interventions in the construction of the body. It exploits the association of cloning with the artificial and the unnatural to suggest gender’s lack of relation to any essential Nature. In doing this, it also provides a reminder of the continuing need to pay attention to the cultural, social and discursive forces through which identity is learnt and regulated, a timely reminder at a moment when explanations are increasingly being sought in the field of genetics. The idea of identity as performed is endorsed with the uses and descriptions of colons, and ‘colon italics’, a reference to the typographic appearance of a play script. In this context, the quotation from the coded diaries of Anne Lister of Halifax, (‘Come again a bit freddy’), underlines the Foucauldian notion of sex as a regulatory ideal.<sup>96</sup> Lister’s nineteenth-century diaries documented her romantic and sexual relations with women. The decoding of the diaries showed that ‘freddy’ was a name for her lover Marianna Belcombe Lawton, while ‘kiss’ was used throughout her diaries as a code word for orgasm.<sup>97</sup> The use of this extract here serves to disrupt the interpellation of gender, and instead gestures towards a pluralisation of gender and sexual identity. That the diaries were written in code, and initially suppressed once this code had been broken, highlights the regulatory nature of binary categories of sex.

*Goan Atom* thus contrasts different forms of creation and construction. As well as considering linguistic, scientific, and cultural constructions of the body, it also incorporates figures of ‘the artist’ and ‘the every host’, and, in its allusions to *Frankenstein*, proposes certain parallels between the writer and the scientist. Both the

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<sup>95</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 7-8

<sup>96</sup> This source is referenced in ‘Les jets de la Poupee’ in Tuma ed., *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry*, p. 915

<sup>97</sup> Anne Lister, *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister*, ed., Helena Whitbread (New York: New York University Press, 1992)



artist and the 'every host' appear in bold, capitalised typeface, like the allegorical figures of a morality play. The various Christian associations of 'host' brings into play a particular form of creation myth, while speculations on the role of the artist refute the myth of the blank page as the genesis of literary creation. The artist instead is suggested as someone who works with already-existing fragments rather than creating out of a void:

#### THE ARTIST

as archivist as archaeologist as bricolist as cataloguist  
as collatist as collectist as compilist as ethnographist  
gathers up the debris particles  
as residues as indices  
(GA, p. 69)

This seems to overlap with Bergvall's discussion in 'In the Place of Writing', which considers the 'deep-rooted notion of the blank, amnesiac page, this material void which supposedly faces and blocks the writer', a notion which has influenced writers including Burroughs, the OuLiPo, the Language poets, Mac Low, Kathy Acker and Tom Phillips. Such writers have 'formally sought to wrench their work from the clean state of the page: through procedural writings, systemic projects, explicit intertextual structures, plagiaristic methodologies, cross-arts and collaborative frictions which all situate the beginnings of writing not in the white silence of the page but in the noise of written language'.<sup>98</sup> This applies to Bergvall's poetry, and can be seen in constrained, procedural works such as *Via*, but also in *Goan Atom*'s uses of already-existing texts, as well as anagrams, such as the grids which provide the section titles.<sup>99</sup> Anagrams, like the rearranging of spaces to provide new words, start from the 'noise of written language'. The fragmented, rearranged quote from Mary Shelley's introduction to her novel both describes and demonstrates this notion of creating out of existing materials:

It must be humbly AD-  
Mary by the lake  
had a good  
idea that is  
"by some law  
in my temperature"  
quote MITTED invention does not consist  
in cric-crac  
crrr crr

<sup>98</sup> Bergvall, 'In the Place of Writing', *Assembling Alternatives*, p.329

<sup>99</sup> The illegible grid of letters following the epigraphs in *The Doll* are rearranged on the following page so that the titles of each section can be read vertically up the page - 'cogs' 'fats' and 'gas'



ee  
 a ting out of void  
 but out of the ka  
 (GA, p. 55)<sup>100</sup>

That creation is tied up with questions of agency and the wielding of power is something that the poem's manipulation of space and typography helps to underline. The re-arrangeable body is emphasised by the visual arrangement of blocks of text. One section is printed upside down, suggestive of a hinge in its opposing direction to the text below it (GA, p. 30), while other arrangements give the impression of a connecting joint or pivot:

Woo pops  
 er  
 body partson  
 To the flo  
 Ring the morning  
 It's never matt  
 ers what goes back  
 on w  
 here Dolly  
 goodolly  
 In a  
 ny shape or form  
 (GA, p. 26)

Notions of the unfixed body in the poem partly signify a progressive force, insofar as they relate to the destabilisation of fixed categories of identity. But the manipulated body as represented by Bellmer's dolls and the genetically modified bodies also represent repressive acts of power, resulting in silencing. The doll, who never speaks, has about as much agency as the transgenic mouse in an earlier version of the poem, who 'spqueaks/ who ma/ demi so?' questioning the ethics of its very creation, while punning on its state of incompleteness and inbetweenness.<sup>101</sup> A similarly diminutive font is used in *Goan Atom*, where 'nic/e round/ ed olly' (GA, p. 25) is placed in the centre of a blank page, the rounded

<sup>100</sup> Allusion to Shelley's 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*: 'Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of the void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself.' Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* ed., Johnanna M. Smith (Boston: Bedford Books of St Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 19-24, p.22

<sup>101</sup> 'Les Jets de la Poupee', in Tuma ed, *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*, p. 917. 'This mouse/ has a big ear' alludes to the widely circulated image of the mouse with a human ear growing out of its back. It does not feature in the Krupskaya version of *Goan Atom*.



arrangement evoking the centrality of the ball joint to Bellmer's articulated doll. The tiny font is also indicative of the subservience and voicelessness of the doll as a female cultural representation, seen and not heard, 'Dolls should be seen full st' (GA, p. 52). The passivity of the doll, its ability to be rearranged and ordered ('here Dolly'), as in the extract above, is shown as an essential condition of its acceptance ('goodolly' and 'nice...dolly').

Theories and practices of performance are thus intrinsic to *Goan Atom's* engagement with forms of creation. Typography and the visual arrangement of the text help to perform the poem's concern with linguistic and corporeal instability and rearrangement, and with artistic creation as a form of re-working, an intertextual art which starts with already-existing materials including 'the noise of written language, in the business of its cultural machines'.<sup>102</sup> Tied in with notions of the unstable body is the constructed and performative nature of identity, and Bergvall undermines the idea of a natural or essential identity by contrasting gendered subjects with those of genetic engineering. The fragmented and re-constructed language of much of *Goan Atom* works at visual and aural levels; and serves to draw attention to the performance of the reader, and the aural, bodily nature of reading. While the rearrangement of spaces between words visually demonstrates the fluid boundaries of language, aurally it draws attention to the workings of delay and deferral in the construction of meaning. Significantly, this role of delay is altered in the audio recording of Bergvall reading *Goan Atom* where enjambment signifies a more severe acoustic break than it seems to in the subvocalised performance of the reader. In the reading aloud, fragments of words are pronounced as complete words, rather than as delayed sounds (thus 'nic/e round' is sounded with a hard 'c', as 'nick ee round' for example).<sup>103</sup> This produces a greater sense of friction and stuttering, possibly a way of aurally suggesting the voicelessness and lack of agency of the doll-figure, particularly appropriate if the visual nature of the work is not part of the poetry reading. This leads to the final way in which performance is important to this work – its different appearances in the public sphere, which, as Bernstein suggests, can each be considered as separate and unique textual performances. Its circulation as audio recording, online text

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<sup>102</sup> Bergvall, 'In the Place of Writing', p.329

<sup>103</sup> Bergvall, reading at the University of Pennsylvania, 6 April 2005,  
<<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bergvall.html>> [accessed August 2006]



and web-animation, as well as different forms of published text all help to construct a poetics of transition and incompleteness, ideally suited to poetry dealing with transitional, unfixed forms of subjectivity.

### 3.3 *Say: "parsley"*; Site-Specific Speech

In *Say: "parsley"*, the final work this chapter will examine, Bergvall makes use of another set of performance practices. Like her earlier piece *Élcat*, *Say: "parsley"* is a site-specific performance work. It was first installed in Exeter's Spacex gallery in 2001 and then later adapted and re-sited for the Liverpool Biennial Arts Festival in 2004. The different kinds of performance informing Bergvall's print-based work continue to be significant in this temporal piece. Like previous work, *Say: "parsley"* is also visually performative, engages with the role or performance of the reader, and reflects on the performative nature of identity. However, the sited nature of this work alters the experiences of these performances considerably. While *Goan Atom* draws attention to the embodied nature of reading through its linguistic fissures and the suggestion of an articulatory stream of sounds, *Say: "parsley"* highlights the embodied nature of reading, speaking and hearing in different ways. The spaces of the gallery are used so that the physical act of moving through the rooms encourage reflection on one's movement through speech and language. The differing types and placements of the texts – through speakers, on walls, or on the floor beneath weighted fishing lines – encourage a sense of being surrounded by language, of inhabiting it and moving through different kinds of linguistic noise. But *Say: "parsley"* also defamiliarises the relationship between speaker and language by invoking the experience of speaking as an immigrant. In this respect, it is also about the relationship between language and national culture, and the extent to which speech, particularly the subtleties of pronunciation, can be used to mark out and exclude individuals and groups. The treatment of the physical voice in this piece overlaps with many of O'Sullivan's preoccupations. This final section thus aims to substantiate the idea that performance practices predicated on non-verbal or extra-linguistic elements are particularly suited to the poetic examination of communication, (in)articulacy, and the relationship between speech and identity.



The central motif of *Say: "parsley"* is 'speech as a gatekeeper'.<sup>104</sup> In its engagement with accent as a marker of 'foreignness', audio material plays a central role. In its 2001 installation, the piece occupied four rooms. Playing in one room was a recording of the reading of a forty five line text written by Bergvall, while another played distorted recordings of voices Bergvall and her sound-collaborator, Ciarán Maher, had collected. People with a wide variety of accents, both regional English and non-English, were asked to speak some pairings of words chosen for 'their tricky difficulty yet familiar (i.e. English) connotation. The thick English "l" and liquid "r", and the frictive "th" ("shibboleth of foreigners") are amongst the most recurring problems.'<sup>105</sup> These included 'rolling hills', 'proper English', 'nothing certain', 'keep calm' and 'at home'. The recorded pairings were used to stress the subjective, unstable nature of communication, as much built upon the perception of hearing as on the act of speaking, for recordings of the original spoken words were mediated and blurred to encourage uncertain hearings, with viewers/listeners picking up different sounds, and different word combinations. Pairings of single words were recorded 'one in each channel at more or less one octave apart and [looped] at a speed of 0.5 sec.' Bergvall describes how '[d]uring the week of showing, an Italian woman tells me she hears Italian words in the pairings. I hear French words. Ciarán hears Irish.'<sup>106</sup>

As well as indicating the subjective nature of hearing, the uniqueness of each speaker's enunciation worked to oppose the standardisation of speech and the idea of a 'correct' pronunciation. *Say: "parsley"* is interested in accent's relation to cultural belonging and acceptance, the 'drama of the shibboleth'.<sup>107</sup> The title alludes to a devastating historical example of this drama, 'the massacre of tens of thousands of Creole Haitians on the soil of the Dominican republic during the dictatorship of Trujilo in 1937 ... for failing to roll the /r/ of "perejil" (parsely)', which is 'still perhaps the most recent documented example of such a shibboleth at work' (F, p. 51).<sup>108</sup> Yet the work also uses this motif of the shibboleth to comment on the 'culturally pluralistic, yet divided, and

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<sup>104</sup> Bergvall, 'Marks of Speech', *Additional Apparitions*, p. 192

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 193

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p. 195

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 192

<sup>108</sup> Rita Dove's poem 'Parsley' (1983) is also based on this massacre. Rita Dove, *Selected Poems* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), pp. 133-136



markedly monolingual society of contemporary Britain', in which variations in accent can still be linked to harassment and abuse (F, p. 51). By the time of the work's second installation, in September 2004, this theme had picked up new resonance, given the 'explicit progression towards a culture ruled by fear and xenophobia' (F, p. 53). While growing political debates on race and immigration in Britain espoused the importance of integration, the semantic intention of this rhetoric was closer to assimilation. In 2002, the home secretary David Blunkett generated much media publicity when he proposed that new bilingual immigrants should speak English with their families.<sup>109</sup> The Liverpool siting of *Say: "parsley"* referenced this by spray-painting one of the walls with the words 'speak English at home'. This work continues to pick up new significance as the debate over language-use and national identity goes on, with the legislation of language and 'Britishness' tests for citizenship applicants in November 2005, and the introduction of citizenship lessons in schools.

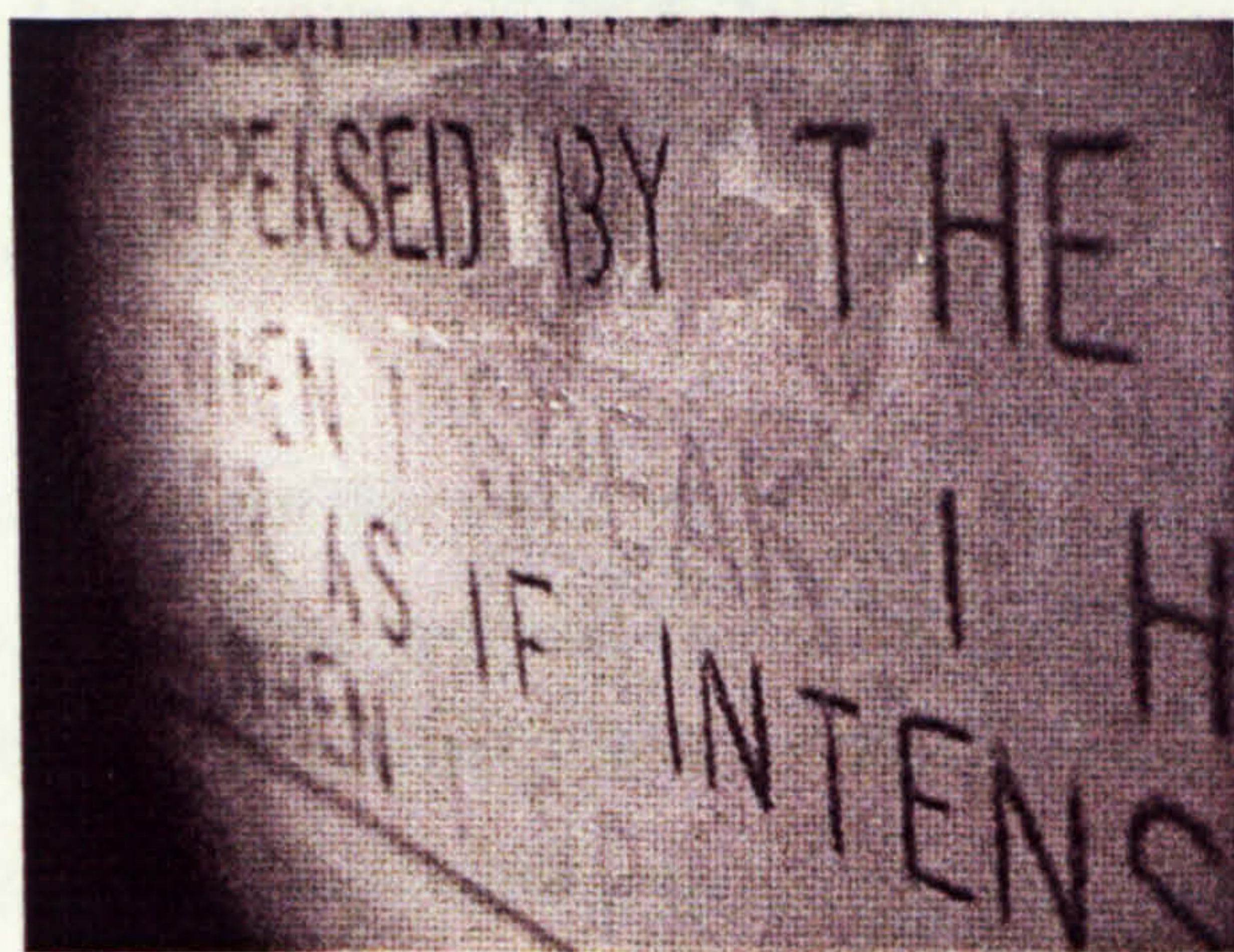
*Say: "parsley"* brings together both literal and more metaphoric understandings of voice – as physical speech, but also as representation. To do this it relies on certain visual devices for its effects. This is apparent in a section of text which was painted on one of the walls. The words 'speak', 'I speak', and 'I speak up' were painted in white emulsion, the glossy texture of the paint making them just about visible on the white wall, suggestive of a ghostly Derridean trace present in language:

speech mirrors ghosts speak as if  
 appeased by the evidence of this  
 when I speak I hold at least two  
 or as if intensely preoccupied  
 when I speak up I am held to one  
 (F, pp. 56-7)

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<sup>109</sup> David Blunkett, 'Integration with Diversity: Globalisation and the Renewal of Democracy and Civil Society', in *Rethinking Britishness* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002). Essay also printed in *The Observer Comment*, 15 September 2002, <<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/comment/0,,792501,00.html>> [accessed August 2006]





**Figure 4:** Photo from 2001 installation of *Say: "parsley"*, in *Fig*, p. 57

This foregrounds a tension between visibility and invisibility, absence and presence, which *Say: "parsley"* explores in relation to voice. Such a tension was intensified by lighting effects, so that the text was illuminated every other minute, for a minute at a time, in an otherwise darkened room. The sound of the blurred, recorded paired words could be heard on loop in the same room, setting up an intermittent link between voice's manifestation as physical sound, and its use as a term for visibility and representation. In relation to the non-native speaker, this text on the one hand articulates the desire not to be marked out or noticed through speech, to keep a low profile, as suggested in the recorded text, 's peak s low ly lie low' (F, p. 58). On the other hand, in the partial erasure of 'speak up', a phrase associated with personal or collective representation, with speaking out, there is also a fear of *not* being heard, or of being perceived only through imposed narrow identity structures, such as those of 'otherness'. This ties in with the vocabulary of accountability ('evidence', 'held to'), and also with Bergvall's interest in Krzysztof Wodiczko's work with immigrant speakers. Particularly relevant here are the instruments he designed as 'public speech-act equipment' such as *Alien Staff* and *Mouthpiece*.<sup>110</sup> Endowing their individual users ('alien speakers') with narrative power, they aimed to express the complexity and multiplicity of immigrant experience, as acts of resistance against 'any imposed (even self-imposed) uniform or generalized notions of a so-called

<sup>110</sup> Bergvall praises Wodiczko's work in her interview with University of Pennsylvania students, <<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bergvall.html>> [accessed August 2006]. She also discusses his instruments in 'Marks of Speech', and an image and discussion of Wodiczko's *Mouthpiece* forms part of her presentation notes 'Piece in Progress: About Face, (*Goan Atom 2*)', in *How2* vol. 1, no. 6 (2001), <[http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v1\\_6\\_2001/current/in-conference/bergvall.html](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v1_6_2001/current/in-conference/bergvall.html)> [accessed August 2006]



immigrant identity.’<sup>111</sup> The differences in Bergvall’s text between ‘when I speak I hold at least two’ and ‘when I speak up I am held to one’ possibly imply a similar tension between an imposed, restrictive identity, and a more complex, personal experience of identity.

The architectural siting of the poetic text of *Say: “parsley”* encourages reflection on the physical occupation of language, and, like several of Denise Riley’s later poems considered in chapter two, on the dialectic between language and speaker. In one of the upstairs rooms of the gallery, textual marks and letters stuck on the floor were hidden by plumb lines hanging down from the ceiling, meaning that readers/viewers had to wind their way through them and swing the lines to reveal the marks underneath – jumbled letters which could be rearranged to spell ‘voices’.<sup>112</sup> Encouraging viewer interaction, this siting foregrounded the tension between controlling language and being lost in it. Elsewhere, other spatial gestures were used to develop the theme of ‘speech as a gatekeeper’. Four ‘R’s were painted on the wall beside the door into the gallery, again painted in white on white walls, and thus easy to miss. A reference to the shibboleth of the Spanish rolled ‘R’ in ‘perejil’, these also alluded to ‘the dog that guards the entrance of hell. The dog of the so-called “canine” letter “R”.’<sup>113</sup> That they were placed next to the literal entrance of the gallery door sets up the work’s conceptualisation of language as a physical space, through which the viewer moves.

As Riley suggests in her critical essays, and Bergvall alludes to in her interviews, the learning of a foreign language can illuminate the dialectic between speaker and language.<sup>114</sup> The longer spoken text, which is transcribed in *Fig*, comments on the tension

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<sup>111</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (London: MIT press, 1999), p. 116. Wodiczko describes the Alien Staff (first created in 1992) as ‘a piece of storytelling equipment and a legal and ethical communications instrument and network for immigrants.’ Resembling the ‘biblical shepherd’s rod’, it is equipped with a video monitor and loudspeaker, which enables its immigrant operators to play back a video of their own storytelling, while standing with the Staff in public spaces (p. 104). The Mouthpiece (1993) is a piece of equipment attached to the face which “replaces” the immigrant’s actual act of speech with the moving image of the immigrant’s lips and the sound of the immigrant’s voice’ (p. 118)

<sup>112</sup> cris cheek, ‘Caroline Bergvall: Writing and Reading, the Sites of Performance’

<sup>113</sup> Bergvall ‘Marks of Speech’, p. 200

<sup>114</sup> Riley uses the example of a sign displayed in a Paris language school which read “Don’t let the English language beat you – Master it before it masters you” to start a discussion on the dialectic between individual and speech in ‘Malediction’, in Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 9-27, p. 13. In her interview with Stammers, Bergvall describes how writing in English ‘generates an awareness. You can’t forget that you are using verbal material you



between controlling and being controlled by language, and draws on the figure of the non-native speaker to do so. It starts:

say this language heels  
language keels  
over  
s wallow in it  
f hollow hollow fall low  
s peak slow ly lie low  
say this feels c loose  
the big mous th chokes  
has a bong st ruck in the throat  
(F, p. 58)

The idea of language being trained ('heels') contrasts with a more frustrated attempt at mastery, something that 'keels' over, is choked upon and stuck in the throat. As with Bergvall's other texts, the language is fractured and sounds mutate into new words to suggest semantic links. But here the stammering and the gaps are suggestive of the careful pronunciation of the language learner, echoed in the semantic shifts, the learner's slow speech blending into the desire not to make their pronunciation stand out, 's peak slow ly lie low'. The long list of tests, beginning with 'Say: "pig"/ Say: "fig"/ Say: "fag"/ Say: "fog"' (F, p. 58) and ending several phonemic alterations later with 'Say: "portly"/ Say: "partly"/ Say: "parsley"' (F, p. 59), call to mind Saussure's account of language as a differential system, that 'whatever distinguishes one sign from others constitutes it. Difference makes character just as it makes value and the unit'.<sup>115</sup> Bergvall's list runs like a demonstration of this, with /pig/ as distinguished from /fig/ and /fig/ from /fag/ and /fog/ and so on. This text emphasises the key role played by language as a sign system in the social construction of reality and the construction of cultural identities. For while phonemic difference is key to establishing linguistic meaning, the ending, 'Say: "parsley"', reminds of the more sinister ways in which speech can also be used to constitute cultural difference.

*Say: "parsley"* uses a variety of techniques to draw attention to the nuances of phonemic difference and to emphasise the physical nature of speech as an embodied act.

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don't have the same so called intuition of language you can have with your first language. The whole issue of the mother tongue becomes immediately very problematic. It isn't my first language so where do I place myself, where do I place the whole activity of dreaming, of speaking in tongues, of connotation?' <sup>115</sup>

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, in Vincent B. Leitch et al eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York; London: Norton, 2001), pp. 956-977, p. 973



Like other, page-based works of Bergvall's, it is also concerned with the construction of identity, difficulties of communication, and the physical processes of reading. But due to its nature as a spatial and temporal event, it does this through different performance techniques. Just as visual means such as fonts and textual arrangement on the page are used to establish voicelessness in *Goan Atom*, here space, colour, sound, props and lighting are all exploited as ways of representing the borders of articulacy and understanding. As with O'Sullivan, who also explores how accent can render the individual an outsider, non-linguistic elements are key in articulating the relation between voice and identity.

### Conclusion

The work of O'Sullivan and Bergvall illuminates the complex and multifarious significance of voice to British poetry in recent decades. Understandings of voice in terms of authorial presence, authority, speech, subjectivity, and identity, are all confronted and questioned in the printed and audio texts of these poets, and it is perhaps down to their diverse use of performance practices that they are able to engage so effectively with the conceptual and material voice simultaneously. As well as their poetry's printed performativity, temporal performances such as O'Sullivan's readings or Bergvall's installations are multi-dimensional and multi-sensory, relying on visual and spatial as much as acoustic elements. O'Sullivan's and Bergvall's poetry suggests some of the ways in which contemporary poets are engaged with expanding how and where poetry is experienced. In order for such an expansion to take place, poets are investigating not just the medium of language, but also technologies of inscription, and collaborations with other artforms. This chapter has argued that the non-verbal dimension of such collaborations enables this poetry to defamiliarise the very act of speaking and thus to explore states of voicelessness. It has also proposed a link between the interdisciplinary nature of various performance practices and the states of synthesis and betweenness that the poetry of O'Sullivan and Bergvall articulates, whether in the form of cross-culturality, multilingualism, human/non-human consciousness or polymorphous modes of sexuality. This is not to suggest that their poetry constitutes an uncritical



celebration of liminality as a timeless or abstract state of being. One of the aims of O'Sullivan's mutable poetics, for example, is to find a language to communicate a culturally-specific diasporic history. Bergvall's poetry meanwhile considers the effect of particular discourses and cultural shifts on conceptualisations of identity in the twenty first century. These include new technologies of communication, changing understandings of the body, gender and sexuality as influenced by new forms of genetic determinism, and a political rhetoric preoccupied with the 'problem' of immigration, which espouses the importance of national integration. O'Sullivan's and Bergvall's poetry points to some of the ways in which voice continues to be a powerful signifier, whether as a trope for representation or, in its embodied sense, as a physical marker of identity. The work of both poets reinforces that the social, cultural and political engagement of much innovative poetry is made present through an exploration of voice.



## Conclusion

The starting point of this thesis was an acknowledgement of the weight carried by the term 'voice' in recent poetic discourses. Over the last three decades, voice has become a freely and frequently invoked signifier, but the complexity, different contexts and implications of its uses have remained largely unexamined. As the introduction demonstrated, critical narratives have often called upon voice to distinguish different strands of contemporary British poetry, frequently using it to imply irresolvable tensions between the ideals of different poetic communities. This is particularly evident in the polarisation of a poetics of the marginalised voice and an anti-lyrical avant-garde practice. But the problem with such distinctions is that they tend to rely on an unselfconscious use of 'voice'. Its alternately affirmative and pejorative associations are all too often accepted as the norm by those defending either side of this divide. This study has argued that much contemporary poetry actually enacts a more complex and self-reflexive engagement with voice than these critical divisions sometimes suggest.

This thesis has not aimed to propose a new definition or a general theory of voice capable of encompassing its significance to recent British poetry. Instead, by analysing some of the differing investments that diverse poets have made in voice, whether as a trope or more materially, I have sought to emphasise its multiplicity and semantic instability. I have used this indeterminacy to try and complicate divisions between emotionally expressive and formally experimental poetic practice and to demonstrate that while much avant-garde practice complicates subjectivity and the idea of an innate identity, this does not necessarily represent a negation of selfhood. For while it distances itself from certain conventions of representation, the poetry in this study remains committed to the voicing of silenced histories and identities. While their aesthetics may differ from that of a 'consciousness-raising' mode of poetry, much of the work considered in this thesis has been concerned with finding a language for communicating and critiquing social inequality and exclusion. In doing so, this poetry, suggests the difficulty of assigning a single kind of politics to voice and voicelessness; it has demonstrated that the aim of making voices heard is not exclusively dependent on an expository language and form.



This thesis has advocated a more fluid understanding of the various strands of recent British poetry by comparing aesthetics across and within different experimental poetic communities. In arguing for a more nuanced relationship between experimentalism and voice than that implied by the innovative/expressive opposition, I have aimed to broaden out how experimental practices are conceived. The thematic arrangement of chapters highlights that voice is not only something that has been contested, displaced or reworked within experimental practices, but something which, in a different sense, has also been valued as a poetic medium. To some extent, I have considered areas of overlap between different poetic communities by contrasting poets such as Peter Reading and Linton Kwesi Johnson with those more usually associated with small press publication. Analysing poetic approaches to voice also foregrounds diversity within experimental communities. Within groupings such as the 'British Poetry Revival' of the seventies, recent black British poetry, or the linguistically innovative women's poetry associated with O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere* anthology, there exists a wide range of formalisms and critiques. Thus while the intertextual poetry of Sinclair, Fisher and Reading shares a preoccupation with the meanings of authoriality, the first chapter demonstrated that these poets all configure their own distinct collage aesthetic and authorial selves, which become vehicles for specific social and cultural critiques. Mulford's and Riley's re-theorisation of the lyric voice represents another mode of formal innovation. Yet while they share an interest in abstract painting as part of their search for alternative modes of personal expression, the visual aesthetic of each poet is, again, quite distinct. In the second half of the thesis, Johnson's and Wall's uses of the physical voice question certain assumptions about the 'authenticity' of performance traditions. But Johnson's textual engagement with voice takes the form of a politically-charged vernacular, which contrasts with Wall's more intensely visual poetics. Finally, O'Sullivan and Bergvall both draw heavily on non-linguistic techniques in their exploration of the borders of articulacy and communication. Differences surface in the nature of the voiceless states they communicate, which are inflected by distinct cross-cultural histories. Though both are investigating the spaces between cultures and language, the poets' different positions within these interstitial spaces is reflected in their approaches to language and performance media. The thesis as a whole, then, has sought to illuminate crossover points



between different poetic groupings, while each individual chapter underlines the diversity of practices existing within them.

This work has also considered some of the reasons why recent British poetry should be so preoccupied with the meanings and uses of voice. While certain elements of this poetry reflect trans-atlantic dialogues, my focus has been on the national cultural and political specificity of its formal experimentation with voice. I have argued that an interrogation of voice as a signifier for authoriality, authenticity, representation and personal self-expression is in part a response to new forms of political authority and changing conceptions of national identity. I have tried to suggest that much experimentation with the textual voice is not just formalistic; rather, it is an intrinsic part of the social and political commentary of this poetry. In the poetry of the first chapter, drawing attention to the mechanisms of authorial presence – to the idea of the author as a mediator between world and reader – was a way of reflecting on other forms of power beyond the text. In Sinclair's case it can be seen as an acknowledgement of changes in masculine models of identity and authority. The more radical disruption of the authorial voice in Fisher's and Reading's texts critiques the authoritarian centralism of new right politics, while Reading's later work plays with voices to undermine the powerful, moralist 'common sense' rhetoric of this politics. The fragmentary and complex representations of place and history by all three poets can be seen partly in response to the consumable images proffered by the emerging national heritage industry. This poetry's anxieties over the changing cityscape also articulates a wider unease with new constructions of Britishness, as the changing physical environment became metonymic of a national identity built on a competitive financial ethos.

Riley's and Mulford's poetry considers the impact of such an ethos from an alternative perspective. Their cautious, self-reflexive use of a lyric voice acknowledges contradictions between a feminist politicisation of the personal and the Thatcherite promotion of individualism. They recognise the importance of the personal, intimate voice in articulating the material conditions of gender inequality, but their work strives for a language to communicate interiority and emotional experience which avoids individualised narratives. In this respect, the work of both poets unites certain aims of identity politics with those of avant-garde experimentalism. This is something Johnson's



poetry in chapter three also achieves, but using a quite different kind of innovation. The written orality of Johnson's poetry fragments and reaccentuates the English language, using structural devices to challenge the rise of an aggressive, exclusionary form of nationalism in the seventies and eighties. By complicating distinctions between sound and voice, his poetry configures a politics of sound similar to that inherent in reggae music. Both Johnson's and Wall's 'soundscapes' question the association of oral performance with personal self-expression. This becomes an important tool in Wall's interrogation of selfhood, and her poetry's critique of the marketing of ethnic identities within nineties' British culture.

The poetry of O'Sullivan and Bergvall considered in the final chapter foregrounds the relationship between speech and national and cultural belonging. Their uses of the physical voice in performance, and their textual tropes of voicelessness are related to historically specific narratives of identity. O'Sullivan's poetry is informed by the history of the Irish diaspora, while Bergvall reflects on language use for its relationship to twenty-first century notions of Britishness. Her work also engages with changing understandings of the body, identity and subjectivity as influenced by contemporary scientific research and new technologies. Throughout the chapters, then, I have aimed to show how textual experiments with voice are inflected by a national context. In much of the poetry considered, unpacking the authority of the traditional poetic voice becomes a way of critiquing an authoritarian form of political power and the model of selfhood this is reliant upon.

A final theme running through this study concerns poetry's relationship with other cultural forms. Something shared by all the poets considered here is a lack of complacency about the contemporary status of poetry and its publics. Experimenting with new forms of production and dissemination, from the print culture of the labour intensive small presses, through to live poetry performances, installations, recordings and internet pieces suggests a concerted effort to expand the sites of poetry. The metapoetics of many of these texts often entail reflection on the strategies and the visceral impact of other art forms, such as paintings, music, or song. Other works considered represent more direct collaborations with non-poetic forms by working with musicians and composers, producing visual-verbal crossovers, or else by incorporating and reframing found



material from a range of different discourses. This impulse to demonstrate language's 'interconnectedness and interdependence with other disciplines' can be seen as another facet of contemporary poetry's preoccupation with voice.<sup>1</sup> Collaborations and crossovers result from a reflection on poetry as an outward gesture. They represent a rethinking of poetry's parameters and of the ways in which it might speak to its audience, ultimately reinforcing the value of poetry as a social act.

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<sup>1</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Commentary', Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris eds, *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry, Volume 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.835



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