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Writing Material Remains:
History and Visual Poetics in the Work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Susan Howe and Maggie O'Sullivan

by

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ABSTRACT

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WRITING MATERIAL REMAINS: HISTORY AND VISUAL POETICS IN THE WORK OF THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA, SUSAN HOWE AND MAGGIE O'SULLIVAN

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This thesis examines contemporary experimental poetries which foreground visual materiality as an integral part of 'archaeological' investigations of suppressed histories. It engages with theoretical questions surrounding the articulation of marginalised histories and aesthetic debates centred on verbal-visual relations, as well as focusing on the work of three poet-practitioners working between the 1970s and the present: Korean American artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, American poet Susan Howe, and British poet Maggie O'Sullivan. The thesis situates the problem of theorising verbal-visual interactions in relation to a wider split between cognition and sensuousness, meaning and materiality, and by doing so it seeks to contribute to newly emergent vocabularies of visual poetics. Moreover, it investigates the political and ethical implications of aesthetic works that invoke or critique the dividing line between meaning and materiality by bringing to attention the physical, visual dimensions of the written work via formal strategies such as the incorporation of images or the manipulation of page layout and typography, for example. Thus by examining the relationships between particular kinds of visual materiality and the archaeological impulses of a range of poetically-conducted investigations of specific forgotten, suppressed, or traumatic histories it also participates in prominent current debates around aesthetics and historical anamnesis. The thesis argues that in their hybrid forms, the works of Cha, Howe and O'Sullivan materially embody the difficulties and opportunities of recovering the unacknowledged histories they aim to bring to attention. In addition, it evaluates the implicit redemptory claims of poetic projects whose rescue of hitherto unacknowledged dimensions of material meaningfulness propose ways of reading/seeing history 'otherwise'.

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Introduction

Writing Material Remains

Throughout the twentieth century and into the early years of the twenty-first, British and American modernist poets have been persistently interested in writing poetry 'including history', as Ezra Pound notoriously put it. Variously manifested in canonical works of modernist literature such as Pound's own *Cantos* and T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, later works such as William Carlos William's *Paterson*, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, and Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, and more recently in the work of contemporary poets such as Ron Silliman, Allen Fisher, Nathaniel Mackey, and Kathleen Fraser, poetic engagements with history and historical material have taken many different forms. Brian McHale has mapped out a field of what he usefully calls 'archaeological poetry', identifying two distinct but intertwined strands, one modernist and the other postmodernist, but by dint of their archaeological activities both involved in a 'spatial turn' generally associated with the postmodern.[1] He associates the modernist tradition 'that extends from Eliot and Pound through H.D., David Jones, and Olson down to Hill, Heaney, and the present' with a Freudian model of 'deep time', with tropes of archaeological depth, and with a claim for 'epistemological mastery'.[2] The postmodern tendency, on the other hand, is characterised by a Foucauldian insistence on discontinuity and 'antinarrative', with a 'collapsing of vertical structures of transmission onto a single plane', and with epistemological uncertainty.[3] Above all, McHale argues, these postmodern archaeological poetries insist on the concrete, material dimensions of their own poetic forms, on their own status as artefacts rather than as representations of an encounter with an artefact. McHale suggests we might call this kind of work '"material" poetry: poetry that foregrounds its own constituents, its ink and paper, its typography and layout and the conventions of bookmaking, above all, the space of the page'. In this poetry 'the space right here in front of us, *this* space here on the page' becomes an archaeological site.[4]

It is precisely this type of 'material' poetry that forms the focus for this thesis, although I am less interested than McHale in connecting this development too closely with postmodernism or in making too much of a distinction between modernist and

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[1] Brian McHale, 'Archaeologies of Knowledge: Hill's Middens, Heaney's Bogs, Schwerner's Tablets', *New Literary History*, 30 (1999), 239-262, pp. 241, 239.
[2] McHale, 'Archaeologies of Knowledge', pp. 250, 240.
[3] McHale, 'Archaeologies of Knowledge', pp. 253–4.
[4] McHale, 'Archaeologies of Knowledge', p. 256.

postmodernist poetic archaeologies.[5] My thesis concerns itself with formal issues raised by poetries that foreground some dimension of visual materiality, and with the relation of this formal move to these poetries' specific 'archaeological' or historical investigations. Although I specify a *visual* form of materiality here, I recognise that the material dimensions of the poetic page – its spatial dimensions, the ink forming words, letters, or various kinds of marks, its layout and its white spaces – are not exclusively visual; as my thesis will show, these constituents form part of a multimedia experience of the text that comprises not only its visually apprehensible elements but also tactility and especially sound. Yet the primary emphasis of this thesis is on *visual* materiality, because the material constituents of the poetic page are above all its spatial, visually perceptible elements. Poetries that bring such visual elements to attention present a problem for readers and critics, however, because they insist that we acknowledge and engage with aspects of the textual artefact which are not often taken into account in normative reading practices and which have no established frameworks for their interpretation. As Richard Bradford puts it, 'visual form [in poetry] is something to which the reader has been denied access, because although we can experience it we have no critical or interpretive code to account for our experience.'[6] The visual dimensions of poetry, then, are in general very poorly understood and lack a robust critical tradition. My study is aimed at this critical gap and hopes to contribute to developing critical debates around visual poetics and studies in word-image relations. However, this thesis does not confine itself to formal problems; it is most interested in teasing out the wider cultural and political resonances of hybrid verbal-visual forms. The material poetries upon which I focus demonstrate that to bring the physical, visual dimensions of the printed page to attention is not only – and perhaps not even predominantly – a formalist move. In these works, the foregrounding of visual materiality and its tensions and overlaps with linguistic functioning constitutes a mode of engagement with complex political and cultural issues.

The central concern of this study is to examine the relationships between specific kinds of visual materiality and the archaeological impulses of a range of poetically-conducted investigations of specific marginalized, suppressed, or traumatic histories. If in material poetries the poem offers itself as an artefact, as McHale suggests, what is the

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[5] Although I often find it useful to draw on discourses around the postmodern and postmodernity, postmodernism has come to mean and suggest too many varied things. Furthermore, there are as many overlaps as differences between modernist and postmodernist archaeological poetries as McHale describes them; for example, he links both Susan Howe's work and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's DICTEE with modernist tropes of depth, and yet at the same time with a postmodern re-visioning of the long poem (see his aforementioned essay, p. 241).
[6] Richard Bradford, *The Look of It: A Theory of Visual Form in English* Poetry (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p. 2.

relation of 'the space right here in front of us, *this* space here on the page' to history? What claims do these poetries make for the visual, sensory dimensions of the poetic page as artefact? In what ways might the material page conduct and reflect upon processes of historical anamnesis? How might material poetries embody or enact a politics of memory? This thesis investigates such questions by examining experimental texts by three women practitioners working between the 1970s and the present day in the US and Britain: Korean-American artist and filmmaker Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, American poet Susan Howe, and British poet Maggie O'Sullivan. Each of these writers has developed a thoroughly hybrid practice informed by their early careers in and involvements with different kinds of visual arts practice. They have all subsequently brought a sensitivity to the visual, material dimensions of writing to their archaeological negotiations of particular histories and historical questions. Cha's best-known work *DICTEE* draws on the author's work in film and performance art in its investigation of the traumatic history of modern Korea. Howe's visually experimental poetry is persistently concerned with American history and its erasures, exclusions, and repressions. O'Sullivan's intermedial material poetry is informed by the poet's Irish roots and her sense of diasporic history which shapes her engagement with issues of voicelessness and marginalisation.

I have chosen to concentrate on works by Cha, Howe and O'Sullivan for this project because of their sustained interest in bringing the materiality of the poetic page to bear on suppressed histories and the problems of their recovery. These writers have also been selected for the range of different kinds of visual materiality their poetries offer and for the variation of approaches to historical material embodied in their work. Despite this project's attention to the work of women writers, gender is not the primary focal point of my thesis. The work of Cha, Howe, and O'Sullivan, particularly in its concern with issues of silencing and erasure, has undoubtedly been informed by these writers' own sense of marginalisation as women, both in broader social terms and in terms of their positioning within their various spheres of cultural activity. Moreover, each of these practitioners addresses gendered structures of power and processes of exclusion and suppression in their work. Redell Olson has done valuable work on the relation between the use of visual materiality by writers such as Howe and Cha, as well as many others, in her 2003 doctoral thesis entitled 'Scriptovisualities: Contemporary Women's Writing and the Visual Arts'. Olsen's work has been very helpful to my own thinking, and her concerns are very close to my own in many respects. But rather than making issues of gender a primary focus, I have read gender as *one vector among many* which has informed these writers' sensitivity to a range of unacknowledged and suppressed dimensions of history and culture. One other

such factor worth bringing to attention at this stage is the status of these writers' work in wider cultural terms. This work is generally not very well known in literary studies, let alone to a wider reading public, and Cha, Howe and O'Sullivan are all very much conscious that, like the marginalised histories they are interested in bringing to attention, their work operates on the edges of hegemonic forms of literature and culture.

In their different ways, each of the practitioners focused on in this study undertakes a practice of what I would like to call 'writing material remains'; their writing insists on its own status as archaeological artefact, as material remains of particular historical events or cultural configurations. I have found the archaeological notion of material remains useful for my encounter with this work because it suggests a way of working with the 'mute' materiality of artefacts rather than with a discursive historical record. Although the poetries which form the basis of my study work with language and in some cases with historical records, their visual dimensions embody something of the muteness of archaeological artefacts. This writing makes a claim for the capacity of its visually foregrounded materiality to retain residues of aspects of history that have been lost, forgotten, or written out of hegemonic, discursively-based historical knowledges. Its very materiality embodies traces of alternative versions of the past and proposes alternative modes of engaging with history. I would like to suggest that central to these poetries' particular modes of engagement with history is an intractability of materiality which is bound up with the lack of critical vocabulary for visual form I mentioned before; the composite verbal-visual forms of material poetries embody a range of tensions such as those between reading and seeing, between semantics and sensuousness, which provoke dilemmas for reading and for interpretation. I would like to propose that in so doing, these hybrid texts not only articulate an aspiration to recover lost or unacknowledged aspects of history, they also articulate and reflect upon the difficulties and dangers as well as the possibilities of historical anamnesis.

This thesis has its basis in the poetries of Cha, Howe and O'Sullivan, and the central strands of its argument to a large extent depend upon and advocate a process of close reading and engagement with the literalness and materiality of such works. However, as I have already begun to suggest, the composite nature of these material poetries and the ways in which their hybrid forms relate to questions surrounding historical recovery raise complex theoretical questions. I will not address these in any depth in this short introduction; rather, I will discuss these matters in detail in Chapter 1. By way of example, this first chapter uses a single page from one of Susan Howe's poems to investigate the theoretical issues raised by such material poetries. It sketches out contemporary debates

around history and historical recovery which form the wider intellectual and critical contexts for such poetic engagements with history over the past thirty years; discourses associated with postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism and trauma theory, for example, have all had a significant impact on the ways in which we perceive the past and our relation to it. Chapter 1 also briefly considers the aesthetic contexts and precedents for contemporary material poetries before embarking on an in-depth investigation of one of the primary critical problems with which these poetries present us: that of the relation between verbal and visual, between language-based meaning and physical, visible materiality. Tracing a history of debate centred on the relations between visual and language arts, I identify two main lines of argument, one rooted in the notion of separate verbal and visual domains, and one committed to finding points of comparison between them. However, what can be detected in both kinds of discourse, I argue, is a fundamental tension between the semantic functioning of language and the materiality of the visual. I look at ways in which some key critics of visual poetics have negotiated this divide, and I offer my own synthesis of the most useful ideas discussed in this chapter with an eye to the question of how conflicts, dialogues, and overlaps between materiality and linguistic meaning might relate to processes of historical recovery and ideological critique. Finally, I ask what kind of historical project material poetries are involved in. Invoking Benjamin's messianic philosophy of history, I raise the question of whether there is a comparable redemptive impulse at the heart of such poetic-historical projects' attempts to rescue traces of suppressed pasts, and I consider where the problems of such an approach might lie.

The rest of the thesis focuses on the work of Cha, Howe and O'Sullivan, and devotes a chapter to each of these poet-practitioners. Moving from Cha's disjunctive collaging of text and image in her best-known work *DICTEE*, to Howe's visual unsettling of the poetic page, to O'Sullivan's multidimensional synaesthetic practice, these chapters investigate a range of verbal-visual relations embedded in these material poetries – from word/image conflicts to imagetext fusions – and the particular kinds of historical impulses they embody.[7] Chapter 2 focuses on Cha's *DICTEE*. This text has risen to prominence since the early 1990s as an experimental work which addresses issues relevant to postcolonial and feminist concerns. By considering some of Cha's film works, which are rarely consulted by

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[7] Like W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *Picture Theory: essays on verbal and visual representation* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), in this study I frequently use the forward slash as in 'verbal/visual' or 'image/text' to signify a relation of conflict, a hyphen (e.g. 'verbal-visual') to suggest relations of productive tension, dialogue or linkage, and a fusing of two or more terms as in 'imagetext' or 'verbivocovisual' to indicate a synthesis or fusion.

critics writing on *DICTEE*, I show how the artist's persistent interest in a range of materialities informs her only full-length book. In this text Cha often deploys filmic principles of montage and techniques such as cutting, dissolves, blank frames and video snow to create a work characterised by a series of disjunctive text/image relationships and degraded or deteriorating forms of materiality. I suggest that *DICTEE* presents itself as an uneven and conflicted 'testimonial object' whose material fractures and disintegrations physically bear witness to the traumatic history of modern Korea and the ruptures of diaspora. The work's material graphic surfaces also constitute modes of testifying to and reflecting upon the problems of articulating this history. *DICTEE*'s materially embodied mode of witnessing, I argue, puts epistemological relations to history under pressure, proposing instead an ethical mode of encountering the traumas and fractures of Korean diasporic history.

Chapter 3 considers Howe's poetic-historical investigations of the late 1980s and early 90s, which deploy a quite different visual sensibility to that of Cha's filmically-influenced book. Using a restricted range of characteristic page layouts, Howe's visually experimental poems challenge and rethink the visual codes of the poetic page in ways that hold language-based and visual elements in relationships of uneasy but often productive tension. Howe's visual poetics are rooted in textuality, in the visual materiality of the printed word, line and page, and her historical interests are similarly textually embedded. Orientated towards detecting the silences and erasures of early American history, her poetic-historical project directs its attention towards textual history, gleaning archaeological material from archives, libraries, and canonical works of American literature. Howe's bookish mode of investigation uses verbal-visual tensions, dialogues and impasses to dramatise and embody the difficulties of reclaiming pasts barely – but, her work insists, palpably – detectable in historical and literary records. I argue that the verbal-visual interplays of her visually experimental poems propose ways of reading history 'otherwise' for these excised and suppressed presences, but they also constitute reflexive embodiments of some of the problems, prohibitions and dangers involved in the recovery of lost pasts.

In Chapter 4, I examine O'Sullivan's multidimensional poetic practice, which especially in more recent works makes use of collage, colour, and gestural marks. This poetry in many ways aims for a higher degree of synthesis of verbal and visual, but also oral and textural elements than the work of either Cha or Howe. O'Sullivan has a less clearly-defined historical 'project' than Cha and Howe, but her poetry's pursuit of voiceless and marginalised presences is informed by, although not by any means confined to, the

diasporic history and cultural legacies of her Irish heritage. By looking at poems written between the mid 1980s and the early 2000s, I trace her materially-embedded engagement with this history in her poem *that bread should be*, its echoes in another of her works *A Natural History in 3 incomplete Parts*, and her pursuit of voicelessness and inarticulacy in two of her highly visual later poems, *red shifts* and *murmur*. I argue that O'Sullivan's works constitute a series of performances on the page which propose a sense of history as embodied, and passed down corporeally. Moreover, by tapping into the sensuous capacities of the performed word, her poems aspire to redeem from language something of those presences which have been lost or made inarticulate.

By engaging with the work of Cha, Howe, and O'Sullivan, this thesis aspires to make a contribution to critical vocabularies of visual poetics which are still in the early stages of their formation. In its scrutiny of the politics and ethics of these poets' hybrid forms, I hope that it also has something to offer to debates around aesthetics and historical anamnesis at a time when an interest in suppressed, lost, and forgotten histories continues to expand in the humanities.

Chapter 1

Secret Histories and Dividing Lines

Marking a 'secret history'

mark   mar   ha   forest   1   a   boundary   manic   a   land   a
tract   indicate   position   2   record   bunting   interval
free   also   event   starting   the   slightly   position   of
O   about   both   or   don't   something   INDICATION   Americ

made   or   also   symbol   sachem   maimed   as   on   her   for
ar   in   teacher   duct   excellent   figure   MARK   lead   be
knife   knows   his   hogs   dogs   a   boundary   model   nucle
hearted   land   land   land   district   boundary   times   un

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Figure 1. Susan Howe, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (New York: Telephone Books, 1978), p. 1

Susan Howe's 1978 book-length poem *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, from which the page depicted above is taken, draws on material from American history with a particular

focus on colonial processes of mapping and establishing boundaries.[1] The poem's title is an appropriation and amalgamation of the titles of two key source texts: William Byrd's *The History of the Dividing Line*, an account of a surveying expedition undertaken in 1728 to determine the disputed border between Virginia and North Carolina, and Byrd's private satirical reflections on this venture, *The Secret History of the Line*, which the author deleted from the final version of the official *History*.[2] Discovered fragment by fragment between 1815 and the 1940s, *Secret History of the Line* documented the internal divisions of the surveying team.[3] Howe's interest in this text is part of a broader investigation of American colonial history, a persistent thread that runs through her oeuvre. She is also frequently drawn to source texts which, like Byrd's, make visible various conflicts and tensions within the colonial project. Her redeployment in *Secret History* of a text that is itself materially unstable – in that it has an edited-out and fragmented 'secret' side – typifies her wider poetic-historical activities; Howe seeks in the erasures and inconsistencies of historical and literary texts traces of those presences which have been silenced, marginalised, and expunged in the making of modern America.

The opening page poem of *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (hereafter referred to as *Secret History*)(figure 1) does not appear, at first glance, to be especially concerned with the historical questions towards which this work's title gestures. The poem consists of a collection of disjointed words arranged in two four-line sections with justified left and right margins to form what might be described as a word grid. As Rachel Tzvia Back indicates, this textual material has in fact been derived from a dictionary definition for the word 'mark'. Back tracks down the precise source for the words on this page: the margins of the two-column entry for 'mark' in Webster's Dictionary (see figure 2).[4] Words appropriated from these areas of the text are rearranged in Howe's poem to form two grid-like 'stanzas'. The disjointed array of words which make up this poem, then, are not quite as random an assortment as they might seem, and nor is the choice of the term 'mark' arbitrary, as a dedication unusually embedded into the poem two pages later indicates: '*for Mark my father, and Mark my son*'.[5] But the term 'mark' also has significance far beyond the personal because, along with recurring terms such as 'boundary', 'land' and 'position', 'mark'

[1] Susan Howe, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (New York: Telephone Books, 1978). Also reprinted in *Frame Structures: Early Poems, 1974–1979* (New York: New Directions, 1996).

[2] Both these texts can be found in William Byrd, *The Prose Works of William Byrd*, ed. by Louis B. Wright (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966).

[3] Maud H. Woodfin, 'The Missing Pages of William Byrd's "Secret History of the Line"', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 2.1 (1945), 63–40, pp. 63–4.

[4] Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. 21.

[5] Howe, *Secret History* (New York: Telephone Books, 1978), p. 3.

indicates a process of inscribing boundaries and drawing up borders, thus chiming with the 'dividing line' of the poem's title. Terms taken from the dictionary definition for the word 'mark', then, are offered here as textual artefacts that are somehow bound up with the 'secret history of the dividing line' which the poem claims to investigate.

Figure 2. Rachel Tzvia Back's tracing of Howe's source text in Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. 22

Howe's poem presents its textual material as a form of documentation of colonial expansion and the carving up of conquered or appropriated land embedded in the language of the dictionary entry: its words are proffered as indexical historical or archaeological material. C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory defines an indexical sign as one that is 'physically connected' with its referent. [6] A pointing finger is an index, as is a thunderbolt

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[6] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), II (1932), p. 168.

which 'indicates that something considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was'.[7] A photograph is also indexical, states Peirce, because it is a chemical imprint of a real situation, 'physically forced to correspond point by point to nature' by its mode of production.[8] A shout in the street or demonstrative pronouns such as 'this' or 'that' are indexical because they work to indicate rather than denote something. The material appropriated from the dictionary's definition for 'mark' functions in Howe's poem in much the same way; these words are indexical 'marks' which gesture towards historical processes to which they are materially, if perhaps rather indirectly, connected. Plucked from American culture's most authoritative guide to language and meaning, this material contains traces of 'a secret history', a history which has hitherto been suppressed or consigned to the margins of history, just as the found words of the poem previously dwelt upon the physical margins of the dictionary text. Indeed, the word 'sachem' (a Native American term for 'chief'), which has rather aptly found its way into the margins of the source text for the poem, acts as a textual trace and lingering presence of histories, such as those of the aboriginal peoples which have been erased, silenced, or made peripheral in the colonial project of claiming, surveying, and partitioning the 'land' of 'Americ'. Howe's physical rearrangement of the dictionary material places 'sachem' next to 'symbol', thereby assigning to this word a capacity to stand in for, or to open out onto, other kinds of 'secret' histories, to work symbolically as well as indexically. The composition also makes the 'sachem' into a 'sachem maimed', indicating a violence done to indigenous cultures of the colonized 'land', whilst the succeeding words 'as on her' forms a link or makes a parallel with a marginalised feminine 'her'.

The poem's physical rearrangement of its appropriated words not only strikes up suggestive verbal relationships that point to a 'secret history', it also emphasises the visual materiality of the page. This poem is not strikingly 'visual' in that it contains no images, does not participate in any kind of particularly noticeable typographic experimentation, and adheres to a fairly normative page layout in terms of the orientation and distribution of text. Yet its careful visual arrangement and manipulation of textual material is noticeable enough to be significant to the poem's meanings and effects. The use of capitalisation, for example, emphasises the key words 'INDICATION' and 'MARK', which reflexively point to or even proclaim the indexical properties of the printed words here via a combination of their semantic resonances and their own visually emphasised indexicality. The grid-like layout of the poem, meanwhile, visually references the practice of mapping and dividing land up

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[7] Peirce, p. 161.
[8] Peirce, p. 159.

according to a grid of co-ordinates or boundary markers, although the widely varying word lengths of Howe's word squares make for a somewhat skewed arrangement that does not conform to the straight lines of a conventional grid. Notably, there are a number of truncated words along the right-hand margins of the justified text, 'Americ', 'nucle', and 'un', which might be read as physical testaments to the tyranny of such straight lines, 'dividing lines' whose unswerving rigid trajectories serve not to neutrally plot and organise, but to violently sever and amputate. Furthermore, the poem's two-part structure makes it an embodiment of a 'tract' (in both the textual and the spatial, geographical senses) divided in two by a 'boundary' provided by the white space between the first and second sections; it thus becomes a terrain subjected to the binary logic of dividing one thing from the other. This two-part layout also visually echoes a column layout (and in particular the two-column layout of its source text, Webster's dictionary), except that the poem turns it on its side. This manipulation of a convention of textual layout suggests that in order to sift *historical material for its 'secrets', the poet must, quite literally and in a very physical sense,* reinvent ways of writing it. Accordingly, the reader of the poem must rethink the processes of reading a text; for example the white space between the textual masses also works as a mark of absence, an index of silence or of that which is silenced in the processes of constructing conceptual and literal boundaries or appropriating and apportioning the repeatedly referenced 'land land land' of the poem. The slightly larger than usual white spaces between individual words similarly perforate the poem with visual gaps and verbal silences that gesture towards unspoken, unwritten 'secret' aspects of the past.

Howe's poem offers itself, then, as a textual archaeological site, an artefact or carefully-arranged collection of artefacts whose status as both linguistic signifiers and visual, material objects is closely connected to the work's enquiry into a specific history and particular historical processes. But how exactly might such a poem's composite verbal-visual form constitute a mode of historical enquiry? In what ways might aesthetic hybridity engage political, cultural, and historical issues? W. J. T. Mitchell, a literary critic and cultural theorist who works at the intersection of literary and visual studies, proposes that there are intimate linkages between formal word-image relations and social and ideological questions. 'The image/text', he declares, 'is neither a method nor a guarantee of historical discovery; it is more like an aperture or cleavage in representation, a place where history might slip through the cracks'.[9] Whilst Mitchell's words hardly provide an answer to my question, his statement raises a number of further questions which this chapter aims to

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[9] W. J. T Mitchell, *Picture Theory: essays on verbal and visual representation* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 104.

address, if not unequivocally answer or resolve. Why is historical 'discovery' such a fraught process, figured here as recoverable only insofar as it might inadvertently 'slip through the cracks' of representation? What exactly is the nature of the 'cleavage' that is so central to Mitchell's cautious aspirations for the efficacy of the 'image/text's capacity to yield hitherto 'undiscovered' glimpses of history? How is the 'cleavage' of the 'image/text' bound up with the notion of 'apertures' in 'representation' more generally? And in what ways might it be tied to processes of historical recovery? Furthermore, why might we take seriously a fractured 'image/text' such as Howe's as a mode of historical investigation?

Problems of historical anamnesis

Why would a writer interested in the silenced aspects of the colonial history of America want to approach history in the highly oblique way adopted by Howe's 'image-text'? Why not attempt to represent this history more clearly or by more straightforwardly discursive or even lyrical means? The indirectness of the poem's mode of historical reference points to a troubled relation with the past and raises questions about the relationship of our contemporary moment both to the specific 'secret history' pursued here and to the past more generally. How do we know the past? Can any aspect of the past be represented straightforwardly? If not, why not? What are the particular problems of recovering marginalised or suppressed histories? What kinds of ethical obligations do we have to these histories? Such questions have of course been widely debated over the past thirty or forty years not only in literary studies but across a number of disciplines in and related to the humanities. Whilst it is not my intention here to rehearse or engage with these debates at length, a brief account seems necessary in order to sketch out a broader sense of the sorts of issues and tensions with which a poetic historical encounter like Howe's is embroiled, and to indicate the intellectual contexts for such an attempt to recover suppressed aspects of the past.

One such context for thinking about the problematic nature of contemporary relationships with the past is the heterogeneity of discourses circulating around the notion of the postmodern and postmodernity, which have in various ways contested the notion of history as unitary and teleological and have brought to attention the highly mediated ways by which we know the past. In a statement which has by now become a cliché of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard in 1979 announced the demise of 'grand narratives' in favour of a plurality of localised 'language games'. Although this formulation, as Lyotard admits, is 'Simplifying in the extreme', it nevertheless registers and exemplifies an attitude of scepticism towards the notion of history as progress as it was declared by modernity's

'metanarratives', such as those of Enlightenment rationality, Marxism, or technological development, especially in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust, the Soviet Gulags, Nagasaki and Hiroshima.[10] The postmodern abandonment of totalising modes of knowledge as ways of knowing the past typified by Lyotard's thinking also offers a critique of history conceptualised as any kind of singular, unified, or coherent narrative, proposing instead a plurality of localised historical narratives and knowledges.

In a contiguous and related vein, Michel Foucault's Nietzschean genealogical approach to historical discourses developed in his work of the late 1960s and 70s argues for a dismantling of traditional history's imposition of 'an ideal continuity' on a 'profusion of entangled events', seeking instead to make visible the inconsistencies, irregularities, errors, and discontinuities of history.[11] Foucault emphasises history's plurality, its 'profusion', proposing a historical methodology engaged in the pursuit of 'numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of colour are readily seen by an historical eye'.[12] Furthermore, his work investigates the ways in which historical knowledge is always entangled with power, and recurrently asks the question of how historical 'truths' are produced by and in the service of existing power relations. These central nodes of Foucauldian thought have informed and intersected with numerous versions of a postmodernism interested in attending to a heterogeneity of 'local' knowledges, raising questions about who has and who has not been in a position to produce historical narratives, and treating history not as objective truth but as highly mediated representation.

Whilst postmodernism's pluralistic sense of history and critique of power relations seems to offer possibilities for writing a marginalised 'secret history' such as that attempted in Howe's poem, postmodern cultural criticism also indicates some of the problems of doing so. Just as the concept of postmodernism itself is hardly unitary, coherent or uncontested, nor are the hugely varied discourses associated with the postmodern in complete agreement about its implications for our contemporary relationship to the past. Frederic Jameson, for example, sounds a particularly pessimistic note when he expresses his dismay at what he sees as a loss of historical consciousness in a postmodernity dominated by the logic of the simulacra: 'the past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.'[13] For Jameson, to have history reduced to 'nothing but texts' is to have it 'effaced altogether',

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[10] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 10, xxiv.
[11] Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977) pp. 139 – 163, pp. 154, 5.
[12] Foucault, 'Nietzsche', p. 145.
[13] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 18.

given the gap between signifier and signified; texts cannot connect us with a historical real. Moreover, for him, the 'texts' we are left with are always already coded by the dominant logic of consumer capitalism, so the ways in which we know the past are invariably inauthentic, commodified, and leave no outside point from which to critique dominant culture. Another theorist of the postmodern, Linda Hutcheon, thinks that Jameson underestimates the capacity of texts to reflect meaningfully on history, and especially on their own relation to the past. 'We cannot know the past except through its texts', she concedes, but for her, '[p]ostmodernism returns to confront the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present... The past really did exist. The question is: *how* can we know that past today – and *what* can we know of it?'[14] The difficulty for a historical investigation of marginalised or silenced histories such as that undertaken by Howe's poem is that if such aspects of history have not been documented, or have been documented only by and in the language of those in power, *how* we can know those pasts and *what* we can know of them is severely limited.

This has been a key problem for scholars and writers attempting to recover the perspectives of historically marginalised groups such as women, colonial subjects, and non-heterosexuals. Feminist scholars of the 1970s and early 80s such as Joan Kelly, Linda Gordon and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in historical studies and Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in literary studies, sought to recover women's previously unacknowledged histories and writing by resurrecting hitherto forgotten or ignored historical documents and creative works and by reading between the lines of official histories and canonical literatures. Whilst such projects have produced a proliferation of valuable revisionary histories, they have also come under attack for their failure to account for differences of race, class, and sexuality among women and the impact of these different social positionings on the telling of their histories, thereby participating in elisions and marginalisations of their own. These recovery projects were also taking place concurrently and in dialogue with emerging psychoanalytical theories of sexual difference which pointed to the ways in which the feminine has been suppressed in language and even in thought itself. Although they drew on these theories, Anglo-American feminist scholars of the 70s and early 80s were also frequently suspicious of their poststructuralist implications which put the possibility of writing any kind of women's history or of gaining access to the truth of the past under question. The suggestion that women are always already Othered and silenced in the symbolic and social orders within which both the writing and the rewriting of

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[14] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 16, 92.

history occur means that women's histories and the histories of other marginalised groups could not be unproblematically recuperated. At the same time, the notion of a systematic symbolic Othering of the feminine in language and culture implies that a rewriting of history using traditional methodologies and discursive forms risks repeating symbolic structures that consign women to the place of the suppressed 'Other'. As Linda Anderson puts it, 'The fear that post-structuralist theory could be disabling for women, making history disappear even before we have had a chance to write ourselves into it, needs to be set against another danger: the constant danger that by using categories and genres which are implicated in patriarchal ideology we are simply re-writing our own oppression.'[15] It is precisely this problem that Howe's poem faces: how does one write suppressed aspects of the past into history without repeating the very structures by which they have historically been silenced, therefore rewriting these histories' suppression?

Such difficulties are relevant not only for feminist critics, but also for those interested in other kinds of oppression and power relations such as those bound up with class and colonialism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak forcefully and notoriously brought such issues to the fore in her 1985 essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' The term 'subaltern' indicates a heterogeneous array of disempowered subject positions silenced by acts of 'epistemic violence' which constitute marginalised and disenfranchised groups as 'Other' within networks of power configured around class, colonialism, and patriarchy. Because the position of subalternity is that of the disempowered and therefore silenced subject, Spivak's own response to the question posed by her essay amounts to a declaration that 'the subaltern has no history and cannot speak'.[16] The subaltern 'has no history' because its 'voice' has not been articulated in historical accounts, and this silence of the subaltern and its (absent) history persists into the present and its power relations: the subaltern has no political 'voice' either in the past or the present. In her discussion of widow burning or *sati* during the British colonial period in India, for example, Spivak points to how the *satis* were multiply silenced by a collusion between colonial documentation, white women's discourses, and the Indian nativist argument, which posit between them two mutually legitimating statements, 'White men are saving brown women from brown men' and 'The women wanted to die'. In these discourses, Spivak claims, '[o]ne never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness... one cannot put together a "voice"'.[17] The

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[15] Linda Anderson, 'The Re-Imagining of History in Contemporary Women's Fiction', in *Plotting Change*, ed. by Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), pp. 129 – 141, p. 134.

[16] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 66–111, pp. 76, 83.

[17] Spivak, 'Subaltern', p. 93.

subaltern woman's articulation is irrecoverable from these discourses which are rooted in the power structures that have consigned the subaltern to the position of silent 'Other' in the first place.

Whilst Spivak's polemic and seemingly debilitating claim that 'the subaltern cannot speak' has been much contested and even revised somewhat by Spivak herself in later years, the difficulties that she underlines have profound implications for historical investigations like Howe's which seek to recover some silenced or marginalised aspect of history. At the heart of Spivak's essay is an impulse to make visible the complicated political implications of processes of representation. She is anxious to make a distinction between the two different senses of representation: 'representation as "speaking for," as in politics, and representation as "re-presentation," as in art or philosophy.'[18] Spivak is wary of discourses that too easily collapse the two senses of representation; her pointed insistence on this distinction highlights the fact that '"re-presentation," as in art or philosophy' does not automatically equal political representation. At the same time, the distinction points to the ways in which processes of representing marginalised groups (in the sense of speaking politically for) can become 're-presentations' which produce knowledges of still-silent 'others' and reproduce the power relations of existing discourses. She insists that the two senses of representation should not be too easily conflated; rather the complex relations between them need to be reflected upon and interrogated. Marginalised or suppressed histories cannot be heard to 'speak' because of the very fact of their historically suppressed and silenced status, but nor can subaltern presences be unproblematically spoken for. As Amy Hinterberger puts it, Spivak indicates that 'ethical strategies of representing "others" need to be based on working responsibly within this framework of impossibility, not trying to sidestep it.'[19]

So how might projects to recover marginalised voices and histories operate ethically within such a 'framework of impossibility'? Spivak's discussion on subaltern 'voice' is useful not only for the ways in which it points out the difficulty, the unfeasibility even, of recovering suppressed histories, but also for the ways in which she indicates possibilities for their detection. In the course of her essay, she quotes Pierre Macherey on how one might identify a literary work's ideological workings, and this quotation is worth reproducing in full here:

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[18] Spivak, 'Subaltern', p. 70.
[19] Amy Hinterberger, 'Feminism and the Politics of Representation: Towards a Critical and Ethical Encounter with "Others"', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8. 2 (2007), 74–83, p. 77.

> What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notion "what it refuses to say", although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence.[20]

Going somewhat 'against the grain' of Macherey's argument Spivak proposes that something like the process of 'measuring silences' and scrutinising 'what [the social text of imperialism] refuses to say', might constitute a methodology for a critique of imperialism. It might also, she obliquely suggests, provide an opening in which subaltern presences could be discerned: 'When we come to the ... question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important.'[21] The subaltern might be 'heard,' Spivak implies, but only in a kind of speaking silence, as an almost spectral presence that manifests itself in what the text cannot say. The subaltern articulation can be looked for in the gaps and silences of history where it makes itself apparent in indirect ways, but it must not be subsumed to modes of articulation that threaten to symbolically perpetuate its oppression (hence Spivak's own 'difficult style').[22] Spivak's thought highlights some of the ethical questions involved in the recovery of suppressed histories and advocates a process of looking for submerged presences in the absences, ruptures, and unspoken moments of resistance in official histories, and allowing them to articulate themselves indirectly rather than subsuming them into already-constituted discursive modes of knowledge and representation. This notion resonates powerfully with the indirect modes of reference adopted by Howe's poem, which act as a recognition of the inability of suppressed aspects of history to 'speak' in a straightforward and unproblematic way. Howe's visually fractured and linguistically disjointed text can be read as a concrete manifestation of a practice of 'measuring silences' such as that intimated by Spivak.

The suggestion carried in Spivak's work that suppressed aspects of the past might be heard to 'speak', even if only in a kind of speaking silence in the gaps and fractures of historical and literary texts has also been played out – albeit in very different ways and with different historical resonances – in the adoption of a model of trauma in the 1990s by many literary, historical, and critical projects endeavouring to engage with lost histories. This upsurge of interest in trauma occurred against a broader cultural backdrop in which the relatively newly recognised Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was being publicly

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[20] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (Routledge: London, 1978), p. 87, quoted in Spivak, 'Subaltern', pp. 81-2.
[21] Spivak, 'Subaltern', p. 82
[22] See Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *Boundary 2*, 20.2 (Summer 1993), 24–50, p. 33.

debated in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. At the same time, an explosion of accusations of child sexual abuse and ritual abuse, many based upon the outcomes of 'recovered memory therapy', prompted numerous and sometimes highly sensationalised court cases, whilst the counter-claims of diagnoses of 'false memory syndrome' sparked a series of debates dubbed the 'memory wars'.[23] Alongside the interest in repressed and recovered memory in relation to PTSD and sexual abuse, issues around trauma and memory were being brought to the fore at this time in connection with Holocaust memorialisation, Holocaust denial and the trials of war criminals. As Roger Luckhurst, Robert Hampson and others have indicated in a special issue of New Formations on 'Remembering the 1990s', questions about the nature of memory and the processes of recall were therefore very much in the air in the 90s.[24] These issues were taken up in various ways in historical and literary studies, where trauma theory offered ways of thinking about the traumatic effects of historical and epistemic violence. A model of repressed memory adapted from Freud formed the basis of many such studies. The basic premise of this model of trauma is that events too traumatic to be assimilated into conscious memory are repressed only to return belatedly, often in the form of uncontrollable eruptions or in the damaging manifestations of a 'compulsion to repeat'. Dominick LaCapra puts it this way:

> the memory lapses of trauma are conjoined with the tendency compulsively to repeat, relive, be possessed by, or act out traumatic scenes of the past, whether in a more or less controlled artistic procedures or in uncontrolled existential experiences of hallucination, flashback, dream, and retraumatizing breakdown triggered by incidents that more or less obliquely recall the past. In this sense, what is denied or repressed in a lapse of memory does not disappear; it returns in a transformed, at times disfigured and disguised manner.[25]

For cultural commentators like LaCapra, this model has provided useful ways of approaching unresolved historical traumas such as the Holocaust whose belated effects are still being felt culturally today. For him, the model of repressed memory suggests ways in which such histories might be 'worked through' rather than compulsively and repetitively 'acted out', although he is careful to warn against 'an indiscriminate conflation of all history with trauma.'[26] For Cathy Caruth, meanwhile, the workings of trauma raise questions about historical truth, posing the question of 'how we in this era have access to our own historical

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[23] See Roger Luckhurst, 'Traumaculture', New Formations, 50 (2003), 28-47.
[24] See Luckhurst's aforementioned essay and Robert Hampson, '"Memory False Memory: Days of '49 by Alan Halsey and Gavin Salerie', New Formations, 50 (2003), 48–56. See also other articles in the special issue New Formations 50 (2003) on 'Remembering the 1990s'.
[25] Dominick LaCapra, History and Memory After Auschwitz (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 10.
[26] LaCapra, p. 46.

experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access.'[27] For her, the unassimilability of traumatic events to comprehension problematises access to certain histories, and to the 'truth' of those histories. Ulrich Baer expands helpfully on Caruth's remarks, emphasising their implications for processes of representation and reference. 'Trauma imposes itself outside the grasp of our cognition', he says, and therefore 'presents us with a fundamental enigma, a crisis of representational models that conceive of reference in terms of a direct, unambiguous link between event and comprehension.'[28] In the light of these critical negotiations of trauma, Howe's page poem can be seen as an index of historical trauma, a work whose gaps, silences, truncated words and visual devices acknowledge both the impossibility and necessity of bringing unassimilable aspects of the past into cognition and representation.

Collectively, the intersecting discourses around postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcoloniality and trauma I have discussed here propose a sense of history that is necessarily multiple and non-teleological, and whose processes of recovery are vexed by complex issues of knowledge, power, truth, temporality, ethics, cognition, representation and reference. The oblique historical references and visually marked graphic surface of Howe's poem constitute one mode of responding to both the necessity and the difficulty of engaging with suppressed or unacknowledged aspects of the past. For a writer like Howe, more traditional discursive modes of representation such as conventional testimony, realist narrative, or lyric poetry are inadequate to the task of engaging with such histories. This is because their discursive or lyric modes risk either replicating the very structures and relations of power by which the marginal has been Othered in the first place, or unproblematically recovering suppressed voices or events into a narrative or lyrical form that might act something like a salve for a traumatic history by offering a sense of coherence and resolution that belies the apparently irredeemable nature of such a past. A poem like Howe's is engaged in an activity of searching for modes of representation that recognise loss, absence, violence, trauma, and inarticulacy even as it attempts to make visible some hitherto 'secret' aspect of history. This poem exemplifies what poet and critic Kathleen Fraser calls an 'innovative necessity', responding to a perceived 'necessity' to articulate the inarticulable via an experimental approach to writing. In an essay on women writers' practices, Fraser declares that

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[27] Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Caruth, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 3 – 12, p. 6.
[28] Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA & London, England: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 10.

> Longing craves articulation and … has sought out visual apparatus as scaffolding on which to construct formerly inarticulate states of being. Expanding onto the FULL PAGE – responding to its spatial invitation to play with typographic relations of words and alphabets, as well as with their denotative meanings, has delivered visual-minded poets from the closed, airless containers of the well-behaved poem into a writing practice that foregrounds the investigation and pursuit of the unnamed.[29]

Fraser's rather liberatory rhetoric of 'play' and 'deliverance' here suggests that a visually-attuned writing practice enables transcendence of the strictures of poetic traditions and even of language itself, and thus tends to smooth over the difficulties involved in any kind of 'pursuit of the unnamed'. Yet her words do point to the ways in which, for a writer like Howe, foregrounding the visual materiality of the page is a way to raise questions about textuality, culture, and history, about regulation and control, about the containment of physical and imaginative territories, about the silencing and erasure of histories of women, Native Americans, the disempowered and dispossessed.

The poetic page as visual 'field'

A poetic deployment of the 'visual apparatus' of the printed page is of course not the only, nor even one of the most obvious, modes of responding to a perceived 'innovative necessity', as the wide range of 'innovative', but not necessarily visually experimental, historically-orientated poetic experimentation over the last century demonstrates: consider H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, or Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, or Nathaniel Mackey's ongoing *Songs of the Andoumboulou*, for example. Why, then, might readers – and indeed critics such as Fraser – take seriously the foregrounding of visual materiality in a poem like Howe's word grid both in aesthetic terms and as a claim to constitute a mode of historical enquiry? An immediate answer is of course that Howe's use of the visual qualities of the page in this poem is not without its precedents. To begin with, the Concrete poetry of the late 1950s and 60s, with its attention to the physical properties of the poem – the size, shape, and style of its letters, their positioning in space and in relation to one another, for example – provides a number of prime examples. One the best known of all concrete poems, Eugen Gomringer's *silencio* (figure 3) resonates especially powerfully with the rectangular layout of the opening poem of Howe's *Secret History*. So too does Gomringer's concrete meditation on silence; *silencio* suggestively demonstrates how silences might be bodied forth via the visual, material dimensions of the page and raises questions about presence and absence pertinent to Howe's interest in the erasures and marginalisations of

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[29] Kathleen Fraser, 'Translating the Unspeakable: Visual poetics, as projected through Olson's "field" into current female writing practice', *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 2000), pp. 174–200, p. 175.

colonial history. Gomringer's poem gives silence a visual presence on the page, by means of the repeated word *silencio*, which gives to silence a 'graphic voice' made of ink on paper, whilst the white space at the poem's centre physically demonstrates the visual equivalent of silence on the printed page. *Silencio* exemplifies Gomringer's notion of composing and reading by 'constellation' rather than line: 'In the constellation something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other.'[30] Gomringer confers upon the constellation the status of *being* in the world rather than just that of representing, and indeed, his poem does give silence a tangible presence, making of it 'a reality in itself' via its concrete visual forms. The poem becomes a physical object with potential for the presencing of that which is absent, intangible or inarticulate.

silencio   silencio   silencio
silencio   silencio   silencio
silencio   silencio
silencio   silencio   silencio
silencio   silencio   silencio

Figure 3. Eugen Gomringer, *silencio*. Image acquired from *UBUWEB*,
<http://www.ubu.com/historical/gomringer/gomringer01.html> [accessed 12th January 2008]

Gomringer's visual poetics lack the historical emphasis that Howe brings to her more complex version of the word square format. But the spatial 'field' that his poem proposes by way of visual example points to another important precedent for a poem like Howe's and especially for its claim to constitute a meaningful mode of historical enquiry: Charles Olson's 'open field' poetics. Although Olson's influential notion of 'composition by field' was not necessarily conceived of in terms of a visual poetics, it is intimately entwined with his sense of American geographic space and the historical processes of conquest, mapping, and 'settling' embedded in the very notion of American space. As Michael Davidson points out, critics have 'related Olson's concept of field to Action Painting or field theory in mathematics, but given his interest in anthropology and archaeology during this

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[30] Eugen Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation', (1954), from *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Indiana University Press, 1968), *UBUWEB* < http://www.ubu.com/papers/gomringer01.html> [accessed 18th January, 2008], (para. 5).

period one would also add fieldwork as a model for poetic composition.'[31] Particularly in *The Maximus Poems*, Olson brings the space of the page into relation with the space of a specific geographic locale, Gloucester, Massachusetts, and its cultural history. In the example

Letter, May 2, 1959

125 paces Grove Street
fr E end of Oak Grove cemetery
to major turn NW of
road

this line goes finally straight
fr Wallis property direct
to White (as of 1707/8)

(2) 125 of curve
(3) 200 paces to Centennial

(4)
47   90   90
                    st
       230 paces

c 300 paces
   Whittemore to the marsh

Kent's property/ Pearce

w to marsh
(hill falls off

70
paces   o
hill falls   o
S to   o
                 o   140
marsh   o
                 o   old stonewall   did Eveleth go to present Marsh St?
       Meeting House   —between Bruen & Eveleth?
Babson   Green   (Perkins)
house   Millet
   Ellery   fence marking

What did Bruen want? He had already shifted from Piscataqua
to Plymouth, then to Gloucester and now to New London and
would go from New London to found Newark, N.J.

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[I.145]

Figure 4. Charles Olson, 'Letter, May 2, 1959', *The Maximus Poems*, ed. by George Butterick (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983), p. 150

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[31] Michael Davidson, 'Hunting Among Stones: Poetry, Pedagogy, and the Pacific Rim', *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 196–219, p. 203.

depicted in figure 4, the poem plots a journey both by means of a relatively conventional-looking poetic line and via a number of unconventionally-printed lines which make use of the page as a visual space. Whilst Olson's off-kilter lines in this particular poem do not look quite the same as Howe's rectangular grid formation, they nevertheless draw attention to the page as space, as a visual 'field'. By presenting itself as a sort of map for a geographical and historical terrain, Olson's page resonates with Howe's verbal and visual references to the mapping and marking out of 'land'. Here also is a precedent for Howe's embedding of indexical historical material; Olson's poem incorporates references to early 17th Century settlers Bruen and Eveleth and frames an enquiry into their movements and the motivations for their geographic relocations. Olson's poetic deployment of the visual page presents itself as a mode of archival, cartographic and geographic investigation, as archaeological activity that connects the space of the page to a specific sense of place and its cultural history. Thus it offers a model for the sorts of historical enquiry Howe wants to make in her *Secret History* via a 'mining' of dictionary material for its historical traces and its links with an American geographical terrain.

Whilst Olson's poetry undeniably constitutes an important precedent and influence for a work like Howe's, her poem is also a gendered rethinking of his 'open field' poetics. Although highly influential for a poet like Howe, Olson's poetry and poetics are imbued with a misogyny that is problematic for this woman writer, and for her historical project whose sensitivity to the silenced voices of history is highly informed by gender issues (and of course it is often precisely silenced women's voices she seeks to make palpable). For Olson the poet is always a 'he', as his 'open field' manifesto articulated in his 'Projective Verse' essay makes clear.[32] This means that having proposed the notion of the poem as 'open field', Howe indicates, Olson 'fences it with a collective Oedipalism. In this economy of exchange – of FORCE – man's business; are we a Dialogue?'[33] The restriction of the 'open field' to 'man's business' that assumes a masculinised 'Oedipalism' and shuts out women is an act that 'fences it' in, and that not only impoverishes poetry but also repeats in a different guise the imperialist and colonial paradigms of mapping, claiming, and managing by creating divisions and boundaries which Howe's opening poem of *Secret History* brings to attention and which Olson's poetry also wanted to critique. Howe puts it this way: 'The tradition of dead fathers weighs heavily on writing that passes itself off as a liberated field. So much of it comes down to an idea of power, that while inflicting blows on literary and

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[32] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' in *Collected Prose: Charles Olson*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 239–249, p. 240, for example.
[33] Susan Howe, 'Since a Dialogue We Are', *Acts*, 10 (1989), 166–173, p. 169.

political authority only circles back to its own despotic centrality.'[34] For Howe, the Oedipal violence of Olson's writing begets violence. Furthermore, some of this aggression is often directed at feminine figures: Olson's poetry itself is littered with blatantly misogynistic references, with sexualised and derogatory terms like 'Kunt/cunt', 'whore' and 'she-bear', and violent images such as 'the one so far back she craves to be scalped.'[35]

Says Howe, 'I maintain that the complexity of Charles Olson's writing, is, for a woman, an indeterminate, sometimes graphically violent force.'[36] Interestingly, she describes the violence of Olson's writing as functioning 'graphically', as if its 'despotic' activities are embedded into the visible surface of the poetic page. Whilst Olson's poetry and poetics constitute an important precedent for a poem like Howe's which enable the visually attuned dimensions of this poetry to be read in relation to already-existent traditions and forerunners, Howe's own words indicate ways in which the 'open field' is also a model whose gender politics and attendant implications for other kinds of 'Others' require rethinking. Indeed, the graphically embodied reference in Howe's poem both to processes of 'fencing off' and to the violence this engenders can be read as a critique and a reworking of Olson's gender-restricted 'open field'. To use the words of Rachel Blau Du Plessis, '[t]he page is not neutral. Not blank, and not neutral. It is a territory'.[37] The page is a 'territory' always already implicated in power relationships and struggles and always already 'claimed' and contested whether by normative printing conventions or by experimental poetics like Olson's whose modes of intervention in the space of the page are no less implicated in relations of power and dominance than those conventions they seek to displace. Howe's word grid, then, inscribes itself in a territory that has already been explored and claimed by precursors and it does so in a mode that physically bears their traces, building upon them even as it contests those previous incursions into the visual field of the page.

My discussions revolving around the issues raised by Howe's poem have begun to sketch out the cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic contexts for such an intervention into the disputed territory of the page, suggesting some ways in which this archaeological poem constitutes a politics of representation. However, by foregrounding the visual dimensions of the page, this work points to and engages with an even more extensive set of formally-

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[34] Howe, 'Since a Dialogue', p. 170

[35] See Olson, The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, ed. by George Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 639, 129 and The Maximus Poems, ed. by George Butterick (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 39, 229 for some examples.

[36] Howe, 'Since a Dialogue', p. 168.

[37] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, '"Whowe": On Susan Howe', in The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 123 – 139, p. 131.

embedded problems and tensions which have to do with the relationship between visual materiality and the abstract linguistic functioning of the written word. In general, as I indicated in my introduction, the relationships between such works' visual aspects and their verbal structures are not very well understood. As Craig Dworkin cogently points out, the visual dimensions of poetry like Howe's have tended to be sidelined by critics, even though they are a highly noticeable feature of this work, because of the problems involved in 'talking about visual prosody' and the lack of a 'sophisticated critical tradition and ready vocabulary'.[38] The reasons for this lack of critical tradition and 'ready vocabulary' are complex and manifold, but can be usefully related to a highly engrained traditional separation between literature and the visual arts which is in turn linked to a wider set of distinctions between temporal and spatial forms, linguistic meaning and visual materiality, cognition and sensory experience. Debates around the question of the relations between verbal and visual art forms have traditionally centred on relations between poetry and painting, and have generally aligned themselves with one of two general lines of argument. The first of these operates via a discourse of separation or opposition between verbal and visual forms and the modes of their reception. The second approach, which has developed in dialogue with this first argument, is that of the 'sister arts' or comparative tradition which sees instead a parallel between the arts, or, in its later incarnations, focuses on the similarities between verbal and visual processes of 'reading'. The contested and multiply articulated border between verbal and visual forms, poetry and painting, then, is another 'dividing line' which Howe's poem simultaneously brings to attention, questions, and presses into service for the purposes of its historical investigation. In order to grasp the complexity of the problems raised by a work that crosses this 'dividing line' and their implications for a historical project conducted by means of this crossing, the debates centred on relations between language and visual arts need to be examined more closely.

A 'cleavage in representation'

'What is the relation of the visual to the verbal?' asks Charles Bernstein, 'Are they not separate realms – races – each with their own civilization?'[39] Indeed, this notion of 'separate realms' reaches back at least as far as the Renaissance, when Leonardo da Vinci announced a *paragone* or rivalry between the arts of poetry and painting. Distinctions between the literary and visual arts have been drawn, debated, and re-inscribed ever since. An important moment in this debate occurs in G. E. Lessing's well-known 1766 essay *Laocoön*. Lessing

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[38] Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p.32.
[39] Charles Bernstein, *Content's dream: essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), p. 115.

posits a separation between language-based and visual arts based on the fundamentally different nature of their media and sets up a series of oppositions between visual and verbal signs. According to this treatise, the visual signs of painting function as 'figures and colors in space', whilst the verbal signs of poetry unfold as 'articulated sounds in time'; painting is an essentially spatial art whilst poetry is a temporal art.[40] Furthermore, visual signs 'must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified'; they work by physical resemblance, whilst verbal signs undertake 'the representation of objects other than those that are visible'.[41] Operative here is a logic of presence and absence; visual works make a likeness of the thing signified present before the viewer's eyes; verbal signs stand in for that which is absent. This logic extends to the physical appearance of artworks themselves; according to Lessing, when looking at a visual work, 'to the eye, parts once seen remain continually present', whilst in the process of reading 'we should cease to be conscious of the means which the poet uses ... that is, his words'.[42] Visual signs proclaim their own presence; verbal signs, on the other hand, should render themselves invisible, or at least transparent. This series of polarisations ultimately implies not only that the media of the language and visual arts are fundamentally different, but that the activities of reading and seeing are mutually exclusive and essentially incompatible; Lessing argues that these activities cannot and should not intersect: 'Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other's domain'.[43]

Howe's poem clearly takes such 'unseemly liberties' by crossing and confusing the 'dividing line' between verbal and visual domains. By bringing to attention the physical dimensions of its verbal material via the word grid shape, the use of capitalisation, truncated words, and precise spacing, and by stripping the poem's verbal material of any kind of syntactical unfolding via radical parataxis, this poem demonstrates that printed words on a page are always visual. But in a sense, the poem also works with Lessing's essentialist terms, aspiring to claim some of the presencing power of visual signs in order to make absences in history and articulation tangible. Furthermore, there is no doubt that by taking these 'unseemly liberties' Howe's word grid makes visible an array of tensions – between presence and absence, spatial and temporal dimensions, seeing and reading. The

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[40] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 78. It seems significant that Howe's poem 'Articulated Sound Forms in Time' echoes this famous formulation, with which Howe's poetry seems to engage – both by transgressing the verbal-visual separations Lessing posited, and by making use of the tensions between looking and reading etc.
[41] Lessing, pp. 78, 76
[42] Lessing, pp. 86, 85.
[43] Lessing, p. 93.

poem both embodies these tensions and critiques their binary logic. However, this reflexive intermedial mixing must be seen not only in relation to Lessing's segregation of the verbal and visual domains, but also as a response to Lessing's legacy, which has played itself out in much more recent discourses.

Lessing's prohibition on any kind of crossover between language-based and visual arts was a precursor for the discourses of medium specificity that constituted the dominant face of mid twentieth-century modernism. One of the most vociferous proponents of medium specificity, Clement Greenberg, saw the increasing tendency towards abstraction in twentieth century visual art as an attempt to 'escape from "literature"' which, in his thinking, had been the dominant art form of 'official bourgeois culture' since the eighteenth century.[44] Alluding to Lessing's distinction between language and visual arts in his 1940 essay 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' Greenberg argues that the elimination of figure and narrative in painting and sculpture formed a crucial dimension of an avant-garde attempt to 'restore the identity' of visual art by purging it of literary functions. As Mitchell notes, '[t]he project of abstract painting (as understood by some of its principle advocates) is only secondarily an overcoming of representation or illusion; the primary aim is the erection of a wall between the arts of vision and those of language.'[45] Greenberg's argument for medium specificity thus defines visual media in polarised relation to all that he considers literary. In his thinking, ideas are the domain of 'literature', and what is specific to its medium is, as Lessing's dictum indicates, its immateriality consisting in the invisibility of any kind of physically embodied medium at all. In contrast, '[f]or the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all to affect the spectator physically'.[46] By 'isolating' itself in the 'physical, the sensorial' specificities of its medium, Greenberg indicates, visual art had found in its 'proper' domain a refuge from the 'corrupting influence' of literature's focus on the conceptual, on ideas, and in its concomitant entanglement with bourgeois ideologies.[47]

Greenberg's discourse shores up the boundaries between language-based and visual arts, marking out the literary domain as the realm of immateriality and cognition, and designating the visual arts as a realm of pure physicality. Divorcing the visual arts from the world of thought, knowledge, and of course language and linguistic meaning, his medium-

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[44] Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. by John O'Brian, 2 vols (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), I, pp. 23–38, p. 30.
[45] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 216
[46] Greenberg, p. 33.
[47] Greenberg, p. 32.

specific argument ultimately posits the purified visual arts as entirely mute.[48] In this respect, Greenberg's argument shares much with one of its medium-specific counterparts in literary criticism, Jean-Paul Sartre's 1947 essay 'What is Writing?' which deploys a polarisation of language and visual arts in order to make distinctions between prose and poetry.[49] Sartre inverts the value judgements of Greenberg's argument, however; the visual art critic's celebration of painting's physicality and muteness and denigration of literature's 'infection'[50] by ideas is reversed in Sartre's thinking, for whom the muteness of the visual arts meant that they were unable to address the urgent social, political, and ethical issues of post-war Europe. Sartre argues that properties proper to the visual arts such as materiality and opacity, when they creep into the domain of the verbal arts, threaten literature's ability to engage with ideas and ideologies and thus to commit itself to social action. He positions poetry 'on the side of painting, sculpture and music'; art forms that he sees as essentially 'mute' and therefore incapable of engaging with or shaping social and political change.[51] This 'muteness' inheres in these artforms' status as objects; similarly, poetry, although it uses the same linguistic elements as prose, 'considers words as things and not as signs. For the ambiguity of the sign implies that one can penetrate it at will like a pane of glass and pursue the thing signified, or turn one's gaze towards its *reality* and consider it as an object'.[52] Poetry transgresses into the domain of the visual arts by directing the reader's 'gaze' (the optical metaphors are instructive here) towards the material '*reality*' of its physical elements, words. According to Sartre, this thingness of words does not render them entirely meaningless; however, '[h]aving flowed into the word, having been absorbed by its sonority or visual aspect, having been thickened and defaced, [meaning] too is a thing, uncreated and eternal'.[53] Disconnected from the social and historical world by the 'eternal' character of its thingness, the meaning generated by poetic language, according to Sartre, is inert and useless for the purpose of engaging with the urgent issues of its day.

Such arguments for medium specificity constituted the dominant story of modernism at mid century. Of course these discourses have been variously challenged and critiqued by practices and critical debates centred on what Mitchell refers to as 'the

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[48] And, ironically, reliant on the critic to speak for them, as Mitchell points out in his essay '*Ut Pictura Theoria*: Abstract painting and language' in *Picture Theory*, pp. 213–240.
[49] The New Criticism in ascendancy in American academia at mid-century forms another literary parallel to Greenberg's particular brand of formalism, although verbal-visual distinctions are played out far more explicitly in Sartre's essay.
[50] Greenberg, p. 32.
[51] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'What is Writing?' *What is Literature?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1–26 p. 5, 4.
[52] Sartre, p. 6.
[53] Sartre, p. 6.

resurgence of artistic impurity, hybridity, and heterogeneity summarized as the "eruption of language into the aesthetic field"' associated with the postmodern.[54] Howe's crossing and contestation of the 'dividing line' between language-based and visual arts in her word grid can certainly be located within this active questioning of the discourses of aesthetic purity at work in modernism's medium specific arguments. As Mitchell further points out, 'this "eruption" has occasioned new, revisionist histories of the modernism it supplanted, histories in which Greenbergian abstraction tends to be de-centred and jostled about by alternative traditions in modernism.'[55]

Figure 5. Rene Magritte, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (original in colour). Image derived from Michel Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, ed. and trans. by James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983)

In an essay which constitutes one of these 'revisionist histories of ... modernism', Foucault provides a critique of the sorts of discursive separations between verbal and visual domains produced and perpetuated by arguments for medium specificity. Focusing on René Magritte's verbal-visual work *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Figure 5), Foucault's discussion deploys the tension between visual material presence and the immateriality and transparency 'proper' to the written word not as a way of making distinctions, divisions, or separations, but as productive tension capable of performing a critique of these very processes of categorisation and segregation. Moreover, by locating the separation of word and image in relation to the history of modernity in the western world, Foucault suggests that the differences between verbal and visual sensory perception are not a 'natural' or innate effect of the different media, but are, rather, discursively produced and ideologically informed. His argument starts with an acknowledgement of the sensory difficulty of reconciling the linguistic and the visual aspects of Magritte's verbal-visual piece: 'The very

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[54] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 239. Mitchell is quoting Craig Owens here: Owens, "Earthwords", *October*, 10 (1979), 120–130, pp. 126–7.
[55] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 239.

thing that is both seen and read is hushed in the vision, hidden in the reading'.[56] Thus Magritte's *Pipe* makes visible the 'careful and cruel separation' of word and image which has, for Foucault, been one of the main principles of painting since the Renaissance.[57] Historically, he argues, the split between word and image has always involved a hierarchy: '[e]ither the text is ruled by the image... or else the image is ruled by the text'.[58] For him, because Magritte's work posits no hierarchy between text and image, it becomes a site of almost revolutionary conflict: '[w]e must therefore admit between the figure and the text a whole series of intersections – or rather attacks launched by one against the other, arrows shot at the enemy target, enterprises of subversion and destruction, lance blows and wounds, a battle'.[59] This 'battle' is revolutionary because, among other things, it questions the logic of material presence and absence which crops up time and again in aesthetic discourses on the relationship between visual and verbal modes of signification. In *Pipe*, the word shares something fundamental with the image: its medium, paint. Thus it takes on a visual, material, painterly presence. The word 'pipe', meanwhile, does not exactly stand in for an absent referent because by means of its physical resemblance to the referent, the image claims to make the pipe itself virtually present. However, the caption declares 'this is not a pipe' reminding us of the gap between sign and referent. The referent itself, then, takes on a shadowy vaporous status which can be described neither in terms of presence or absence. Thus Magritte's *Pipe* exposes the 'void, the non-place hidden beneath marble solidity', a site of indeterminacy made apparent by means of the 'gulf which prevents us from being both the reader and the viewer at the same time'.[60] In this 'gulf' or 'non-place' opened up by the verbal-visual work, Foucault suggests, neither the strictures of verbal discourse nor those of visual representation hold sway. Magritte's work demonstrates that, having both created and disavowed this 'non-place' by refusing to admit any in-between, any overlap, or any relation between the verbal and the visual, hegemonic aesthetic discourses have nothing to say about this 'gulf'.

Furthermore, it seems to me that Foucault's analysis of Magritte's work aims at the 'non-place' between text and image as a kind of deconstructive 'third space' that not only works to critique the binary-structured discourse of separation between verbal and visual, but also opens up an as yet unclaimed space of articulation. Foucault's aesthetic discourse intimates that by foregrounding tensions between the verbal and visual, reading and

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[56] Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, ed. and trans. by James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 25.
[57] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 35.
[58] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 32.
[59] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 26.
[60] Foucault, *Pipe*, pp. 41, 36.

seeing, a work like Magritte's *Pipe*, or Howe's grid poem, deploys an in-between space of articulation disavowed by dominant discourses of representation but nevertheless very much in evidence in such works. Foucault's argument suggests that a historically-orientated hybrid work like Howe's calls upon the zone of contention between the verbal and the visual as a way of making palpable that which is made 'mute' and 'hidden' in both verbal and visual modes of representing the past. In other words, it suggests that the very difficulties encountered in such works provoked by a discursively-produced impossibility of 'being both the reader and the viewer at the same time' could also be opportunities for indicating the presence of that which is otherwise suppressed in modes of representation which present themselves as either purely verbal or purely visual.[61]

Mitchell's work on the discourses of images and their relations to words owes much to Foucault's thinking; for him the 'fault-line [between visual and verbal expression] is deeply linked with fundamental ideological divisions'.[62] To scrutinise the nature of this 'fault-line', Mitchell argues, is to engage in 'a struggle that carries the fundamental contradictions of our culture into the heart of theoretical discourse. The point, then, is not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves.'[63] Mitchell's critical engagement with word-image relations, like Foucault's, works with, and also against, the discourse of separation between language and visual forms in ways that are persuasive and illuminating. His key arguments – and their implications for the potentially productive effects of verbal-visual tensions – are perhaps most clearly articulated in his work on William Blake's 'composite art'. In Blake's verbal-visual works, Mitchell discerns a clash of word and image which he reads in the light of the poet's affiliations with both the rationality of the visible printed word and a revolutionary, romantic sensibility for which the visible materiality of print was anathema. Blake's work, Mitchell argues, is 'based on dialectical transformation through conflict'.[64] Thus, in his view, the antagonistic relationship between the verbal and the visual here both reveals something about the ideological issues of Blake's art and his time, and is a kind of politics enacted through dialectical, transformative struggle in the artwork. Howe's word grid might be read as an embodiment of a comparably productive verbal-visual tension. At a very fundamental level it presents itself both as a list of words arranged horizontally to be negotiated sequentially (as the numerals 1 and 2 suggest) from left to right working downwards line by line, and as a spatial arrangement to be taken in at a glance, its borders

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[61] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 41.
[62] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 5.
[63] Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 44.
[64] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 117.

and perimeters inspected by a viewing rather than a reading eye and the contents of the two sections sifted according to their visual prominence, beginning with the capitalised words 'INDICATION' and 'MARK'. The poem simultaneously draws attention to the 'dividing line' between the activities of reading and seeing and sets up a dialogue between them so that, to borrow Mitchell's words, 'the very identities of words and images, the sayable and seeable, begin to shimmer and shift… as if the image could speak and the words were on display.'[65] There is no doubt that the words of Howe's poem are 'on display', arranged carefully in space almost as if placed in a museum case or pinned on a display board as material evidence of historical occurrences. So too, the visual elements of Howe's piece (although they are not 'images' exactly) 'speak' of seemingly neutral and rational processes of organisation and management, via visual reference to grids and squares and straight lines and 'dividing lines'. This dialogue both makes visible and begins to question the 'dividing line' between the textual and the visual, and in so doing it brings to attention and contests other kinds of dividing lines, interrogating the very principle of apportionment and management itself, and making tangible the erasures and marginalisations these processes involve.

In Foucault's and Mitchell's thinking, then, works that bring to attention discursively-produced tensions between verbal and visual modes of representation and modes of perceiving, carry the potential not to articulate a politics in the rather narrow sense that Sartre understood it, but to embody a politics of representation. Furthermore, Foucault's 'gulf' or 'non-place' and Mitchell's 'cleavage in representation' can be related to a wider poststructuralist emphasis on the split between signifier and signified, and the gap between sign and referent, representation and world. Foucault's and Mitchell's engagements with relations between word and image in composite artworks suggest that processes of 'mining' the cleavages of representation – both as enacted by artworks themselves and by criticism – are capable of mounting a critique of language, culture, and power by locating an unappropriated 'non-place' which escapes incorporation into established discourses and frames of reference. As I shall show later on in this discussion, a similar principle can be found in some of the most politically-attuned criticism on contemporary visual poetics.

Ut pictura poesis and cognitive poetics

The notion of *paragone*, argument, tension or splitting between the verbal and the visual is far from the only – or even necessarily always the dominant – story of relations between

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[65] Mitchell, Picture Theory, pp. 45, 68.

the language and visual arts. An alternative line of thought which has grown out of Horace's ancient maxim *'ut pictura poesis'* ('in poetry as in painting') stresses similarities and parallels between the arts. Although this comparative approach would appear to offer the most logical and sympathetic basis for an investigation of verbal-visual relations and hybrid works, it actually implicitly retains many of the assumptions discernable in discourses that posit a separation between language and visual forms. Thus in many ways the 'sister arts' tradition only makes more visible the problems involved in trying to negotiate the 'dividing line' between language-based and visual arts, between speaking and showing, and between meaning and materiality.

Up until the late twentieth century, the 'sister arts' tradition has tended to pursue formal analogies between the arts rather than scrutinise verbal-visual relationships as such.[66] John Dryden, for example, worked with a model of mimesis, arguing in 1695 that 'both these Arts . . . are not only true imitations of Nature, but of the best Nature, of that which is wrought up to a nobler pitch.'[67] The basis for comparison between poetry and painting changed in the eighteenth century, as Elizabeth Abel indicates, with '[t]he shift from a mimetic to an expressive theory of art' which placed the arts of poetry and painting in 'a less apparent, more problematic relationship'.[68] For some critics of this period, however, poetry and painting shared a common impulse to express the workings of the imagination. Writing somewhat later, in the mid nineteenth century, John Ruskin was a prominent proponent of this view, asserting that 'Painting is properly to be opposed to *speaking* or *writing*, but not to *poetry*. Both painting and speaking are methods of expression. Poetry is the employment of either for the noblest purposes'.[69] Ruskin's notion that poetry and the visual arts are united by a shared impulse towards a Romantic ideal of expressivity prefigures many twentieth-century comparative studies of the arts which proceeded on the basis that the arts of poetry and painting share formal qualities characteristic of artistic styles and movements. A prime example of this comparative mode is Mario Praz's 1970 study *Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts* which maps stylistic correspondences between painting, poetry, and architecture across a range of historical styles from the Renaissance through the baroque to various kinds of

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[66] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 227.
[67] John Dryden, 'A Parallel of Poetry and Painting', *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. by W. P. Ker, 2 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), II, pp. 115–153, p. 137.
[68] Elizabeth Abel, 'Redefining the Sister Arts: Baudelaire's Response to the Art of Delacroix', *Critical Inquiry*, 6.3 (1980), 363–384, p. 365.
[69] John Ruskin, 'Of the Received Opinions Touching the "Grand Style"' in *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from his writings*, ed. by John D. Rosenberg (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), pp. 42-55, p. 52. For more on Ruskin and ut pictura poesis, see George P. Landow 'Ruskin's Version of "Ut Pictura Poesis"', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 26. 4 (1968), 521-528.

modernist art. The problem with such a tracing of parallels is that its method tends to subsume visual and language arts under an umbrella of aesthetic values or art movements without telling us very much about relations between the arts.

However, such questions have become more focal in the comparative tradition since its reinvigoration in the late twentieth century by semiotics and by structuralist and poststructuralist methodologies. Critics such as Wendy Steiner, Norman Bryson, and Mieke Bal, have used such methodologies to propose ways of approaching verbal and visual media not as separate sign systems but as different *modes* of representation which participate in comparable processes of making meaning. It is on this basis that Bal, for example, proposes a practice of 'Reading Art', arguing that 'every act of looking *is* – not only, not exclusively, but always also – a reading, simply because without the processing of signs into syntactic chains that resonate against the backdrop of a frame of reference an image cannot yield meaning.'[70] As this contention suggests, the comparative method in which Bal participates tends to consist in applying semiotic methodologies predominantly developed in literary studies to the interpretation of visual artworks. Bal insists, though, that this strategy does not amount to 'a linguistic invasion of visuality' or 'linguistic imperialism'.[71] 'Reading an image,' she asserts, 'is nothing like reducing images to linguistic discourse'. Her method wants to resist 'remaining locked within the binary opposition that has ... been construed around the two media, or modes', and to this end she makes use of the semiotic theory of C. S. Peirce.[72] When placed against the binary logic of Saussurian linguistics, Peirce's triad of icon/index/symbol certainly seems to offer a way out of the verbal-visual oppositions to which Bal refers. In an article co-authored by Bal and Bryson, the pair demonstrate how Peirce's version of semiosis offers a theory of the sign understood '*not as a thing but as an event*', as a dynamic process rather than a static thing.[73] They propose 'a view of image-seeing that is dynamic and positioned in time' thus implicitly critiquing Lessing's dictum that verbal signs unfold in time and that visual signs exist statically in space.[74]

But this approach has its problems. What Bal's emphasis on, and even privileging of, reading as the primary mode of engaging with an iconic sign reveals is that whilst this argument vehemently claims not to be participating in 'linguistic imperialism', it does end up subsuming visuality to a language-based semiotic model of 'reading' driven by a pursuit

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[70] Mieke Bal, 'Reading Art?' *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 289–312, p. 298.
[71] Bal, 'Reading Art?', p. 290–1.
[72] Bal, 'Reading Art?', p. 294.
[73] Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, 73.2 (1991), 175–208, p. 194.
[74] Bal and Bryson, p. 191.

of system-based meaning. As Mitchell says of Bal and Bryson's method, '[a]lthough [they] insist that they are proposing "a semiotic turn for art history" rather than "a linguistic turn," they underestimate …. the extent to which semiotics privileges textual/linguistic descriptive frameworks. Far from avoiding "the bias of privileging language," semiotics continually reinstates that bias.'[75] Indeed, this 'bias' is implicit not only in the very notion of 'reading art', but also in Bal and Bryson's adoption of a dynamic, time-based model for looking at images, and in their insistence on treating the sign '*as an event*' and most emphatically '*not as a thing*'. One of the central problems here is that this method recurrently falls back on the binary structures it aims to circumvent, by privileging the sign understood as event *rather than* as a thing, for example. Moreover, the privileged term is always one rooted in a linguistic model.

The semiotic turn of more recent comparative criticism, then, has several implications that limit its usefulness for a reading of a hybrid work like Howe's. Firstly, in the pursuit of structures of meaning, critics such as Bal tend to focus on visual works that are representational in a fairly straightforward referential way. Therefore this method is able to tell us a great deal about how images might be read, but what happens when the visual component of a work does not consist of an image as such, but some other kind of more abstract, material visuality? And whilst this approach to interartistic relations might propose ways of reading images, its language-based semiotic assumptions render it silent on the question of looking at words, a process that Howe's word grid, for example, seems to insist upon.

This gap in the comparative method is partly addressed by cognitive poetics, which is concerned not so much with parallels between language and visual arts but in precisely the sorts of verbal-visual fusions evident in a poem such as Howe's word grid. Despite this difference in their objects of study, however, there are many similarities between these two critical methods; in particular a shared emphasis on semiotics means that cognitive poetics also shares the linguistic assumptions of recent interart studies, although these are differently articulated. One of the best exemplars of cognitive poetics, Reuven Tsur's article on 'Picture Poetry, Mannerism, and Sign Relationships' deploys not only semiotics but cognitive psychology to investigate visual poems as perceptual problems and also as social phenomena. Drawing on speech research, Tsur proposes a semiotic model that 'regards language as a hierarchy of signs: the graphemic string signifies a phonological string, which signifies units of meaning, which signify referents in extralinguistic reality.' Because '[o]ur linguistic competence urges us to reach the final referents as fast as possible', fewer

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[75] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 99n.

interruptions in this semiotic chain make for a smoother, more 'natural'-seeming process of reading.[76] The foregrounding of the visual dimensions of written language represents one such troublesome interruption, rendering reading 'more difficult, less natural'.[77] Tsur thus reads visual experiments in poetry not as something brought into poetry from the visual arts, but as 'a logical extension' of the principles of poetic language, as a mannerist device or gesture that brings to attention the high artifice of the poem. The extreme difficulty this presents for readers works to induce a kind of defamiliarisation, or 'disorientation' to use Tsur's vocabulary. This 'disorientation' effect, he avers, crops up most often in poetry produced in times of social disruption such as in a modern world epitomised for him by Yeat's lines 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' However, for Tsur, the disruptive mannerist device interrupts the smooth processes of reading with its visual impediments only to test 'adaptation mechanisms', working in the end as a mode of reassurance that the reader's cognitive processes are able to adapt and function properly in the face of unsettled social circumstances.[78]

In some ways this cognitive model is incredibly persuasive because it offers a way of understanding the discourse of opposition or split between verbal and visual modes of representation by proposing that visuality hampers the cognitive processes of reading that want to pursue semantics at high speed. This idea seems to work in relation to Howe's word square because it suggests that the poem's visual layout functions as an obstruction to smooth linguistic articulation, and this would explain the apparent tension between the work's language-based and visual elements. Furthermore, as Tsur's admittedly rather general gesture towards historicity indicates, this disruption to the process of reading can be read as an index of a larger set of social or cultural difficulties such as those concerned with how to represent the past in general and suppressed or marginalised histories in particular. At the same time, Tsur also points to ways of deconstructing an understanding of seeing and reading either as parallel or as opposed by suggesting ways in which they are intertwined in the same process. According to this view, then, the visual layout of Howe's word grid and the disruption it induces in the reading process can be read as an extension of the poem's paratactic linguistic relations. However, the hierarchical semiotic model Tsur constructs serves to reinstate separations between the verbal and visual by placing the graphemic, visual sign at the far end of the signifying chain and by aligning visually marked signs with 'artifice' as opposed to more 'natural' unmarked signs that are more readily translatable into semantics. Moreover, in common with the comparative method, Tsur's

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[76] Reuven Tsur, 'Picture Poetry, Mannerism, and Sign Relationships', *Poetics Today*, 21. 4 (2000), 751–781, p. 751.
[77] Tsur, 'Picture Poetry', p. 775.
[78] Tsur, 'Picture Poetry', p. 779.

cognitive poetics subsumes visuality to a linguistically-based model that assumes that semantics are the incontestable and inevitable end product of artworks and our encounter with them. This enables him to jettison visual materiality as a kind of by-product, extension, or supplement to the main business of making meaning, and to neutralise its unsettling effects.

Comparative studies and cognitive poetics represent attempts to think across the 'dividing line' between visual and language arts and to begin to dismantle the divisions between them by pointing to the numerous ways in which all media are always-already mixed media; no mode of representation is ever purely verbal or purely visual. However, whilst these methods claim to enable an examination of the interplay and overlap between verbal and visual modes of representation, their models of interpretation end up subsuming visual materiality to language and system-based models of meaning making. In so doing, these comparative and cognitive approaches retain a key assumption of discourses that posit a divide between the verbal and visual arts: the notion that meaning is essentially language-based and that visuality is effectively 'mute' unless it can be transposed into a language-based system of interpretation. In so doing, they illustrate the persistence of the 'dividing line' between the verbal and the visual, and to a great extent unwittingly perpetuate it.

Materiality and meaning

What both the comparative approach and the discourse of separation between the verbal and visual arts have in common, I would like to suggest, is the problem of negotiating a pervasive – although sometimes unacknowledged – split between discursively based meaning and sensuous materiality. This split can be traced back to Kant's account of judgement in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he makes a distinction between the intelligible and the sensible. But it is also there in Descartes' *Meditations*, in which he delegitimates sensory perception as a mode of knowing in favour of rational intelligence, splitting off the sensory from the cognitive. As my discussion of debates around the differences and parallels between language and visual arts, verbal and visual signs, reading or speaking and looking have suggested, terms such as immateriality, cognitive thought, semantics, and hermeneutic exegesis are generally associated with the language arts, whilst materiality, sensuousness, and phenomenological experience tend to be aligned with visual art forms.

The problem that a work like Howe's word square presents for readers and critics is that in foregrounding the visual, material status of the written word, it embodies a collision

between and fusion of verbal and visual forms, linguistic meaning and visual materiality. Such a work cannot quite be accounted for either by a discourse of separation between linguistic meaning and visual materiality that renders visual materiality mute, nor by one rooted in a comparative approach that seeks to incorporate the artwork into an overarching system that ultimately subsumes 'meaningless' visual materiality to language-based cognition. Together, these traditions insist that the sensuousness of visual forms is either entirely extraneous to language-based cognition or that it can only be made sense of by means of a total translation into linguistic meaning structures. Many critics, such as Foucault and Mitchell for example, do of course productively interrogate the assumptions and underpinnings of the vexed relations between word and image, cognition and sensuousness, rather than unproblematically accepting these tensions as givens. However, this is not to suggest that they in any way resolve this difficulty; the twin problems of incompatibility between visually apparent materiality and language-based meaning and of assimilation of one by the other are central to the dilemmas with which critical engagements with verbal-visual relationships necessarily continue to struggle.

Critics writing on poetry that foregrounds a visual dimension are confronted, then, with the problem of materiality and how – or whether – it can be reconciled with language-based meaning. Indeed, the term 'materiality' is frequently invoked in discussions of visual poetics, although with varying emphases which differently negotiate the relationship between sensuous materiality and language-based signifying processes. It would be helpful to examine a sample of these engagements with materiality as they have been articulated in critical debates around visual poetics of the last twenty years or so, before teasing out the implications of visual materiality and the dilemmas it provokes for poetically conducted historical projects such as those pursued by Howe and the other poets examined in my study.

One approach to visual materiality in poetry, exemplified by Canadian poet and critic Steve McCaffery, works with the notion of a 'cleavage in representation' which posits a gulf between the materiality of the signifier and that which it signifies.[79] Explicitly bringing poststructuralist theory to bear on his discussions of visual and sound poetry and influenced in no small part by Jacques Derrida's idea of the supplement and by George Bataille's notion of general economy, his poetics are concerned with the ways in which language's excess, its supplementary logic, inheres in its materiality, which is foregrounded in poetry that emphasises sonic and/or visual dimensions of language. In an essay on the visual aspects of bill bissett's poetry, McCaffery writes

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[79] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 104.

> The materiality of language is that aspect which remains resistant to an absolute subsumption into the ideality of meaning...To see the letter not as phoneme but as ink, and to further insist on that materiality, inevitably contests the status of language as a bearer of uncontaminated meaning(s).[80]

Materiality here is the element of language – in this case the graphic mark – which is a necessary condition of 'the ideality of meaning' and yet exists as a non-utilisable excess in the linguistic meaning-making process. For McCaffery, 'to see' the letter as visually present, to detect the literal materiality of the printed word, is to bring to attention a cleavage in representation induced by a recognition of that which cannot be subsumed by conventional processes of meaning-making. Hence the foregrounding of the visual materiality of the signifier becomes part of a process of deconstructive critique. As the economic terms of his argument indicate, for McCaffery the target of this critique is the all-pervasive ideology of late capitalism and most especially its logics of consumption. Like the Language writers with whom he has close ties, McCaffery is interested in unsettling signifying economies which are saturated by and intertwined with the logic of late capitalism; to transform reading into a process of active production rather than passive consumption, is, for him, almost 'inevitably' to form a critique of this dominant ideology.

Marjorie Perloff's negotiation with visual poetics begins from a comparable positing of incommensurability between materiality and linguistic signification. For her, the foregrounding of materiality in, say, the concrete poetry of McCaffery or Ian Hamilton Finlay amounts to a postmodern poetics of 'radical artifice' that embodies a critique of the consumer cultural forms of late capitalism. For her, the radicalism of 'radical artifice' lies precisely in visual poetic works' use of materiality to preclude being 'easily understood' in the same way that mass media forms are, thus constituting a mode of resistance to the logic of contemporary consumer culture.[81] Perloff's discourse implies that the 'radical' or resistant aspects of such avant-garde works are good for their readers, because they exercise our critical faculties, or train us to become more questioning of the culture we live in. This negotiation of the interpretive problems presented by visual poetry echoes the cognitive poetics approach of Tsur because although she wants to retain the power of critique for poetry, like him, Perloff both insists on the difficulty presented by visual materiality to interpretive processes and then resolves such difficulties by awarding them a

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[80] Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (New York: Roof books & Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986), p. 105.
[81] Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 120.

pedagogical function that in the end enables a subsumption of stubborn materiality to an overarching explicatory hermeneutics.

A rather more careful, modulated, and reflexive account of the politics of the poetic foregrounding of visual materiality can by found in Craig Dworkin's consideration of visually-induced illegibility in his highly engaging book *Reading the Illegible*. His starting point – the notion that visually-foregrounded materiality constitutes a politically-inflected resistance to normative processes of signification – is similar to that of McCaffery and Perloff. But Dworkin is both more cautious about materiality's resistance to meaning and about imposing an overarching interpretive framework on 'illegible' works. Whereas for McCaffery a foregrounding of visual materiality 'inevitably' participates in a contestation of idealised processes of meaning making and, by extension, of dominant cultural logics, for Dworkin both the relationship between materiality and semantics and the political potentials of these intersections are rather more provisional. Drawing on elements of Russian Formalism, the practice and theory of the Situationists, and a number of poststructuralist principles, Dworkin foregrounds what he calls the 'strategic illegibility' of works by Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and Tom Phillips, among others.[82] Such texts, he asserts, invite 'paragrammatic "misreading"' a reading strategy that 'challenges the normative referential grammar of a text by forming "networks of signification not accessible though conventional reading habits"'.[83] In this argument, illegibility induced by textual materiality functions as the catalyst by which alternative 'networks of signification' might be engendered by a fracturing of 'normative' semantic or referential drives.

For Dworkin, then, materiality is not simply resistant to the semantic impulses of reading, it also contributes to processes of making meaning. Yet at the same time, he also recognises that in interpreting illegible texts he is making them legible, a process he is ambivalent about. He wants to avoid reducing the intractable materiality of his chosen texts to discursive sense-making, but worries that nevertheless his book is ultimately an instance of 'The Critical Obscene', a 'betrayal' of the illegible text's modes of resistance.[84] On the other hand, Dworkin recommends that 'we must learn, as readers, to take responsibility' for 'the semantic drives' we cannot entirely repudiate. In the end, he is willing to take responsibility for his own 'semantic drives' because in doing so he has opened up his chosen texts to a new kind of legibility that enables them in turn to 'suggest

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[82] Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. xxiii.
[83] Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 12. Dworkin is quoting a definition of paragrammatic misreading given by Leon Roudiez.
[84] Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, pp. 140, 155.

an ethics of the illegible'.[85] Ultimately, Dworkin hopes that the practices of reading proposed by these texts might 'provide concrete models for the sort of cultural activities readers might then bring to other aspects of the world around them'.[86] Whilst there is an echo here of Perloff's suggestion that 'difficult' materiality makes us into more critically-attuned readers of our world, Dworkin is careful to voice reservations about any notion of resolving illegible texts. If paragrammatic 'misreading' opens texts up to semantic play, then a concomitant 'ethics of the illegible' insists that any reading is a 'misreading' that confers new kinds of illegibility as well as legibility on a text. Dworkin's subtle argument tries to strike a balance between the play of linguistic signifiers and their stubborn visual materiality, although it tends to falls back time and again on the inventiveness of semantic play and most particularly on the potentially revolutionary agency of the 'ethical' reader.

As his arguments suggest, Dworkin's engagement with visual materiality in poetic works operates around an irresolvable tension between semantic legibility and the illegibility of visual materiality, but as I have already mentioned his work also, in some ways paradoxically, insists that the material details of a text contribute to its processes of making meaning, although this aspect of signification goes unacknowledged in normative reading practices. In this respect, his critical position begins to undercut assumptions that visual materiality either operates outside of or in a mode of opposition to linguistic signifying structures or that it must be subsumed by these processes in order to become meaningful. In this respect, his view of the relationship between visual materiality and language-based meaning intersects with – and draws on – that of Jerome McGann whose book *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* argues that modernist poetry in English has emerged as 'a direct function and expression of the Renaissance of Printing that began in the late nineteenth century'.[87] For him, modernist poetry – and not just modernist poetry that noticeably foregrounds a visual dimension – has developed in dialogue with its material supports and their specific technologies. He asserts that modernist writing makes use of the ways in which 'meaning invests a work at the level of its physical appearance' as well as the level of its linguistic signifiers, suggesting that the materiality of the printed page contributes significantly to writing's processes of making meaning.[88] Citing William Blake and William Morris as foundational figures, he traces a tradition of writing in which

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[85] Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 155.
[86] Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. xx.
[87] Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 1993), p. xi.
[88] McGann, *Black Riders*, p. 12.

'bibliographic codes' – by which he means elements such as typeface, font size, and page layout – are important poetic resources.[89]

Although there are problems with McGann's use of the term 'bibliographic codes' to describe the meaningfulness embedded in the visual conventions of the printed page, this is nevertheless a useful formulation for thinking about the ways in which material details signify. McGann sees no inherent conflict between the visual and the verbal, materiality and language-based meaning, suggesting instead that these dimensions of writing are intertwined and operate in dialogue with one another. However, he also implies that visual, material aspects of the page are meaningful in and of themselves. In his discussion of how contemporary poets have appropriated and extended the 'bibliographic inheritance' of modernist poetry, he offers examples from Howe's *Pythagorean Silence* which dramatically disrupt the normal conventions of the printed page.[90] Such highly visual texts, he remarks,

> transmit, at their first level, the simple signal of an emergency or a possible emergency: Stop. Look. Listen. They are Thoreauvian calls to awakening. This may be a special and relatively localized awakening – to the resources of language, to new possibilities for poetry – or it may involve more serious ethical and social questions.[91]

For McGann, then, the visual dimensions of the page are capable of communicating a 'signal of an emergency or a possible emergency' independently of linguistic signification. Whilst his assertion that visual appearance signifies on a *'first level'*, that it is a *'simple* signal' (my emphases), assumes that these material details' mode of signifying is somehow less sophisticated than language-based processes of meaning making, he also implies that visual materiality signifies in ways that are more immediate, more arresting, more attuned to the senses, and that they have an effect that is startling, emphatic, affective beyond that which might be produced linguistically. McGann is therefore working with distinctions between temporal unfolding and spatial simultaneity, duration and immediacy here; to some extent this formulation relies on the alignment of visual materiality with an affective but mute

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[89] For more discussion of 'bibliographic codes' see McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). McGann's use of the term 'bibliographic codes' is slightly puzzling; it is clear that he adopts this coinage to refer to physical textual details and the ways in which these help shape meaning, but this term seems unable to quite do the work asked of it. At a stretch, the two halves of the word 'bibliographic' tentatively suggest something about the graphicity of the book. However, this word really points to systems of referencing works rather than the physical characteristics of texts. Meanwhile, by using 'code', McGann wants to indicate the ways in which texts' physical details signify, whether their readers acknowledge this or not. But 'code' indicates a system which can be decoded using a specific set of rules, and it seems that in McGann's readings textual details do not signify in quite this way because their meaning effects often tend to be locally and historically contingent.

[90] McGann, *Black Riders*, p. 98.

[91] McGann, *Black Riders*, p. 107.

sensuous corporeality in ways that recall the medium-specific arguments of mid-century modernism. But it also, importantly, claims for materiality a mode of signifying, of cognition even, which does not rely upon and is not subsumable to abstract structures of linguistic meaning.

In this respect, McGann's argument suggests something very similar to the more formalised and 'scientific' account of visual semiology given by Jacques Bertin. In his book *Semiology of Graphics*, aimed at graphic designers, Bertin asserts that graphics – by which he means a system of marks on a page – represents a '"language" for the eye' with its own kind of rationality.[92] Careful to place scare quotes around the term 'language', Bertin wants to isolate that which belongs to the visual page alone, and to make distinctions between any kind of linguistic signifying process and visual semiosis. In so doing, he relies upon an assumption that 'the eye and the ear have two distinct systems of perception' and that 'sign systems intended for the ear are linear and temporal' whereas 'sign systems intended for the eye are, above all, spatial and atemporal'.[93] This formulation, which of course harks back to Lessing, requires Bertin to exclude a wide range of representations such as film, for example, and restrict his theory to graphic representations such as diagrams, maps, and tables. However, what he has to say about visual semiosis within this restricted field is of value. He identifies eight sensory variables – the 'two dimensions of the plane', and the variation of marks which comprise size, value, texture, colour, orientation, and shape (see figure 6). These variables 'form the world of images' and constitute a sign system capable
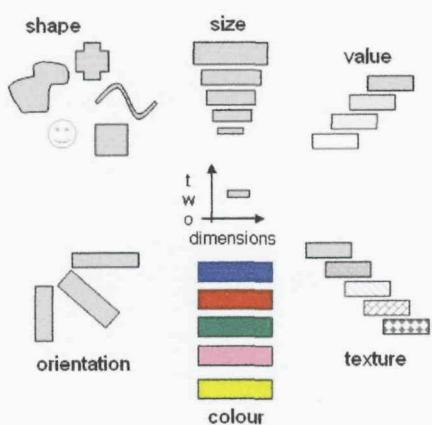
Figure 6. Diagram of Jacques Bertin's eight variables of the graphic page, adapted from Bertin's own diagram in his *Semiology of Graphics*

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[92] Jacques Bertin, *Semiology of Graphics*, trans. by William J. Berg (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p. 2.
[93] Bertin, p. 3.

of meaningful representations of perspective, ordered relationships, and space, for example.[94] For Bertin, then, marks on a page are inherently meaningful because they constitute a rational sign system which the viewing eye (in modern Western cultures at least) knows how to navigate and interpret.

This notion of the 'coded' printed page is undoubtedly at work in McGann's thinking; for him, the visual details of the page produce affect and meaning effects according to factors such as shape (font style, for example), size, orientation, placing on the page, and so on. But McGann's notion of 'bibliographic codes' extends many of the implications of Bertin's semiology because for him, as well as being inherently meaningful in and of themselves, the visual details of the graphic surface of the page are intertwined with the linguistic processes of the verbal material bodied forth by means of the printed page. As well as producing meaning on their own terms, and contributing to the signifying processes of the text as a whole, McGann suggests, visual details are capable of bringing about an 'awakening' to other aspects of the page, alerting readers to unnoticed or unacknowledged aspects of language, of art, or of the social, because 'bibliographic codes' are embedded in and entwined with larger social, historical, discursive, ideological formations. For McGann, as for Foucault and Mitchell, conventions of representation, including printing conventions and modes of viewing and reading, are ideologically-informed and discursively shaped. To disrupt these conventions or even just to make them visible is potentially to investigate or critique both the networks of meaning in a text and the referential, social contexts with which they are entangled.

The possibility that visual materiality is capable both of independent signification and of contributing to linguistic signifying processes is further explored by book artist and critic Johanna Drucker, who conducts a thoroughgoing discussion of the visual materiality of the printed word in her book on modernist typographical experimentation, *The Visible Word*. She emphasises the ways in which the physical, visible surface of writing has largely been suppressed in semiotic discourses and their poststructuralist reformulations, whilst attempting to tease out a theory of materiality from the loopholes and paradoxes of these discourses. At the same time, she thinks through the implications of phenomenological, Marxist, and psychoanalytic models for theories of signification. For Drucker, '[t]he inherent physical properties of stuff function in the process of signification in intertwined but not determined or subordinate relation to their place within the cultural codes of

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[94] Bertin, p. 42.

difference where they also function.'[95] In Drucker's thinking, the physical substance of language is thoroughly entangled with its capacity to produce meaning effects. Unlike McCaffery, for example, she does not see language's materiality as something that in any way escapes the process of meaning making, but as a contributing factor, even where the visual aspect of writing disrupts or 'RESISTS THE VERBAL ... EXPECTATIONS [of] THE CLEAN MACHINE OF READING'.[96] This is not to say, though, that she subsumes visual materiality to a linguistic model of signifying. In order to offer a critical framework that can account for the role of visual dimensions of writing, Drucker puts forward a model of materiality:

> The challenge is to take into account the physical, substantial aspects of production as well as the abstract and system-defined elements. By proposing that materiality combine the two, a dialectic relation is assumed in which neither presence as substance nor absence as difference can ever be left fully alone; each continues to irrupt into the domain of the other and interfere in the happy play of signifiers and in the dismal insistence on self-evident appearance. [97]

According to this formulation, then, materiality encompasses both physical substance and signifying processes. This understanding of materiality allows it to function both in tension with and as an inseparable part of the linguistic processes of written language. Meaning, Drucker suggests, is produced through a dialectical negotiation between linguistic processes and the visual appearance of writing, it is just that the contribution of the physical aspects of writing to making meaning are normally unacknowledged, disavowed, or denigrated, positioned as 'dismal ... self-evident appearance' as opposed to a liberatory, materially unfettered 'happy play' of signifiers. By basing her notion of materiality on a dialectical model, Drucker, like Mitchell, works with and to some extent relies upon distinctions and oppositions between the verbal and the visual, materiality and meaning. But like Mitchell she deploys this strategy to demonstrate the fundamentally composite nature of media and to investigate the ideological implications of the split between the verbal and the visual. As her ironic positioning of appearance as 'dismal' and linguistic signification as 'happy' indicates, this tactic is a kind of strategic essentialism which works with binarily opposed categories in order to foreground the significance of an aspect of textuality which has been unacknowledged or repressed.

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[95] Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-23* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 45.
[96] Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), p. 142.
[97] Drucker, *The Visible Word*, p. 44.

Drucker's thinking on materiality is very suggestive for my study of works which bring visual materiality to bear on their historical investigations. Her assertion that materiality contributes to meaning in unacknowledged ways has implications for historical enquiry and the status of the historical document. Deploying a Marxist insistence on the material conditions of a text's existence as rooted in its modes of production, Drucker counters a postmodern pessimism about the recoverability of history in the face of the gap between world and text by advocating a recognition that 'the materiality of the document is part of that history and recoverable insofar as materiality is acknowledged as part of the document's existence.'[98] Although this statement is slightly ambiguous and places an overly deterministic role on the historical conditions of production and the importance of the 'original' document, there is an important point being made here. Drucker asserts that the materiality of the text is part of history, is tangled up with its historical world and thus bears traces of that world embedded in its material form. These traces, she indicates, are recoverable, but only to the extent that any aspect of materiality is 'recoverable' – in other words to the extent that materiality's contribution to a text's 'existence' and signification can be 'acknowledged' but not entirely subsumed by discursive structures that would make these traces entirely intelligible. Furthermore, Drucker suggests that a text's material dimensions might not only carry traces of its 'original' historical moment of making but also of intervening processes of historical passage: 'A document may be lost, translated, reconfigured in written form and then bear evidence of a new and different historical moment, but the material fact of history is always part of any written text.'[99] The notion that writing carries 'the material fact of history' and processes of passing on or engaging with that history – translating, reconfiguring, recovering it, for example – in its physical forms resonates powerfully with a text like Howe's word grid poem.

Howe's poem is an instance of what Drucker calls the 'marked' text, a text that foregrounds its own material status as opposed to disavowing it as does the visually unobtrusive 'even gray page of prose and poetic convention'.[100] And indeed, to proclaim this 'marked' status is yet another one of the functions of the preoccupation with the term 'mark' in Howe's word grid. Following McGann, it can be argued that all texts are 'marked' texts, that is their physical forms, even the conventional 'gray page', are a manifestation of particular historically-specific processes and conventions and as such they carry traces of their historical moment and its shaping ideologies. But the distinction that Drucker is making is that some texts reflexively draw attention to their 'marked' status by deviating

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[98] Drucker, The Visible Word, p. 41.
[99] Drucker, The Visible Word, p. 44.
[100] Drucker, The Visible Word, p. 46.

from normative visual conventions such as that of the 'even gray page'. So whilst Howe's poem does use a very conventional serif font and does not stray from horizontally-printed lines, for example, its grid-like layout positioned centrally in an expanse of white space and its use of capitalised and fragmented words 'mark' the text or foreground its materiality in ways that draw attention to and invest with significance even its unremarkable features – such as the serif font, for example. In this way, Howe's poem is claiming an indexical capacity for its textual material; that is, following Peirce's definition of the index, it is offering its printed textual fragments as signs 'physically connected' with their referential worlds.[101] This notion of indexicality makes Drucker's claim about the capacities of textual materiality to carry historical traces clearer, and less tied to modes of textual production which seem less relevant in relation to Howe's poem, for example, than texts' modes of cultural circulation and embeddedness in relations of power and ideology. As Peirce explains, a footprint, or a pointing finger is an index, as is a thunderbolt which 'indicates that something considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was', as is a photograph because it is a chemical imprint of a real situation, 'physically forced to correspond point by point to nature' by its mode of production.[102] In a comparable way, the printed words of Howe's poem are offered as indexical markers physically connected to and shaped by a historical reality and historical processes. Although the nature of that connection and its shaping forces might not be readily apparent, the textual material of the poem is proffered as an indexical embodiment of its traces. Peirce's notion of the index helps to indicate a mode of signifying firmly rooted in, and largely signifying through, physicality but which is neither reducible to visual modes of signifying through resemblance nor subsumable to linguistic processes of making meaning. And yet indexicality is also entangled with both 'iconic' and 'symbolic' modes of signifying: according to Peirce the index cannot be isolated from other kinds of semiotic functioning: 'it would be difficult, if not impossible, to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality'.[103] Howe's word square brings this 'indexical quality' to attention via a visual foregrounding of materiality, and puts it in play or tension with the text's visual, 'iconic' dimensions and its linguistic 'symbolic' modes of signifying. The significance of this for an investigation of history, and of a 'secret history' in particular is that the poem's indexical material claims not to be able to 'show' or 'tell' but that (often in conjunction with an element of showing or telling) it can make something of history materially palpable.

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[101] Peirce, p. 168.
[102] Peirce, p. 161, 159.
[103] Peirce, p. 172.

If Drucker's work helps to indicate how 'the visible word' might be capable of materially embodying traces of history, then it also suggests that the 'marked' text's act of bringing materiality to attention has political implications for other unacknowledged presences besides that of the written word's materiality. In her own poetry and her later critical work, she brings her concern with the 'visible word' into relation with the gender coding of language. For her, women as 'Other' occupy a position that is structurally similar to the materiality of writing itself: that is as an unacknowledged presence: 'the place of the Other is already fully present and operative within many aspects of normative language. It needs to be named, acknowledged, brought to the fore.... In the dismantling of patriarchy the very tissue of its linguistic structures must be infiltrated with a shock of awareness of that Other'.[104] For Drucker, to acknowledge the physicality of written language is potentially to recognise 'with a shock' other suppressed aspects of textuality and the cultural and historical practices with which it is intertwined. The 'shock of awareness' induced by a recognition of a text's visual, material dimensions, might bring about an 'awakening', as McGann indicates, to other kinds of hitherto unacknowledged presences. This has implications, of course, not only for an articulation of a feminine 'Other' but for other marginalised, lost, or repressed kinds of articulation. In short, Drucker's negotiations with the materiality of the 'visible word' and its relations to history and to a feminine 'Other' suggest that a marked text which proclaims its own, normally unacknowledged, materiality also has the capacity to body forth presences of other suppressed aspects of language, culture, history.

At this point we might recall Spivak's attention to the different senses of representation and the distinction she wants to highlight between aesthetic or philosophical re-presentation and representation in the political sense. The relationship between an aesthetic foregrounding of a suppressed dimension of representation and the politicised representation of oppressed 'Others' that Drucker's understanding of visual materiality suggests is complicated and fraught, and this is not really worked out in her own writing. An aesthetic 'shock of awareness of the Other' embedded in the materiality of the text does not, of course, simply amount to an attainment of political 'voice' for this 'Other'. But at the same time, nor is this aesthetic strategy an attempt to 'speak for' the 'Other' that perpetuates its otherness by reproducing the terms of its suppression in representation. Rather, Drucker's theory of materiality and its potential for bodying forth a suppressed 'Other' needs to be placed within the structure of impossibility suggested by Spivak's emphasis on the two different senses of representation, as a theory that implicitly

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[104] Drucker, *Figuring the Word*, p. 252.

'articulates the difficult task of rewriting its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility.'[105] What Drucker's notion of the 'visible word' suggests is an attention to 'what the work *cannot* say'[106] in that its materiality contributes to but is not entirely subsumable to linguistic functioning. Those dimensions of meaning that 'say' what the work '*cannot* [straightforwardly] say' might produce an 'awareness', although certainly not a wholesale recovery, of an articulation of 'the Other'.

This issue of the politics of representation resonates with contemporary debates around the political efficacy of experimental poetry. Juliana Spahr, for example, in a discussion of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*, argues for a 'decolonising of reading', but she states that she does not want to suggest that this 'would be "enough" or even a top priority of political response', but constitutes, rather, 'a related project'.[107] Similarly, Dworkin stresses that '[t]o the degree that poems affect a reader's understanding of language, they have the potential to alter all of those extraliterary relationships that also involve language; but they do not directly influence electoral politics, or feed the hungry, or soften blows.' Furthermore, 'The danger of taking poetry to be politically efficacious in the narrow sense is not so much a naïveté about what poetry cannot do, but an inattention to what it actually *can* do.'[108] For him, we might recall, what poetry 'actually *can* do' is to 'provide concrete models for the sort of cultural activities readers might then bring to other aspects of the world around them.'[109] For Drucker, by insisting on its own status as a mode of being rather than representing, the marked text takes on the condition of the suppressed other and brings the fact of its repression visually to attention. In so doing, it might offer ways not of representing 'the Other' as such, but of cognising or re-cognising unacknowledged dimensions of language, culture and history.

A useful way of expanding upon the implications of Drucker's argument is to place it in relation to J.M. Bernstein's philosophical engagement with modernist art in his recent book *Against Voluptuous Bodies.* Informed by the thought of Theodor Adorno, and especially by his *Aesthetic Theory*, J. M. Bernstein asserts that the 'ever expanding rationalization of the dominant practices governing everyday life' in modernity have resulted in a repudiation of sensuous, embodied encounter as a way of engaging with and

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[105] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 272.
[106] Spivak, 'Subaltern', p. 82
[107] Juliana Spahr, 'Tertium Quid Neither One Thing Nor the Other: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* and the Decolonization of Reading', *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa & London: Alabama Press, 2001), pp. 119–152, p. 122.
[108] Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 4.
[109] Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, p. xx.

knowing the world of things.[110] Modern autonomous art, also expelled and excluded from 'everyday life and the (rationalized and reified) normative ideals, moral and cognitive, governing it' operates in its very mode of autonomous existence as a critique of practical life.[111] Furthermore, he contends, '[w]hat hibernates, what lives on in an afterlife in the modern arts, is our sensory *experience* of the world, and of the world as composed of objects, things, whose integral character is apprehensible only through sensory encounter, where sensory encounter is not the simple filling out of an antecedent structure, but formative.'[112] According to this account, then, the arts offer sensuous experience as a way of knowing and critiquing the world that is not subsumable to 'an antecedent structure', an already-constituted abstract conceptual framework, but that is 'formative' – that produces new knowledges or modes of encounter with the world. J. M. Bernstein's discussions of Dutch seventeenth-century painting, abstract expressionism, and minimalism focus upon what he calls the 'sensuous particulars' of the artwork, the material bearers of 'sensuous meaningfulness, the kind of nondiscursive meaning that material things have, material meaning'.[113] The sensory encounter offered by modernist art, he argues, is *'significant'*, in the sense that it is both meaningful and important, because art offers sensory experience as a form of thinking that is unincorporable by instrumental reason and that constitutes an alternative form of cognition or even rationality, 'the rationality potential of intuitions and intuiting'.[114] For him, then, modernist art is engaged in an activity of salvaging that which modernity repudiates. 'The task of the arts', he asserts, 'is to rescue from cognitive and rational oblivion our embodied experience and the standing of unique, particular things as the proper objects of such experience, albeit only in the form of a reminder or a promise.'[115] J. M. Bernstein's thinking is helpful because he positions art's sensuousness not as inherently outside cognition and rationality but as expelled from modernity's dominant instrumental modes of reasoning and cognition. He therefore claims a mode of cognition for art's sensuous materiality that is at once unsubsumable to discursive meaning and yet bound up with it as its suppressed underside or disavowed 'Other'.

The 'reminder or promise' of nondiscursive, sensuous modes of encounter is precisely what is offered by works such as Howe's word square poem via the foregrounded visual materiality of the graphic surface of the text. Furthermore, in such a work, this

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[110] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 3.
[111] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 3.
[112] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 3.
[113] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 47.
[114] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 7.
[115] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 7.

'rescue' of 'sensuous particulars' is crucial to – even amounts to – its mode of recovery of lost, excluded, and unacknowledged aspects of the past. The poem offers itself as a historical document or a reworking of other historical documents whose materiality claims to embody ways of knowing the past that resist and constitute an alternative to rational cognition. By drawing upon the 'sensuous meaningfulness' of the printed page, however, such works bring 'material meaning' into an inextricable relation with the printed word, one of the most instrumentalised forms of representation and one most closely linked to discursive meaning and rational cognition. Rather than reinforcing an opposition of rational discursive meanings and sensuous materiality, this intertwining brings to attention the material underside, the hitherto delegitimated and suppressed 'Other' of the instrumental rationality that characterises modernity, but that is nevertheless bound up with rationality and cognition. In this way, such a work claims to be able to recuperate unacknowledged aspects of the past that, along with sensory experience have been expelled from or suppressed by the dominant discourses of modernity.

J. M. Bernstein's thinking on 'sensuous meaningfulness' and its relation to discursive cognition forms part of the basis of my own understanding of verbal-visual relationships in the poetic works I examine in this study. As I have already suggested, critical discourse on the relations between language and visual arts, words and images manifests and often reproduces a fundamental conceptual split between discursively-based meaning and sensuous materiality. Like Foucault and Mitchell, I think that it is important to acknowledge and investigate various articulations of the 'dividing line' between verbal and visual forms, meaning and materiality and the ways in which this split is bound up with historical, cultural, and ideological configurations. My own take on verbal-visual relations is very much informed by these thinkers' notion of a 'fault line' between the verbal and the visual which the works I examine in this thesis negotiate to bring to attention and critique other kinds of cultural and ideological divisions and compartmentalisations. Discursively-produced and reproduced rather than inherently embedded in the essential qualities of these different modes of representing and perceiving, this 'fault line' also potentially forms a space of overlap in which, as Mitchell suggests, word-qualities and image-qualities might begin to mingle 'as if the image could speak and the words were on display'.[116] Such a zone of interaction not only deconstructs any notion of 'pure' media by indicating ways in which all media are always-already mixed media, it also begins to suggest ways of seeing and reading 'otherwise' in both a localised aesthetic and a wider cultural and social sense. In the chapters that follow, my engagements with particular works frequently suggest that

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[116] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 68.

productive tensions between word and image or semantic drives and visual materiality embody a politics of representation not only by making 'dividing lines' visible but also by opening up a 'non-place' in representation as Foucault's thought suggests, in which silenced or unacknowledged presences might be detected.[117] Whilst my negotiations of the 'dividing line' between verbal and visual domains seek sites of interplay and overlap as well as gaps and fissures, I am wary of modes of interpretation – like those suggested by the comparative mode and cognitive poetics – that want too easily to resolve the differences between verbal and visual modes of representation by uniting them under an overarching semiotic system. It seems to me that such methods most often end up subsuming visuality to a language-based model of meaning whilst disregarding the unparaphrasable or unsubsumable dimensions of visual materiality. The semiotic turn adopted by the comparative method of interpretation in particular is symptomatic of a wider disavowal of sensuous modes of meaningfulness. Such abjuration might be countered, I want to suggest, by means of 'an insistence on literalness and materiality', to borrow Mitchell's wording.[118]

My own 'insistence on literalness and materiality' draws on the work of McGann, Drucker and J.M. Bernstein to propose that the visual, sensuous dimensions of the poetic page are meaningful in and of themselves as well as in a process of interplay with the semantic functioning of linguistic signifiers. My sense is that the material poetries I focus on in this thesis foreground and draw on the visual aspects of writing whose meaningfulness is largely unacknowledged and even suppressed in conventional practices of writing, printing, reading and interpreting for the ways in which they are entangled with other denigrated and disavowed presences that form the underside of modernity's dominant discourses. The sensuous dimensions of writing, these poetries suggest, carry as indexical imprint historical traces, including those that have not been part of 'official' histories. Therefore Peirce's notion of indexical signs, which function not so much by substitution or resemblance as by 'physical connection' has formed part of my understanding of how the material dimensions of these poetries claim links to particular historical events and cultural configurations. In the introduction to this thesis, I asked how archaeological poetries which offer their own material surfaces as historical artefacts relate 'the space right here in front of us, *this* space here on the page' to particular histories.[119] I have found the notion of indexicality helpful for engaging with this question, especially in relation to poetries which, like Howe's word

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[117] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 41.
[118] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 90.
[119] Brian McHale, 'Archaeologies of Knowledge: Hill's Middens, Heaney's Bogs, Schwerner's Tablets', *New Literary History*, 30 (1999), 239-262, p. 256.

square, frequently draw on material derived from source texts related to specific historical themes. Historical fragments and cultural residues are embedded in poems like Howe's as indexical markers whose 'sensuous particulars' form a mode of articulation for presences and processes that, like sensuous meaningfulness itself, cannot (and in some cases should not) be subsumed by discursive modes of cognising and enunciating.

Redeeming material meaning?

Clearly, such a claim for the capacity of 'sensuous particulars' to carry traces of that which has been disavowed or suppressed does not constitute a rationalist-revisionist mode of engaging with history. It hardly needs saying that, whilst the poetries I consider in the subsequent chapters of this work often draw on appropriated material, they do not perform a methodical exegesis of relevant archives, documents and records in order to fill in history's gaps or to trace alternative versions of the past. And yet this is in many ways an important point, because it indicates something about the particular model of history and historicism underpinning these poetries' activities. The aspiration to recover certain fragments of material meaning for their potential to body forth hitherto unacknowledged aspects of the past resonates powerfully and in interesting ways with the messianic aspects of Walter Benjamin's historical materialist project 'to brush history against the grain.'[120] A work like the opening poem of Howe's *Secret History* proceeds on the basis that, as Benjamin famously declared, '[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' and that there is no mode of transmission of history that is not 'tainted' by this barbarism.[121] Furthermore, echoing Benjamin's 'materialism', this poetic engagement with the past views history as something that can and must be *physically* 'brushed', materially 'seized', in order to make visible the trace of 'anonymous toil' of oppressed peoples secreted within the document of civilization/barbarism.[122]

Yet, for Benjamin, the 'barbarism' of the 'document' is not quite all that is left of history; in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' he imagines the history of modernity-as-progress as an ongoing 'catastrophe' which leaves behind it the shattered fragments of a broken world.[123] In this rubble of history, Benjamin detects something worth rescuing; his thinking on history insists on the enduring presence of the remains of 'spark[s] of hope in the past'.[124] As the theological language of the 'Theses' suggests, this notion is rooted in the

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[120] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 248.
[121] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248.
[122] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 247, 248
[123] See Benjamin's section on the 'angel of history', 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' IX, *Illuminations*, p. 249
[124] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 247.

Lurianic Kabbalistic account of the 'breaking of the vessels'.[125] According to Luria's interpretation of the *Zohar*, God's divine light was supposed to be contained in ten *sefirot* or special 'vessels', but the light was too powerful for them and they broke apart. Falling to earth, their shattered remains became the *kelipot* or 'husks' of all that is evil in the world. However, mixed among the dross of the *kelipot*, sparks of divine light or *shekhinah* remain, and the recovery and restoration of these sparks to their place in the 'ideal order', as Gershom Sholem puts it, is 'the secret purpose of existence'.[126] In Benjamin's thought, the 'husks' of evil are analogous to the disastrous history of bourgeois culture 'which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' at the feet of 'the angel of history' depicted in his 'Theses'.[127] For him, it is the task of the historical materialist to sift through the debris of this history for *shekhinah*-like 'spark[s] of hope in the past'.[128] Brought to bear on the present, grasped as part of the 'constellation which [the historian's] era has formed with a definite earlier one', these 'spark[s]' have the potential to 'transform the present into 'the "time of the now"'... shot through with chips of Messianic time'.[129] To 'brush history against the grain' in a Benjaminian sense, then, is not just to write in history's 'barbarism' as inseparable from its claims to 'civilization' nor is it to simply recover 'the anonymous toil' of peoples unacknowledged in dominant versions of history; it is to embark on a quest to recover what Jürgen Habermas refers to as 'semantic potentials' or 'semantic energies' gleaned from the past, moments whose possibilities and significance have gone unrecognised and unfulfilled, and to rejuvenate the present with the vigour of their latent promise.[130]

But what kind of materialism is Benjamin's? How does his messianism sit with the Marxist historical materialism that he both invokes and undoubtedly reinvents? As his 'Theses' amply demonstrate, Benjamin broadly agrees with the Marxian maxim that '[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'[131] insofar as his concept of history aims to rescue '[t]he tradition of the oppressed' and to bring to attention the 'anonymous toil' of those classes whose unacknowledged labour is secreted in the 'cultural treasures', the material 'spoils' presided over by history's 'victorious'.[132] Furthermore, he sees unequal economic and power relations between classes as producing a '"state of emergency" in which we live' and which is 'not the exception but the rule' of

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[125] See Gershom G. Scholem's account of Lurianic Kabbalism in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Shocken Publishing House, 1941), pp. 240-282, and especially pp. 262–265.

[126] Scholem, p. 264.

[127] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 249.

[128] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 247.

[129] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 254–259.

[130] Jürgen Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising of Rescuing Critique', in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA & London, England: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 90–129, pp. 120, 112.

[131] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848] (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 219.

[132] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248.

the catastrophic modernity depicted in his 'angel of history' thesis.[133] However, Benjamin obviously departs from orthodox Marxism in his abandonment of the notion of history as progress. The idea of class struggle as a productive driving force behind a progressive history seemed untenable to Benjamin in the light of the political context in which he was writing; for him, the increasingly oppressive regime created in the name of Marxism under Stalin, the rise of Fascism in Germany, and in 1939 the Hitler-Stalin alliance signalled the failure of Marxist materialist history conceived as a history of progress. According to Rolf Tiedemann, Benjamin's messianism is a response to this situation by which he attempts to inject materialism with a 'revolutionary stimulus' which 'had long since disappeared from the calcified theory of official materialism.'[134]

One way in which Benjamin attempts to reinvigorate materialism is by means of a theological rethinking of dialectics. In his uncompleted *Arcades Project*, Benjamin declares that he wants to 'demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress'.[135] Yet he maintains that 'dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening'.[136] Benjamin conceives of this process of 'awakening' not in terms of a narrative driven by conflicting forces, but rather as a meeting of past and present in a 'now of a particular recognizability': 'the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural.' Benjamin thus proposes a mode of dialectical thinking which is rooted not in temporality but in the 'figural', the image: 'image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill.'[137] Benjamin's 'dialectical image' is 'a constellation saturated with tensions' that produce 'a flash' of cognition or re-cognition.[138] This formulation of the 'dialectical image' resonates strikingly with my discussions in this chapter concerning the discourse of separation between verbal media and visual media; Benjamin is working with precisely the sorts of divisions between these domains that I have mapped in discourses ranging from Lessing's to Mitchell's, for example. In taking the notion of a spatialised 'image' rather than a progressive narrative as his privileged metaphor, Benjamin shifts dialectical thinking from a temporal to a spatial axis. As Tiedemann puts it, 'As opposed to the Marxist dialectic, which "regards every ... developed social form as in fluid movement,"

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[133] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248.

[134] Rolf Tiedemann, Dialectics at a Standstill', in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 929–945, p. 204

[135] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 460 (N2,2).

[136] Benjamin, *Arcades Project* p. 13.

[137] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 462 (N3,1).

[138] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 475 (N10a, 3).

Benjamin's dialectic tried to halt the flow of the movement, to grasp each becoming as being."[139] In grasping such moments of 'being', Benjamin hopes 'to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event'.[140] For him, past and present are juxtaposed in the 'small individual moment', their relations crystallised in particular, concrete ways that produce productive 'flashes' of cognition or 'historical awakening'. Furthermore, this notion of 'dialectical images' brings a Benjaminian theory of experience to bear on materialist dialectics. According to Adorno, 'Benjamin does not weave a relation to the absolute out of concepts, but rather seeks it through corporeal contact with the material."[141] His spatialised notion of dialectics is informed by a theory of experience which wants to recover a sensuous relation with the world of things that in his thinking, according to Tiedemann, had been lost to an abstracting cognition related to the 'achievements of language and writing' in human history. Benjamin's concept of experience, Tiedemann continues, 'was concerned about "palpable knowledge", which "not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes, but can very well possess itself of abstract knowledge – indeed, of dead facts – as something experienced and lived through". Images take the place of concepts'.[142] Benjamin, then, is making a claim for sensuous, 'palpable' encounter, embodied in the 'image' as not subsumable to 'concepts' but as a mode of meaningful knowledge nevertheless. It is not too difficult to spot correspondences between this model of engagement with historical material and the historical activities of an archaeological poem like the opening piece of Howe's Secret History. Indeed, this poem could be read as a literalisation of the 'dialectical image', as 'a constellation' arranged spatially and 'saturated with tensions' between one indexical fragment and another, between the page as visual image and the verbal images of poetry, and between historical references to the eighteenth century and the contemporary moment in which the work is made and read. Like Benjamin's dialectical image, such a poem hopes to deploy these tensions to produce sparks of 'awakening' to materially tangible actualities.

But whether in relation to his 'dialectics at a standstill' or in his historical thinking more generally, the question of Benjamin's success in bringing together theology and a Marxist materialism is one that has been hotly contested among commentators on his work. Although some critics see the relationship of these two axes of his thought as

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[139] Tiedemann, 'Dialectics', p. 943. Tiedemann is quoting Marx, Capital, trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling [1887] (New York: International Publishers, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 20.
[140] Benjamin, Arcades Project, p. 461 (N2,6).
[141] Theodor Adorno, 'Introduction to Benjamin's Schriften', in On Walter Benjamin, ed. by Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA & London, England: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 2–17, p. 4.
[142] Tiedemann, 'Dialectics', p. 934

complementary or even dialectical (Susan Buck-Morss for example),[143] for Tiedemann the combining of historical materialism and theology in Benjamin's thought is an 'attempt to unite the irreconcilable'.[144] Habermas essentially agrees, remarking that his endeavour

> must fail, because the materialist theory of social development cannot simply be fitted into the anarchical conception of the *Jeztzeiten* that intermittently break through fate as if from above. Historical materialism, which reckons on progressive steps not only in the dimension of productive forces but in that of domination as well, cannot be covered over with an antievolutionary conception of history as with a monk's cowl.[145]

Furthermore, this failure means that as far as Habermas is concerned, Benjamin's 'semantic materialism' does not amount to political action: '[t]he liberation from cultural tradition of semantic potentials that must not be lost to the messianic condition is not the same as the liberation of political domination from structural violence'.[146] The point that is being made here parallels Spivak's distinction between aesthetic or philosophical representation and political representation: Benjamin's 'semantic materialism' may well go some way towards philosophically rescuing a 'tradition of the oppressed', but this does not constitute a political emancipation of the oppressed.[147] However, for Habermas, the value of Benjamin's 'rescuing critique' for historical materialism lies not so much in its implications for political action but rather in its capacity to emphasise 'a *further* moment in the concepts of exploitation and progress: besides hunger and oppression, failure; besides prosperity and liberty, happiness.'[148] What Benjamin's 'semantic materialism' suggests, argues Habermas, is that emancipation, without taking account of this '*further* moment', risks becoming meaningless: 'Without the influx of those semantic energies with which Benjamin's rescuing critique was concerned, the structures of practical discourse – finally well established – would necessarily become desolate.'[149] In other words, the relevance of Benjamin's 'semantic materialism' is that in its messianic rescue of unfulfilled potentials, it proposes ways of infusing the 'practical discourse' of historical materialism with new significance.

According to cultural critic Vincent Pecora, Habermas's resuscitation of Benjamin's 'rescuing critique' typifies a postmodern embrace of a Benjaminian 'redemptive

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[143] See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA & London, England: The MIT Press, 1989), pp. 245–252.
[144] Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An interpretation of the theses "On the Concept of History"', trans. Barton Byg, Jeremy Gains and Doris L. Jones in *Walter Benjamin: Critical evaluations in cultural theory*, ed. by Peter Osborne (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 175–209, p. 199.
[145] Habermas, pp. 113–4.
[146] Habermas, pp. 123, 120.
[147] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248.
[148] Habermas, p. 121.
[149] Habermas, p. 123.

overcoming of historical time', albeit without the theological overtones of his thought.[150] In both its critique of Enlightenment narratives of history as progress and its adoption of a Nietzschian 'placing [of] history in the service of present interests', postmodern criticism finds affinities with Benjamin's notion of history. But it is above all in the 'institutionally sanctioned revisionist project of reading the past against the grain of received wisdom' that this influence becomes most visible:

> Benjamin's legacy remains intact in the postmodern cultural critic's faith that a history brushed "against the grain" will reveal, like Foucault's "countermemory," moments of a forgotten past that can in turn seed the present with redemptive, transforming "energy." [151]

Whilst Pecora's perceptive remarks are directed at 'the postmodern cultural critic', they are equally pertinent to works of contemporary art and literature – including of course the material poetries examined in my study – which, after all, participate vigorously in the work of cultural criticism. For him, contemporary projects concerned with lost or unacknowledged histories have imported a Benjaminian redemptive model into their activities; Foucault's notion of 'countermemory', for example, seeks 'moments of a forgotten past' that will provide alternative knowledges which have a bearing on 'present interests'. As Habermas's version of recuperative criticism suggests, what is at stake in the recue of such hitherto lost or suppressed moments of the past is the recovery of 'semantic energies' or 'semantic potentials', which, as this vocabulary indicates, contain the promise of latent meaning potentials that might inject new kinds of significance into the present.[152]

Pecora's compelling argument identifies a key problem with contemporary academia's embrace of this Benjaminian model of history. For him, the central difficulty faced by such projects is

> not simply that the past must be rigorously sifted to cull semantic energies that will lend enduring significance to an ever more disenchanted present. The problem for contemporary cultural criticism is that the true diversity of the past actually yields an excess of these redemptive moments.[153]

Because the 'true diversity of the past' offers a surfeit of unfulfilled potentialities, the impulse to recover forgotten or suppressed pasts is 'by necessity' selective, insisting on the

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[150] Vincent Pecora, 'Benjamin, Kracauer, and Redemptive History', *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 67–100, p. 96
[151] Pecora, pp. 95, 93.
[152] Habermas, pp. 112, 120.
[153] Pecora, p. 96.

special resonances of particular 'redemptive moments', the selection of which, Pecora argues, is shaped by 'present interests'. He worries that the 'semantic energies' of such privileged moments 'culled' from the past are too easily used to fuel particular calls for 'memorial justice' which are produced by specific, competing cultural needs in the present.[154] Consequently, any historical project aimed at recovering 'lost' moments of the past risks 'a certain exclusivist particularism' which paradoxically works against an acknowledgement of the irreducible plurality of history even as it is rooted in this very sense of multiple histories.[155] Pecora points out that the political consequences of such 'an exclusive rather than inclusive vision' are potentially disastrous; forgotten moments of the past co-opted to 'present interests' are often used to justify 'so-called ethnic cleansing', 'religious violence', and 'militant communal aggression'.[156] Although I think Pecora's argument moves rather too swiftly between the two senses of representation – in other words he almost equates philosophical and critical recuperations of lost pasts with political action in the name of memorial justice – the note of caution he sounds is nevertheless salutary. Whilst critical and aesthetic modes of thinking and political action do constitute different modes of representation, they are of course linked, albeit in complex ways. Even where the consequences are not so visible or extreme in political terms, Pecora's argument suggests, contemporary attempts to recover forgotten or suppressed pasts are always involved in suppressions of their own, and might disavow 'true' plurality even as they invoke it.

These very persuasive arguments concerning the dangers and pitfalls of this Benjaminian 'legacy' clearly have a bearing on the works examined in this study. In their insistence on a very literal sense of 'materialism' and on the significance of a kind of sensuous, non-discursive meaning, these works do not of course claim to recover potentials from the rubble of history that are in any way straightforwardly 'semantic', as Habermas's terminology would have it. Nevertheless, as I have indicated in my discussion of J. M. Bernstein's thought, the rescuing of a kind of 'sensuous meaningfulness' from modernity's non-cognitive underside does amount to a recuperation of hitherto unacknowledged meaning potentials – or, more properly, modes of meaningfulness – which aims in some way to enrich and expand the very notion of the semantic and the cognitive, to bring new kinds of meaning to present endeavours.[157] Whilst the unfulfilled potentials of materiality cannot be entirely subsumed to the forms of discourse-based cognition connoted by the

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[154] Pecora, p. 96.
[155] Pecora, p. 94.
[156] Pecora, pp. 96-7
[157] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 47.

notion of semantics, the claim for sensuously-embedded forms of meaningfulness is after all an expansion of the terms of what constitutes meaning. But to what extent is such an aesthetic project prey to some of the problems of a redemptive recovery of lost histories? To what extent is an investigation of a 'secret history' in a work like Howe's opening poem of *Secret History* motivated by 'present interests'? Whose history is being recovered here and in what ways might this involve a suppression of other histories? How does the obliqueness of Howe's 'recovery' of lost moments of the past and its reliance on 'sensuous particulars' complicate these issues? To what extent does such a work embody, acknowledge or transcend such problems implicit in any redemptory historical project?

Such questions will be addressed in the chapters that follow in relation not only to Howe's work but also in relation to Cha's and Maggie O'Sullivan's. Subsequent chapters will investigate in detail the historical resonances of the different kinds of 'sensuous particulars' foregrounded in the works of these three practitioners. My readings of their works will attend to and evaluate the implications of the specific material and semantic details, tensions, and intertwinings of their particular verbal-visual modes of engaging with history; and it will investigate the question of redemptory history in relation to each poet's work. These tasks will be conducted by means of close readings of the material particulars and verbal-visual interactions of each work, as well as a frequent revisiting of the larger theoretical problems and methodological tactics discussed in this first chapter. It should be evident from this initial chapter that the material poetries examined in this thesis, produced between the late 1970s and the present day, have emerged in the context of – and in dialogue with – debates around the recoverability of the past and the simultaneous difficulty and necessity of recovering lost, unacknowledged, or suppressed pasts. In their engagement with these issues, the writers I examine have built on and challenged experimental approaches to the poetic page conducted by precursors such as Gomringer and Olson (to name but two of the most obvious), but they have also drawn on their involvement with the visual arts. In so doing, their works bring historical concerns into relation with a complex series of tensions and dialogues between the language and visual arts, verbal and visual sensory dimensions, semantics and materiality, sensuousness and cognition, which act as embodiments of and reflections upon the problems, possibilities and responsibilities of aesthetic activities which seek to recover neglected elements of the past.

Chapter 2

DICTEE: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's testimonial object

DICTEE as testimonial object

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*[1], as Anne Anlin Cheng perceptively remarks, 'constructs itself almost archivally to bear witness to the traumatic events of modern Korea'.[2] This invocation of the archive provides a useful starting point for thinking about the ways in which *DICTEE*'s formal structure 'bears witness' to a troubled history, because Cha's text does indeed resemble a somewhat motley collection of materials whose individual characteristics and structural organisation physically testify to personal and historical trauma. Says Herman Rapaport, in his reading of Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* 'we have archives – we preserve archives – because there is something in them that defies understanding but that we want to grasp'. Furthermore, 'archives occur at that moment when there is a structural breakdown in memory'.[3] In other words the archive, he suggests, can function as an index of trauma. As a collection of materials that have not yet been incorporated into 'understanding', or into a coherent narrative form, its structure echoes that of a traumatic 'breakdown in memory' in which the traumatic event cannot be assimilated to cognition or to a continuous sense of the past. Just as an archive holds materials which seem to be important but whose significance has not been fully comprehended, *DICTEE* comprises a dislocated collection of awkwardly arranged and materially various textual and visual materials – including a variety of written forms, photographs, diagrams, maps, and letters – which neither individually nor collectively 'make sense', but which nevertheless testify to, and even collectively embody, a traumatic history of fracture, dislocation, silencing, and loss. Cha's assemblage of found and constructed materials pertaining to this history offers itself as an orphaned composite body of diverse fragments, whose disjunctive character imbues this work with a resolutely enigmatic quality that can neither be ignored nor entirely overcome.

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[1] Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text accompanied by the abbreviation D, unless I am referring to a section of the text depicted as an illustration. Except where I am quoting others, I have retained the capitalisation of the text's title and also – as accurately as possible – the capitalisation and spacing of the work's section titles because, as I argue, the material forms of written words – and other aspects of the graphic surface of the page – form an important resource for Cha's historical investigation.
[2] Anne Anlin Cheng, 'Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTÉE*', *MELUS*, 23.4 (1998), 119–133, p. 121.
[3] Herman Rapaport, *Later Derrida* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 75–6.

Cha's archival treatment of a traumatic and marginalised history in *DICTEE* resonates with wider debates about how cultural artefacts 'bear witness' to 'traumatic events' such as those which make up the history of modern Korea and the experiences of its diasporic subjects. Therefore, I have found it useful to think of *DICTEE* in relation to these broader investigations and especially in relation to Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's work on memory and the Holocaust which investigates ways in which traumatic events and their affective resonances are passed down to subsequent generations. Hirsch and Spitzer suggest that new and different sites of memory are needed not only because of the cataclysmic nature of a history such as that of the Holocaust, but also because of the increasingly various and fractured ways in which this history is passed on to second and third generations. Particularly useful for my reading of *DICTEE* is their notion of 'testimonial objects'. Drawing on and rethinking Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, sites 'where memory crystallizes and secretes itself',[4] Hirsch and Spitzer propose alternatives to the public, large-scale, officially-recognised memorial sites Nora has in mind: 'points of memory' rather than *sites of memory*. These 'points' mark an intersection of past and present, spatiality and temporality, personal and cultural memory, and also signal 'the fragmentariness of vestiges of the past'. 'Points of memory, small, fragmentary, mobile and portable, unlike Nora's stable and nationally sanctioned "lieux," are trans- or supranational, better suited to the diaspora memorial cultures that define the post-Holocaust imaginary.'[5] Hirsch and Spitzer's multiple examples of such small-scale sites of memory include family photographs, recipe books, a miniature artist's book made in a concentration camp and also works by artists such as Christian Boltanski and Muriel Hasbun which use de-contextualised, re-contextualised, or altered archival photographs. Such 'points of memory', they argue, function as 'testimonial objects', objects which 'not only signal a visceral material connection to the past and carry its traces forward, but ... also embody the very fractured process of its transmission.'[6] In Hirsch and Spitzer's thinking, then, such objects are indexically linked to a specific historical locus and experience, carrying material traces of that history as part of their physical form. Furthermore, they 'embody the ... fractured process' of that history's transmittal, physically testifying to the difficulties of carrying its traces forward.

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[4] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–24, p. 7
[5] Marianne Hirsch Leo Spitzer, 'What's Wrong with this Picture? : Archival Photographs in Contemporary Narratives, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 5.2 (2006), 229–252, p. 246. See also Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission', *Poetics Today*, 27 (2006), 353–383
[6] Hirsch and Spitzer, 'What's Wrong with this Picture?', p. 237.

Whilst Cha's *DICTEE* obviously comes out of a different cultural and historical context than the artefacts and artworks examined by Hirsch and Spitzer, it nevertheless shares with 'the diaspora memorial cultures that define the post-Holocaust imaginary' a sense of a minority position and a history of trauma and displacement, as well as a sense of reflexivity about the problems of articulating and passing down narratives of the specific history with which it is concerned. Furthermore, like the 'testimonial objects' Hirsch and Spitzer examine, Cha's archivally-constructed text makes a claim to physically *embody* traces of the troubled history to which it bears witness. *DICTEE* is a 'testimonial object' which materially connects to a past whose traces it hopes to carry forward whilst at the same time displaying signs of the fractures and failings of this process.

In order to unpack the ways in which *DICTEE* functions as a testimonial object, is important to acknowledge the strangeness of Cha's formally hybrid and almost unclassifiable work: is this an autobiographical novel, an artist's book, a long poem, or something else entirely? As readers, we are not quite sure what we are dealing with when we pick up *DICTEE*. And this crisis of classification is only the beginning of a larger problem; how to negotiate this archivally-constructed collection of testimonial scraps and engage with traces of the history it hopes to body forth? From the first Cha's text sets readers adrift, refusing to provide captions for its photographs and diagrams, or indeed any kind of explanatory material whatsoever. Even the book's 'contents page' does not immediately present itself as one (figure 7); on first encounter it simply looks like a list of Greek muses and the arts which they embody. It is not until later on in the text, at the beginning of 'CLIO HISTORY' (with the spacing from the column format of the 'contents page' bizarrely retained) that we retrospectively read the list of muses as a list of the book's sections, albeit without the usual page numbers. As this example suggests, Cha's text refuses to guide readers through its pages or through the history it investigates. Rather than attempting to 'solve' the problem of *DICTEE*'s inscrutability however, I want to propose that this work's enigmatic character and intransigent materiality constitutes a large part of its power as a testimonial object. In consistently leaving readers without signposts, *DICTEE* questions the knowability of history. Rather than adopting an epistemological relation to the past, this work embodies and proposes an ethical mode of engagement by means of aesthetic strategies that insist upon an acknowledgement of the concrete specificities of Korean diasporic history.

CLIO	HISTORY
CALLIOPE	EPIC POETRY
URANIA	ASTRONOMY
MELPOMENE	TRAGEDY
ERATO	LOVE POETRY
ELITERE	LYRIC POETRY
THALIA	COMEDY
TERPSICHORE	CHORAL DANCE
POLYMNIA	SACRED POETRY

Figure 7. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 'Contents page'

The re-covery of *DICTEE*

Before embarking on a discussion of how *DICTEE* bears witness to the fraught history of modern Korea, and the role that visual materiality plays in its testimonial articulations, I would like to examine the ways in which this work functions as a testimonial object which physically bears the marks of its own history as a cultural artefact. The story of *DICTEE*'s shifting cultural status not only forms the critical context for my own reading of Cha's text, it also resonates in striking ways with the dilemmas of historical recovery with which the work itself struggles. I previously referred to *DICTEE* as an orphaned text, and this work owes its orphaned quality not only to the archival nature of the material within its pages, but also to the circumstances of its initial publication. Cha was murdered shortly after her book was first published in 1982, and partly because of this *DICTEE* has been left in something of a void; there are no subsequent works and none of the post-publication reflections or interviews that normally help to situate such a work in relation to a wider project or context. Furthermore, Cha's text was not exactly widely read or known about in its early years. First published by Tanam, the small, independent New York press for which Cha worked in the early 80s, this genre-defying and all-but-unclassifiable work had a modest

readership and generated little critical response. Written by a young and fairly minor figure working on the fringes of conceptual art, performance art, and filmmaking, *DICTEE* was initially only known about and read within the American East and West coast avant-garde circles within which its author had moved.

Almost ten years after its initial publication, however, with the rise of postcolonial and women's studies in the 90s and a concomitant rethinking of identity politics in the humanities, *DICTEE* was 'rediscovered' by American academia and started appearing on university reading lists for newly emerging literature courses on Asian American studies, women's writing, and experimental writing. This new interest in Cha's text began to gather momentum when in the mid 1990s Third Woman Press in Berkeley published a collection of critical essays on *DICTEE* and then reissued the book itself.[7] In 2001 Berkeley Art Museum put on a major retrospective exhibition of Cha's work and in the same year, *DICTEE* was reissued once more by the University of California Press, this time with a new cover and publisher's gloss. The recovery of *DICTEE* from near obscurity, then, was accompanied by a literal re-covering of the book itself, a shift in the text's physical appearance which reveals much about how its critical resurrection has foregrounded certain contexts – and obscured others.

In its first incarnation, the book's front cover depicted an unfathomable black and white wide-format image of some nondescript and culturally non-specific ruins in a desert landscape. The back cover contained only a cropped, overexposed photograph of a group of Korean schoolgirls; there was no blurb, no captions for the cover photographs – no explanatory or introductory material whatsoever (see figure 8). With *DICTEE*'s reissue in 2001 by University of California press, the slightly bizarre and inexplicable image that had previously adorned the front cover was replaced with a soft-focus sepia-tinted image of a young Korean American woman (identified on the jacket as Cha's mother). The back cover of the new version now contains a gloss that frames the book as a 'work of autobiography', provides an outline of the author's life, and highlights the text's concern with gender and with a specifically Korean American identity and history. This new jacket reflects the critical embrace of *DICTEE* in the 90s in which Cha's text was adopted as a postcolonial or Asian American text and which provided biographical and historical contexts for this otherwise quite enigmatic, disjunctive, and often all but impenetrable work. In its new incarnation, the book was re-presented as an autobiographical work with a newly visible gendered and ethnic identity.

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[7] Elaine Kim and Alarcón Norma (eds.), *Writing Self, Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's DICTEE* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994).
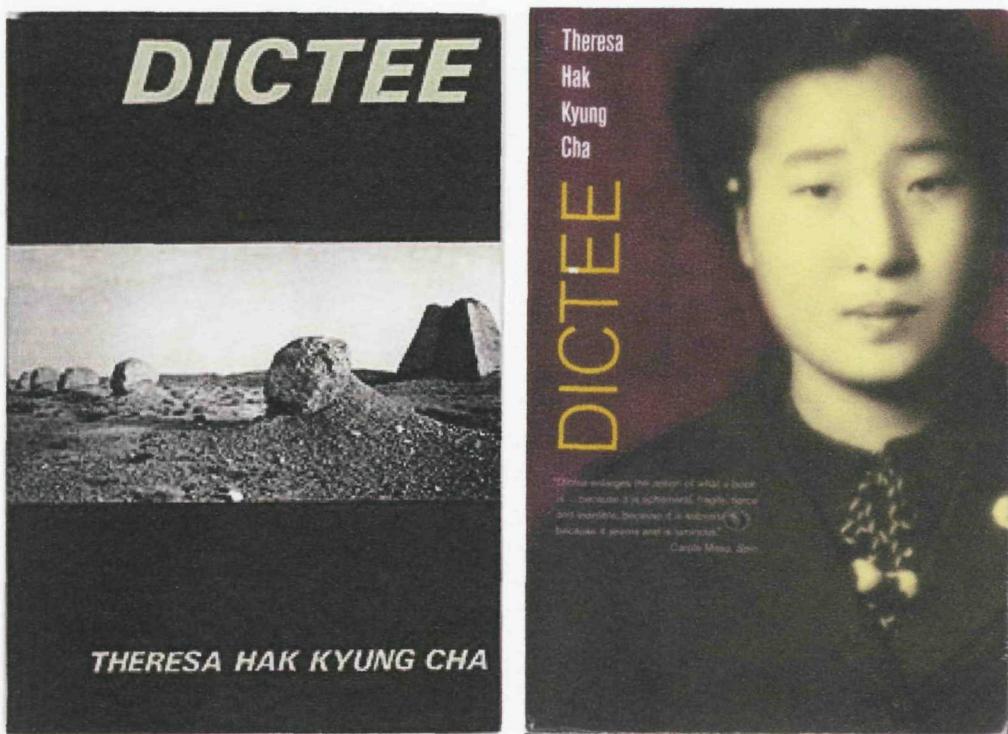
Figure 8. Front covers of the original 1982 version of *DICTEE* (left) and the more recent 2001 University of California Press edition (right)

The autobiographical elements of *DICTEE* foregrounded by the vast majority of this criticism and by the updated version of the book itself do provide important contexts for this work's investigation of history because they stand for, or perhaps more accurately amongst, much broader cultural and historical events. Cha was born in Pusan, South Korea in 1951 during the Korean War, whilst her family's immigration to the U.S. in 1962 occurred amid the social turmoil and mass emigration that followed. Her Catholic schooling in both Korea and the US alluded to in her book points to a long history of cultural imperialism by the West conducted by means of missionary projects, whilst the apparently biographical fragments in *DICTEE* pertaining to Cha's mother's exile in China reference the history of the Japanese colonisation of Korea in the first half of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the emphasis on female perspectives and experiences in *DICTEE* marks an awareness of and an engagement with a Western model of feminism which was both useful and problematic for immigrant women of Cha's generation. The author's own experiences and those of her immediate family thus function as indices for much wider socio-historical patterns of colonisation, displacement, marginalisation, and divided affinities.

However, whilst these contexts are important and valuable, like Cheng, I am slightly sceptical of the impulse to make sense through biographical contextualising of a text which

so persistently questions its own status as 'an object of revelation'.[8] The process of reframing made materially manifest in the processes of the text's re-covering has undoubtedly made DICTEE more easily accessible (and of course more marketable) to a wider readership via by now well-established and institutionally-sanctioned critical frameworks provided by discourses around feminism, ethnic studies, postcolonialism, and identity. But it is also important to acknowledge what this reframing obscures. DICTEE's new jacket downplays the book's more unsettling inscrutable aspects so provokingly signalled by the anonymous and 'unreadable' image of the original cover which, along with the photograph from the back cover, has now become one of a pair of flyleaves. Relegated to a position just inside the jacket, these images occupy a marginal and interstitial position neither inside nor outside the book, neither properly part of the body of the text nor part of its external coverings. This very literal act of marginalisation removes DICTEE's powerfully enigmatic quality from immediate public view. Moreover, in exchanging its original appearance for a jacket that provides the text with a more instantly recognisable ethnic and gendered identity, the cover image and particularly its biographical and contextual notes override the work's uncompromising eschewal of captions, explanatory material and the forging of explicit links. In addition, this re-covering sidelines the shaping force of the author's involvement with conceptual and performance art and filmmaking towards which the film-like character of the images on the text's original jacket obliquely gesture.

'Spectral evidence'

The photograph of crumbling monumental structures that adorned the original cover of DICTEE indicates something very important, I think, about this work's mode of bearing witness. The ruins depicted here embody a process of memorialising; they are concrete traces of a people and a history long since disappeared from living memory. However, Cha's image presents these memorial structures as entirely anonymous; DICTEE provides no caption or any hint of an explanation anywhere in its pages, and the image itself gives nothing away about the geographical location or the cultural and historical origins of the ruins it depicts. Cha offers this radically decontextualised image, then, not as an object of knowledge, but as a document that pointedly refuses to perform documentarily to provide information. This photograph can tell us very little about the landscape and structures it depicts and it seems to have only an oblique and unspecified relation to Korean history or gendered and diasporic identities (hence its displacement to the inner leaves in the more

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[8] Cheng, p. 120.

recent edition of DICTEE). As Ulrich Baer has recently pointed out in his work on photographs and the Holocaust, an image such as this might be thought of as 'spectral evidence', 'evidence' which points to 'the striking gap between what we can see and what we can know.'[9]

Such a gap between seeing and knowing recurrently surfaces in DICTEE via the book's use of multiple uncaptioned photographs and diagrams. Despite the fact that their objectivity has long been under question, photographs nevertheless claim to be the most documentary of witnesses because of their indexical relation to that which they depict. As C. S. Peirce puts it, 'having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature', photographs can claim a 'physical connection' to a real situation.[10] They physically carry an indexical trace of the visual elements of a specific locus in space and time.[11] The photographic image is a highly referential mode of representation; to be confronted with a photograph, in the words of Stephen Bann, is to have the sensation of being brought 'face-to-face with history'.[12] However, whilst the photograph can on some level claim a physical link to a specific time and place, DICTEE's uncaptioned photographs do not name the historical reality they depict. For example, towards the end of her 'CLIO HISTORY' section, Cha inserts an image of three human figures, tied, blindfolded, and standing in a line with outstretched arms on raised mounds of earth, faced by six other figures, some of whom appear to be wearing soldiers' uniforms (see figure 9) This seems to be the scene of an execution, and indeed references to summary executions in previous pages and the phrase 'The decapitated forms.' on the facing page reinforce this supposition. But who are the tied and blindfolded men? Why are they apparently about to be executed? Where and when is this event taking place? Without a caption or framing commentary, this photograph's connections to a historical reality become tenuous and imprecise to say the least. Like the image that adorned the early editions of DICTEE, this photograph has been set adrift from its referents, frustrating what Cheng calls the 'documentary desire' of DICTEE's own 'filmic, documentary' mode.[13] The photograph documents a historical reality of some sort, but the precise nature of the real it depicts is made unavailable to us. This uncaptioned image is offered as a piece of 'spectral evidence' that bears witness to a traumatic event but that points 'the striking gap between

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[9] Ulrich Baer, Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 2.
[10] Charles Sanders Peirce, Collected Papers, 8 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), II (1932), p. 159.
[11] At least in the pre-digital age of photography; and of course Cha's text is pre-digital.
[12] Stephen Bann, 'Face-to-Face with History', New Literary History, 29.2 (1988), 235–246, p. 235
[13] Cheng, p. 120.

Misses nothing. Time, that is. All else. All things else. All other, subject to time. Must answer to time, except. Still born. Aborted. Barely. Infant. Seed, germ, sprout, less even. Dormant. Stagnant. Missing.

The decapitated forms. Worn. Marred, recording a past, of previous forms. The present form face to face reveals the missing, the absent. Would-be-said remnant, memory. But the remnant is the whole.

The memory is the entire. The longing in the face of the lost. Maintains the missing. Fixed between the wax and wane indefinite not a sign of progress. All else age, in time. Except. Some are without.

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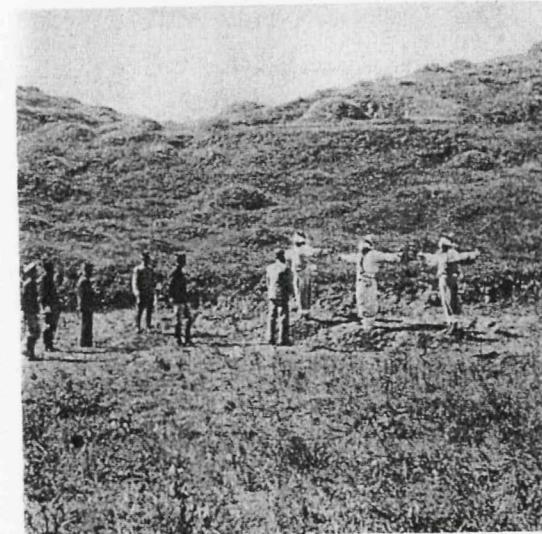
Figure 9. DICTEE, pp. 38–9

what we can see and what we can know' of this historical moment.[14]

DICTEE persistently questions epistemological relations to the past not only by means of its uncaptioned photographs and unexplained maps, diagrams, and other 'archival' scraps, but also through its written 'accounts' of historical events. If this work's uncaptioned photographs are somewhat imprecise and unforthcoming witnesses to history, then some of its written testimonials are downright unreliable. Cha's text signals its own untrustworthiness as a historically accurate document from the outset by means of its epigraph, to which it appends the name of Sappho. However, these lines of verse are actually nowhere to be found in the body of poetic fragments normally recognised as having been written by the ancient Greek poet.[15] This misattribution both indicates the difficulty of recovering authentic and 'whole' documents from the past and acts as a warning to take nothing at 'face value' or 'as read'. Elsewhere in DICTEE, a letter beginning 'Dear Mother' and dated April 19th proves an unreliable witness to events in Korea under successive dictatorial governments of the post-war, post-partition period. The letter alludes to two major uprisings in this period; the April 19th Student Uprising of 1960 against the tyrannical autocratic government of Syngman Rhee,[16] and the Kwangju student protest of 1980 against General Chun Doo Hwan's martial law, both of which resulted in high fatalities.[17] Yet the letter places not twenty but 'eighteen years'(D, 83) between these two key events, conflating the earlier uprising with Cha's own departure from Korea in 1962, and also inserting her narrator into the later 1980 riots, which fell between the author's own visits to Korea in 1979 and 1981.[18]

DICTEE's various testimonial fragments, then, both claim connections to the traumatic history of Korea, and at the same time recurrently question their own capacities as carriers of historical knowledge. A key passage encapsulates such dilemmas of witnessing:

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[14] Baer, p.2.

[15] I have been unable to locate this fragment anywhere but in DICTEE.

[16] Rhee's name, ironically, appears earlier on in the book as one of the signatories for the 'PETITION FROM THE KOREANS OF HAWAII'(D, 34–6) of 1905 in which he is positioned as a spokesperson for a Korea facing Japanese occupation and colonisation.

[17] Andrew C. Nahm, Introduction to Korean History and Culture, (Seoul, Korea: Hollym Corporation, 1996), pp. 285, 302. Nahm gives no figures for casualties in the 1960 uprising, but states that 'as many as 1,200 may have been killed' at Kwangju (302). Other sources used to research the history of modern Korea for the purposes of this chapter include H.G Kim, Modern History of Korea (Pynogyang, North Korea: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1979) and Peter Lowe, The Origins of the Korean War (London: Longman, 1997).

[18] Lawrence Rinder, 'Biography of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha', Guide to the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Collection, California Online Archive <http://content.cdlib.org/view;jsessionid=hSVNSURewq7yvom1?docId=tf238n986k&chunk.id=bioghist-1.9.3&brand=oac> [accessed 22 April, 2008].

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History's recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions for *this* experience, for this *outcome*, that does not cease to continue.

To the others, these accounts are about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land, without any discernable features in the narrative, (all the same) distant like any other.

This document is transmitted through, by the same means, the same channel without distinction the content is delivered in the same style: the word. The image.

(*D*, 32-3)

Whilst Cha's primary target here is 'History's recording', her words point to a more general incommensurability of documentary modes of representation to the specific physicality of historical reality; 'History's recording' is inadequate to capture and convey the '*thisness*' of experience. Instead, in this account, 'The document' delivered by means of 'the word. The image.' functions as a distancing device that allows the bracketing off and non-acknowledgement of a troubled and troubling history. In this mode, 'History's recording' is actually a violation of the historical situation it claims to represent, erasing the specificity of '*this* experience … this *outcome*', and reducing it by abstracting it to a formulaic form of discourse 'about (one more) distant land' that serves to categorise, contain, and dismiss that 'distant land' as 'other'. This process of distancing ensures that the distress of the 'distant land, like (any other)' can be 'Neutralized to achieve the no-response'(D, 33), suggests Cha. Given this critique levelled at 'the word. The image' as witnesses to historical events that are implicated in processes of distancing, Othering, and marginalising, *DICTEE* raises the question of how its own fragmented remains, '[t]his document' (my emphasis), might function as testimony. Whilst Cha is patently suspicious of anything that smacks of documentary realism, that claims neutral and unmediated 'transmission' of 'content', her book nevertheless puts some measure of faith in the testimonial capacities of documents as objects that can, in some more oblique way, bear witness to history. Perhaps *DICTEE*'s testimonial fragments may be compared to souvenirs as described by Susan Stewart, although without the touristic implications of this term; they 'exist as a sample of the now-distanced experience, an experience which the object can only evoke and resonate to, and can never entirely recoup'.[19] In the same way, the various materials that make up *DICTEE*

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[19] Susan Stewart, *On Longing : narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Durham, N. Carolina : Duke University Press, 1993), p. 136

evince a loss of the immediacy of experience and point to the mediated nature of memory. They are reliquaries for memory, but they recurrently signal their own inability and unwillingness to provide unproblematic access to the cultural memories sedimented in them.

However, Cha's deployment of a range of archival scraps as a way of approaching a vexed cultural history goes much further than a postmodern sense of the mediated nature of all representations. As the passage quoted above suggests, Cha's text seeks a language 'physical enough'(D, 32) to approach a multiply fractured, obscured, and palimpsestual cultural history. DICTEE's various pieces of testimonial evidence are a 'sample' from a specific history, proffered for the ways in which they might 'evoke and resonate to' that history by means of their material qualities. This work's insistence on the physicality of its documents constitutes a refusal to represent history in ethereal and abstract terms, aiming rather to get 'to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions for *this* experience, for this *outcome*, that does not cease to continue'(D, 33). Whilst, as Stewart's remarks on the souvenir help to remind us, the document can 'never entirely recoup' the 'flesh and bone' of the past, for Cha the struggle to 'invent anew' a means of representation 'physical enough' to 'evoke and resonate to' the rawness of a traumatic and fractured history is a political necessity. Moreover, this political necessity becomes for Cha an *innovative* necessity, an imperative 'to invent anew expressions' for the cultural history her text negotiates. For Cha, residues of 'the flesh and bone' of history and of the flawed, inadequate and uneven processes of its recording inhere in the material qualities of this book's various kinds of documentation. DICTEE brings to attention the implication of 'the word. The image' in acts of power, oppression, silencing and disavowal 'that does not cease to continue' in the present.

Yet Cha's text also wants to redeploy these means of representation in ways that reveal something of the brute physicality of the traumatic and fractured history to which these objects and accounts act as witnesses. The uncaptioned and decontextualised photographs, misquoted quotations, and unreliable accounts aim not to provide knowledge about Korean history, but rather aspire to formulate and provoke a response to this history. DICTEE thus aspires not to set up an epistemological relation to this history, but to constitute itself as an aesthetic response whose materialities and forms are intimately entwined with the *thisness* of Korean history. Moreover, DICTEE's particular aesthetic strategies constitute and propose an ethical relation to this history by seeking a mode of articulation that is 'physical enough' to bear testimony to the specificity of Korean history.

'Expressions for *this* experience, for this *outcome*' (*D*, 33)

Cha's foregrounding of materiality in *DICTEE* is very much informed by her work as a visual artist and in particular by her engagement with filmic practices and the theoretical issues of her day. During her formative years as an artist from the late 1960s and through the 70s, Cha was working in the highly politicised atmosphere of the post-60s San Francisco bay area. Most particularly in Berkeley where Cha studied and worked, the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations of the 60s fostered a culture of political activism. The spirit of contestation and transformation of the time infused artistic practices too; young artists were increasingly alert to the political implications of aesthetic forms and practices, and were experimenting with new forms and media such as video, installation, performance, and land art which emphasised process and idea over the finished product and sought ways of exhibiting art beyond the traditional gallery system.[20] Cha's writing of *DICTEE* was informed by her immersion in the artistic modes of questioning of the time, and in particular 'the author's larger involvement with new forms of performance and conceptual art, for which the materiality of language as a sign system replaces its strictly expressive features', as Michael Davidson puts it.[21] Davidson's words point to the impact of poststructuralist thought, and in particular its emphasis on 'the materiality of the signifier,' on the artistic practices with which Cha was involved. For Cha an emphasis on the materiality of the various media with which she worked offered resources for an investigation of her own position as a diasporic, transnational, multilinguistic subject, and of the history of trauma and displacement underpinning this sense of cultural positionality.

The greatest influence on Cha's thinking around language and its 'materiality ... as a sign system' undoubtedly came from her work with film. As a filmmaker Cha not only read semiotics, film theory, and feminist criticism, she also spent time studying at the Centre D'Études Américaine du Cinéma in Paris in 1976, where she worked with artists, curators and writers such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Thierry Kuntzel, and Monique Wittig, figures at the cutting edge of structuralist and poststructuralist developments in film and critical theory. She was increasingly drawn to the resources offered by filmic media and film theory, and these influences are very much present in *DICTEE*. The text's front and back flyleaves (or what used to be its front and back covers in its earlier printings) feature black-and-white photographic images on a black (or maroon) background which resemble images projected onto a screen. Together, these photographs

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[20] See Constance M. Lewallen's 'Introduction' in the museum catalogue for Cha's retrospective exhibition of 2001, *The Dream of the Audience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 1–2.
[21] Michael Davidson, 'Hunting Among Stones: Poetry, Pedagogy, and the Pacific Rim' in *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 169–219, p. 210.

suggest that upon opening the book the reader enters into a filmic space. The text itself, both in its larger form and in its minute material details returns time and again to the formal language and structures of film. In *DICTEE*, Cha has in a very concrete sense made a film in the form of a book, deploying filmic techniques and devices such as montage, cutting, suture, dissolves, blank frames, and video snow. By incorporating filmic language and structures into her text, and by montaging together different kinds of materialities, Cha aims towards a language 'physical enough' to articulate – or perhaps more accurately to *embody* – a history of fracture and displacement. In what follows, my reading of this work frequently draws on the author's involvement with filmmaking and investigates ways in which her filmic techniques inform this testimonial object's mode of historical enquiry.

'Break. Break by all means'(D, 79)

As Michael Davidson rightly points out, Cha's *DICTEE* is structured like a filmic montage.[22] This formal technique is rooted in her work with film and informed by an engagement with theoretical debates around cinematography in which montage was often taken as a fundamental filmic principle. Christian Metz, for example, with whom Cha worked in Paris, was interested in constructing a structuralist theory of 'film language', based on the premise that the process of editing shots together could usefully be compared to the process of constructing a linguistic structure like a sentence or, perhaps more accurately, a larger narrative.[23] Such endeavours built on earlier theorisations of montage such as those of Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, Soviet filmmakers and theorists working in the first half of the twentieth century, who saw montage as *the* defining feature of the art of film. Pudovkin and Eisenstein came up with different theorisations of montage which continued to inform subsequent generations of filmmakers and film theorists both in mainstream cinema and in the alternative, avant-garde practices in which Cha participated. In essence, Pudovkin saw montage as a process of building, of adding one shot to another in a series of linked elements,[24] whilst for Eisenstein, montage was characterized '[b]y collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other'.[25] These contrasting ideals produced differing effects in the films of their proponents; Pudovkin's view of montage as linkage contributed to a sense of composed purposefulness in his realist

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[22] Davidson, 'Hunting', p. 211.
[23] Christian Metz, 'Film Language', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings, Fourth Edition*, ed. by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 168-178. Metz coined the term *syntagma* to talk about the syntactic structuring of shots.
[24] See Vsevolod Pudovkin, 'from *Film Technique*: [On Editing]', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 121 – 126.
[25] Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram' & 'A Dialectic Approach to Film Form', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 127 – 154, p. 133.

narrative films, whilst Eisenstein's emphasis on 'collision' and 'conflict' resulted in characteristically tension-filled and frantically-paced films.[26] In what ways, then, does Cha's montage technique build upon or depart from these foundational models? What kind of montage is *DICTEE* and what implications does its formal arrangement have for the testimonial capacities of the text's various components?

Looking again at one of my previously mentioned examples from *DICTEE*, the photograph of an execution juxtaposed with a text predominantly comprised of linguistically awkward sentence fragments (see figure 9), Pudovkin's emphasis on montage as a series of linked pieces seems not quite adequate to explain the relationship between the two elements here. There *are* links between the text and the image as I have already indicated above; the words 'The decapitated forms' on the facing page, for example, form an associative conceptual link with the scene of execution depicted in the photograph. But such a connection is tenuous at best; it is hardly the kind of explicit tie that forges the sense of narrative continuity towards which Pudovkin's version of montage aimed. Moreover, the abrupt shift from one kind of representational mode to another – from text to image – seems to describe more of a break than a link, especially as word and picture here do not conform to a 'normal' text-image relationship in which either words explain the image or the image illustrates the text.

In this example, and indeed throughout *DICTEE*, text and image are juxtaposed, sitting awkwardly on opposite sides of the opening, jarring uncomfortably against one another. Perhaps, then, this 'join' between montaged pieces might be better described by means of Eisenstein's theory of 'collision'. The violent cuts and conflicting energies Eisenstein both theorised and practiced resonate powerfully with the abrupt juxtapositions evident throughout Cha's book. Furthermore, these 'cuts' are most dramatic and unsettling when, as in the example of the opening containing the execution scene, they involve a shift between textual and visual material. These text/image cuts might be read as 'collisions' of word and image in which, to recall the words of Michel Foucault, '[w]e must ... admit between the figure and the text a whole series of intersections – or rather attacks launched by one against the other, arrows shot at the enemy target, enterprises of subversion and destruction, lance blows and wounds, a battle.'[27] As Foucault's deliberations upon word/image relationships suggest, this 'battle' is carried out between the activities of reading and seeing, or as W.J.T Mitchell puts it, 'between the (speaking) self and the (seen)

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[26] Pudovkin's most well-known films include *Mother* and *Storm over Asia* and Eisenstein's *Strike*, *Potemkin*, and *October*.

[27] Foucault, Michel, *This is not a Pipe*, ed. and trans. by James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 26.

other; between telling and showing; between "hearsay" and "eyewitness" testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience."[28] By refusing to supply an explicit link between text and image or allowing one representational mode to dominate over the other, *DICTEE*'s text/image juxtaposition puts numerous such tensions into play. In the opening of the execution scene, for example, the process of reading the text from left to right and top to bottom, and then viewing the image 'at a glance' almost acts as a vindication of G.E. Lessing's dictum that verbal signs unfold in time and are experienced as a sequence whilst visual signs are spatial and experienced in terms of simultaneity.[29] Furthermore, the text in this opening apparently reflects on its own capacity for temporal unfolding: 'Time, that is. All else. All things else. All other, subject to time. Must answer to time, except.'(D, 38) Thus the text implicitly launches an 'attack' on the image of the facing page, which can only capture a frozen moment of time; the photograph cannot relate, for example, whether its tied and blindfolded subjects were actually executed or not – it cannot indicate what happened next. At the same time, the image's capacity to show, to bring the likeness of a scene materially before the viewer points to the text's inability to depict. Indeed, this particular piece of text is especially inadequate in this respect; its fragmented, seemingly frequently 'Aborted'(D, 38) sentences embody writing's constant pursuit of 'the missing, the absent', the referents which words can only ever gesture towards but not make present even in the form of a likeness.

Such a 'jump cut' between text and image typifies the tensions of *DICTEE*'s montage method. Whilst not all Cha's 'cuts' between one montaged element and the next involve a juxtaposition of textual and visual material, such tensions between word and image do occur time and again in *DICTEE*, and it is at these sites of word/image intersection that the principles of discord at the heart of Cha's montage technique as a whole are at their most palpable. In Eisenstein's thinking, such a structural 'battle' enacted between juxtaposed pieces had political as well as formal implications. He saw the conflicts enacted through montage as an embodiment of a Marxist dialectical process by which the energies of colliding elements not only ultimately combine to form a synthesis, an essentially unified totality, but also 'serve as impulses driving forward the total film.'[30] As influential as

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[28] W.J.T Mitchell, *Picture Theory: essays on verbal and visual representation* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 5.
[29] See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1962)
[30] Eisenstein, p. 134.

Eisenstein's theory of montage was for experimental filmmakers like Cha, in this respect her montage technique diverges quite sharply from his model. Firstly, DICTEE repeatedly insists on its own status as a collection of fragmented 'remnant[s]'(D, 38) that resolutely refuse to cohere into a unified or coherent whole. Secondly, any notion of a dialectical process 'driving forward' the narrative of the work is repeatedly thwarted by DICTEE's 'cuts' which frequently abort any sense of momentum. As if to declare such a refusal of a forward-moving dialectical process in its montage form, the text with which the execution scene is juxtaposed announces: 'Fixed between the wax and wane indefinite not a sign of progress'(D, 38). This statement, with the ambiguous and jolting 'indefinite' dropped into its centre, uncannily points to what is perhaps the most unsettling feature of Cha's text/image juxtapositions and her 'cuts' more generally: the 'indefinite' relation between montaged elements and the absence of a sense of progression or dialectical resolution. Between the text and the image of the execution scene opening, for example, both tenuous linkages and 'collisions' occur, but overwhelmingly the text and image seem simply to miss one another. What links there are here are oblique ones, and the conflicts of the text/image 'battle' are perhaps more glancing blows than the head-on collisions Eisenstein had in mind. What this 'cut' between text and image enacts, above all, is an 'indefinite' relationship that might even be read as a non-relation.

Cha's technique in DICTEE, then, constitutes a more radically disjunctive and non-narrative form of montage than either Pudovkin's model of linkages or Eisenstein's model of collisions can account for. This work's various components are placed together in a disjointed manner that embodies a series of breaks rather than the kind of ultimately unified narrative whole that both these early theorists saw as the ultimate goal of the filmic montage. This disjunctive method clearly has implications for DICTEE's historical project. In its abrupt shifts between fragmented narratives and uncaptioned photographs for example, between different modes of representation and different kinds of materiality, this work embodies the fractures of the traumatic history of modern Korea; the oppressive Japanese occupation and colonisation between 1910 and 1945, the post-war partition of north and south which placed an 'incision' across the country, the bloody Korean War fuelled by the superpowers' cold war agendas, the violent social unrest in South Korea of the 60s, 70s and 80s under oppressive regimes, North Korea's continuing isolation, and the ruptures of diaspora which represent a haemorrhage issuing from the wounds of this history. In the wake of these events which are 'not a sign of progress', DICTEE offers a kind of 'cut-up' cultural memory of disjointed scraps. The confrontations between text and image in DICTEE epitomise and dramatise this sense of fracture and dislocation. As the

textual page facing the image of the execution scene puts it, 'The present form face to face reveals the missing, the absent.'(D, 38) The literal confrontation of text and image 'face to face' here opens up a gulf or rupture that might approximate a sense of 'the missing, the absent' with which Cha's book is recurrently concerned. In the discomforting stuttering jumps between one montaged piece and another, and especially one medium and another, inhere the ruptures, losses, and absences which – somewhat paradoxically – form the vital core of DICTEE's sense of history.

'Broken speech' (D, 75)

The 'indefinite' relationships between the montaged elements of DICTEE embody a structural principle invoked by David Antin in relation to modernist poetic collage which he describes as 'the dramatic juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements.' The collage principle, he argues, is in 'direct conflict' with 'strategies for combating the apparently chaotic collage landscapes of human experience and turning them into linear narratives with a clearly articulated plot' such as 'a "historical sense" and "psychoanalysis"'.[31] The collage principle, then, as I have already suggested, structurally resists notions of linearity or teleology. But Antin's definition of collage chimes with Cha's method for another reason; he makes linguistic structures the basis for collage's non-narrative impulses. This sense of collage resonates strongly with Cha's interest in the parallels between the structures of language and the structures of film; DICTEE's montage form describes a broken, fractured syntax. But this principle of broken syntax not only informs the text's larger form, it also recurs time and again in its smaller details and in its thematic concerns.

A major area of enquiry in DICTEE is the problem of verbal articulation, and particularly the difficulty of speaking as a 'subaltern' subject in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's sense. Cha's text recurrently returns to the problems – or the impossibilities even – of speaking from a disempowered minority position; like Spivak, Cha is acutely aware of the prohibitions placed on subaltern speech by colonial and patriarchal 'epistemic violence'.[32] In Cha's text, this prohibition on speaking is performed in quite literal, and often very physical ways. One of DICTEE's recurring tropes is that of 'broken speech'(D, 75); as has been commonly noted, this is a work characterised by a lack of fluency, and many of its pages

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[31] David Antin, 'Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in Contemporary American Poetry, boundary 2, 1.1 (1972), 98–133, p. 106 <http://www.jstor.org/view/01903659/ap020001/02a00130/0> [Accessed November 12th 2004].
[32] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 66–111, p. 76.

record struggles with verbal inarticulacy which are intimately tied to Cha's sense of her own position as an immigrant within American culture and as a woman in relation to the patriarchal cultures of both America and Korea. But the struggles with speaking enacted time and again in DICTEE also have very specific historical resonances; during Japan's colonisation of Korea, the native language, Hangul, was restricted as part of an aggressive project of cultural assimilation. During the latter stages of Japan's colonial project, Korean-language newspapers were banned, instruction in Hangul was abolished in schools and Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names.[33] The Korean subaltern subject then, was quite literally silenced by colonial 'epistemic violence'.

The multiply silenced Korean American subaltern subject is embodied by the female would-be speaker of DICTEE's 'DISEUSE' section. 'DISEUSE', a French word referring to a female speaker, specifically a woman skilled in the professional performance of monologues, is a somewhat ironic title for this passage, as the female figure here is hardly an articulate diseuse. Her desperate attempt to bring forth an utterance fails to produce the desired 'speech', resulting only in 'Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words' (D, 3). This figure's fractured attempts to speak function as an analogue for the historical silencing that haunts Korean history; her simultaneous desire and inability to overcome her muteness has its roots in the Japanese colonial policy of restricting the use of Korean Hangul. Cha's text suggests that harsh penalties were imposed for those who dared break these restrictions: 'The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue... To utter each word is a privilege you risk by death. Not only for you but for all'(D, 46).[34] The historical prohibition on the 'mother tongue' haunts the DISEUSE's efforts to produce an utterance; her muteness is a haunting remnant of the traumatic silencing embedded in Korean history.

If processes of speaking are represented as problematic in DICTEE, the relationship between the speaking subject (or perhaps more properly the subject struggling to speak) and the printed text is hardly an untroubled one either. The persistently 'broken speech' of DICTEE not only represents a multiply inscribed voicelessness, it also forms a critique of phonocentric models of writing and the allied notion that the text constitutes some sort of 'speaking book', to borrow a term from Henry Louis Gates Jnr. As Derrida has argued, dominant Saussurian models of semiotics based on a 'metaphysics of presence' posit writing as a derivative of speech, and thereby conceive of writing as an inscription that

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[33] Nahm, p. 192.
[34] I can find no evidence that the Japanese outlawed Hangul to the extent of imposing a death penalty for speaking it, but of course we need not read this statement literally.

marks the presence of a speaking subject.[35] This is an assumption that underpins much 'minority literature'; the developmental and often autobiographical novel, which charts a teleological process of 'coming to voice,' is a prevalent genre in literatures that emerge from marginalised or disempowered communities. As Gates's work has demonstrated, the 'figure of the talking book' has been central in the formation of an African American literary tradition. Characterised by an 'urgent need to make the text speak', the early slave narratives that mark the inception of this tradition were attempts by their authors to write themselves individually and collectively into being as speaking subjects.[36] But Gates usefully points out that underlying the 'figure of the talking book' is a fundamental paradox. Because black people were considered 'the "lowest" of the human races' and had no political voice, '[t]he trope of the talking book is not a trope of the presence of voice at all, but of its absence'.[37] This absence of the black subject, Gates argues, is embedded in the English language, which aligns blackness with non-existence and lack, making 'the attempt to represent what is not there, to represent that which is *missing* or absent' somewhat 'untenable'.[38]

DICTEE emerges, of course, from a quite different socio-historical context than that of the slave narrative, but it labours under a comparable imperative to 'make the book speak' and is haunted by a history that, albeit in different ways to the history of slavery, makes 'the presence of voice' problematic. Located in relation to a literal historical prohibition of the native Korean language rather than in a racially-inflected metaphysical logic of presence and absence, Cha's book is haunted by the fact of the silencing of Korean Hangul under colonial rule. For Cha, the imperative to acknowledge the untenability of a textual 'coming to voice' is equal to the need to 'make the book speak', because the failure to acknowledge the multiple inscriptions of voicelessness on the cultural history DICTEE negotiates would amount to the non-recognition of this cultural history, a non-acknowledgement of its specificity; it would amount to a suppression of some of its defining features. Here lies one of the central dilemmas of Cha's book; how to articulate a cultural history in which both marginalisation and literal silencing play such a large part? How does a book 'speak' this history when a 'coming to voice' would amount to transcendence of that history that would too easily resolve and smooth over its haunting

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[35] See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974)

[36] Henry Louis Gates Jnr., 'Writing, "Race," and the Difference it Makes', *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp 43–69, p. 64.

[37] Gates, p. 64.

[38] Gates, p. 65.

silences? *DICTEE* embodies an ethical obligation *not* to perform such a 'coming to voice', but then how is this history to be articulated at all?'

A graphic voice 'shot through with holes'

I indicated in my first chapter that Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' suggests a strategy of 'measuring silences' in order to make out subaltern presences in the texts of imperialism.[39] In a similar vein, *DICTEE* proposes a practice of attending to silences, or perhaps more properly, the cracks and fissures of 'broken speech'. These fault-lines and failures, breaks and inarticulacies amount to a form of subaltern utterance which in Cha's book is embedded in the materiality of the written word, a visually-manifested materiality of print on a page which embodies a different kind of verbal-visual relation to the text/image juxtapositions deployed by *DICTEE*'s larger montage form. As Mitchell puts it, 'Writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the "imagetext" incarnate.'[40] With the exception of some reproduced letters, handwritten notes, and Chinese characters, *DICTEE*'s printed language rarely strays too far from the norms of the conventional printed page. Yet Cha's subtle manipulation of printed language and her often physical 'breaking' of the written word or sentence becomes a mode of 'speaking' visually.

DICTEE's own title constitutes a simultaneous foregrounding and interrogation of the relations between graphic inscription and speech. Taking the French word *dictée* – designating the act of dictation – as its title, Cha's book seemingly presents itself as a transcription of spoken utterances. Notably, this French word has a feminine *ée* ending, implying that this dictation is in some way 'feminine', perhaps generated by the Muses whose names provide titles for nine of its ten sections. But the capitalisation of the word *dictée* allows the dropping of the accent over the 'e', making the term also suggestive, in English at least, of a 'dictee' in the sense of someone who is dictated to. Capitalisation and the dropping of an accent, then, makes the title a signifier which subtly shifts between meanings and languages, and this is accomplished by purely graphic means which could not be translated into speech.[41] The graphic 'voice' of the book's own title 'speaks' in ways that a phonocentric model of speech cannot account for.

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[39] Spivak, p. 82.
[40] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 95.
[41] Cha was fond of playing with shifts and overlaps of meaning between French and English words – especially in her artists' books. See for example her piece 'COMMENTAIRE', her contribution to the collection of essays she edited, *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings* (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), pp. 260–327.

Aller à la ligne   C'était le premier jour   point
Elle venait de loin   point   ce soir au dîner   virgule
les familles demanderaient   virgule   ouvre les guil-
lemets   Ça c'est bien passé le premier jour   point
d'interrogation   ferme les guillemets   au moins
virgule   dire le moins possible   virgule   la réponse
serait   virgule   ouvre les guillemets   Il n'y a q'une
chose   point   ferme les guillemets   ouvre les guille-
mets   Il y a quelqu'une   point   loin   point   ferme
les guillemets

Open paragraph   It was the first day   period
She had come from a far   period   tonight at dinner
comma   the families would ask   comma   open
quotation marks   How was the first day   interroga-
tion mark   close quotation marks   at least to say
the least of it possible   comma   the answer would be
open quotation marks   there is but one thing   period
There is someone   period   From   a far   period
close quotation marks

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Figure 10. *DICTEE*, p. 1

The issue of the non-equivalence of writing and speech is again brought to the fore in the book's first page, which presents itself as a record of a simultaneous dictation and translation exercise (figure 10). Most immediately noticeable here is the 'mistaken' rendering of punctuation marks as printed words, an act that points to the transcriber's unfamiliarity with the rules of dictation, and that also demonstrates the gap between spoken words and the graphic marks that purport to represent them. The act of translation from French to English here also points to the incommensurability of languages, to what is lost in linguistic and cultural translation. The explicit gendering of the French is, of course,

erased in the English version, but there are other losses too: the recurring rhymes between 'point', 'loin', and 'moins' for example, which can be visually detected in the repeated 'oin' letter pattern as well as 'heard' in a readerly process of sounding out. Throughout this page, double spaces between phrases and punctuation commands evince a ubiquitous presence of such gaps and losses, making this a visually perforated text. In this way, the graphic surface of the text 'speaks' in a fractured graphic 'voice' of the non-equivalence of voice and writing, and of the stubborn non-translatability of languages. Furthermore, this graphic voice acts as an index for the experience obliquely articulated here, the experience of the 'She' who 'had come from afar', the stranger struggling to find her way through 'the first day' in a new cultural situation. The graphic surface of this page with its errors, approximations, non-equivalences and gaps makes visible a sense of loss and disjunction by embodying these principles in its material form on the page.

Cha's use of visual gaps on *DICTEE*'s first page as a way of bodying forth inarticulacy and unfamiliarity is a strategy employed in various ways throughout her book, and this technique owes something to her work with film. In a film and performance piece called 'Pause   Still' of 1979 comprising slide projections, narrative, and a series of bodily movements, Cha uses blank frames, what she calls the 'specific, isolated time and space between two images' as a means of investigating 'certain "states," "holes in time," memory – the ability and inability to recall, to reminisce.' Cha writes 'While working with projected still images (slides), my concern has been the specific, isolated time and space between two images'.[42] This statement strongly suggests that in this work, the gap between slides or frames becomes a way to investigate memory, its capacities and its 'holes'. As Cha's rendering of the title of 'Pause   Still' with the large gap between the two words suggests, her use of the blank frame in the earlier work finds its counterpart in the use of blanks and white spaces on the printed page, a technique that she employs throughout *DICTEE*. Like the blank frames she was interested in exploring in 'Pause   Still', the visual gaps of Cha's text are 'holes', failures of recall, cognition and articulation, concrete manifestations of loss and absence. One of Cha's particularly interesting and recurrent techniques in *DICTEE* is to literally break words by inserting visible gaps into them as in 'Re move sounds to far' and 'As night re   veils the day'(*D*, 124) in the verse section

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[42] Cha, 'Pause Still (80 Langton Street, SF, CA)', Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Collection, Berkeley Art Museum, Accession No: 1992.4.182
<http://sunsite2.berkeley.edu:8088/xdlib/servlet/archobj?DOCCHOICE=moac/bampfa_1992.4.182_moa2.xml>
[Accessed April 2005].

entitled 'ALLER/RETOUR'. These broken words physically enact the all-pervasive occurrences of 'Absence' and 'silence'(D, 124) that are woven into these pages. The prefix 're' shared by both these words indicates a recurrence or a process of return or repetition that brings to mind the processes of recovering some element of the past. Thus the empty spaces also suggest a gap that occurs in the attempt to return indicated by the title 'ALLER/RETOUR'. The fissures in 'Re move' and 're   veils' appear to literally enact what the writer Henri Raczymow, writing on memory and the Holocaust, has described as a 'Memory Shot Through With Holes'.[43] Although Cha writes a different cultural history to that of Raczymow, her text certainly seems to share his sense of a personal and cultural memory whose 'holes' do not just represent the wear and tear of time but rather indicate a past which violence and oppression has 'shot through'. Moreover, these holes cannot be consigned to the past but rather return to haunt the present of the 'Memory less'(D, 45). The gaps of 'Re move', 're   veils' and 'Memory less' visually suggest an 'Absence' or 'silence' that returns from history to haunt the text on the pages of Cha's book.

Furthermore, the haunting that DICTEE's broken words physically enact also becomes a semantic haunting: in creating spaces between stems and affixes, Cha opens up particular words to a linguistic ghosting by which alternative meanings suggest themselves. 'Re move' comes to indicate not only a taking away but also a renewed motion. 'Memory less', broken apart, suggests not so much total amnesia as memory minus something. Meanwhile, 're   veils', which features a particularly large gap in its midst, accrues supplementary meanings almost in proportion to the size of the space inhabiting its centre. This fractured word suggests most obviously an action of veiling again, but as reveils is not exactly a word in common usage, and indeed is not even to be found in the dictionary, it is perhaps just as easy to read the word 'reviles' here. This suggestion of verbal abuse, when read in relation to the 'silence' of the line above, corresponds to sense of oscillation and power struggle between night and day, dark and light, going and returning, silence and articulation in this page of verse. In addition, 're   veils' invokes the French reveil, meaning awakening or recovery, a possibility which would amount to a reversal of the implications of the line as a whole. Instead of describing a recurring cycle in which night falls, extinguishing the day, this last line of the page would designate a process by which night awakens the day. In other words the line would point to dawn rather than dusk. Furthermore, the invented word invariably invokes the term 'reveals', which once again stands counter to a process of 'reveiling'. But of course 're   veils', and the line it inhabits,

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[43] Henri Raczymow, 'Memory Shot Through With Holes', Yale French Studies, 85 (1994), 98–105.

refuse to be read definitively in any one of these ways. Instead, the fissure in the word's midst holds multiple possibilities in suspension, insisting on a sense of uncertainty and a refusal of resolution. The gap thus engenders a supplementary logic by which each empty white space indicates an absence whilst at the same time enabling a sense of something more, something extra in processes of signification, and something that cannot be resolved.

The constellations of alternative and even contradictory meanings that emerge from the fractures of DICTEE's broken words reveal the trace structure of language, the trace in Derridean parlance being the 'presence' in every signification of that which is absent. Certainly, these aspects of Derrida's thought seem particularly apposite for an exploration of the ways in which Cha's 'broken speech' negotiates a 'Memory Shot Through With Holes',[44] although with more of an emphasis on the materiality of the trace than Derrida allows for. The multifarious gaps in Cha's text act as markers for that which is absent or missing whilst they also put into play a supplementary logic which works to generate a proliferation of meaning. I do not want to simplistically suggest, however, that the supplement, the 'something extra' in Cha's text acts as some kind of consolation for that which is missing or absent, that the proliferation of meaning can in some way unproblematically compensate for or even fill the 'holes' that haunt the work. Rather, as Derrida's notion of the supplement would seem to suggest, the 'something more' in the text is always in play with lack or absence and thus unravels the dichotomy of presence and absence. DICTEE's many fractured words both embody the absences and silences that haunt Cha's version of Korean diasporic history and at the same time they 'speak' visually via a graphic voice that concretely manifests speaking silences and invokes absent presences.

'Incision of the seen' (D, 79)

DICTEE's graphic voice 'speaks' not only via the 'imagetext' of its written surfaces, but also in the material details of some of its visual documents. For example, the map of Korea with which the section entitled 'MELPOMENE   TRAGEDY' opens (D, 78) displays a particularly visible wound. Emphasised by means of an especially thick black line, the fissure which severs the map of Korea into two speaks eloquently of the catastrophic partitioning of the country, initially across the 38th parallel, and later along the contested demilitarised zone delineated by the ideological divisions of cold-war politics. In the wake of the Second World War, the USSR and the US agreed to share jurisdiction of the former Japanese colony,

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[44] Raczymow.

dividing Korea along the 38th parallel. Under the neo-colonial influences of the USSR and the US, North Korea and South Korea became politically polarised, this 'Total severance'(D, 79), as the facing page puts it, escalating into the Korean War of 1950–53, in which the cold war superpowers were heavily involved. Over two million Koreans were killed or listed as 'missing' during the conflict and although hostilities ceased in 1953, the North and South are still technically at war, as a peace treaty has never been agreed upon and signed by the parties involved.[45] The line of partition, *DICTEE*'s map indicates, is still an open wound, and the bloody history of this 'Incision' continues to seep into more recent Korean history (D, 79). In *DICTEE*'s 'MELPOMENE TRAGEDY' section, the history of Korea's partition acts as a precedent for a series of ruptures – the uprisings of 1960 and 1980 in South Korea against oppressive regimes which resulted in the massacre of demonstrators, 'the blood that will not erase with the rain on the pavement'(D, 82) and the associated diasporic movement of Koreans, a mass migration that represents yet another collective rupture, a haemorrhage issuing from the 'Incision[s]' of Korea's recent history.

Elsewhere in Cha's text, history's fractures become part of the physical make-up of other kinds of documentation. The section entitled 'CALLIOPE EPIC POETRY' opens with the photograph of Cha's mother that now forms the cover image of *DICTEE* and ends with another image of a much older woman (figure 11). The older woman looks hardened, wary, subdued; her eyes do not meet the viewer's, her mouth is set in a resolute line. Whilst the usual absence of captions or explicit commentaries makes the identity of this woman uncertain, the implication is that these are both images of the same woman and that the events referred to in the intervening narratives – a life of exile in China during the Japanese colonisation of Korea and an alienating experience of immigration into America which ensures 'you are not one of them'(D, 56) either in America or in one's homeland – have inscribed themselves upon her being and become visible in her appearance. Moreover, the historical fissures inscribed upon this subject also seem to manifest themselves in the second photo's own surface; at some point this photograph has become crumpled and deep creases run across the image, fissures that cross the document's surface and inscribe themselves like scars across the face of the woman there depicted. This wear and tear physically stands as evidence for the multiply fractured history from which the image emerges.

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[45] Nahm, p. 255. Although open hostilities ceased in 1953, as I write in 2007, North and South Korea are technically still at war, having never signed a peace treaty – the US has still not reached a peace deal with North Korea and is currently wrangling over North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

Figure 11. *DICTEE*, photograph on p. 59

White noise, 'white snow'

The various graphic surfaces of some of *DICTEE*'s images, then, 'speak' visually but silently and obliquely of the fractured history from which they emerge. Cha had been developing an interest in various kinds of visual materiality in relation to problems of voice and the difficulties of articulating a fraught cultural history for some time when she wrote *DICTEE*. In a particularly interesting work of 1975, an eight-minute black and white video entitled *Mouth to Mouth*, Cha experimented with the capacities of the new medium of video, and particularly its propensity towards static and interference, its degraded materiality, in ways that resonate powerfully with some of her tactics in *DICTEE*.[46] This video work is one of the few in Cha's oeuvre in which she explores her native language, Korean Hangul. Conceived as a phonetic alphabet, Hangul was created under King Sejong in the fifteenth century with the intention of creating a system that was better able to express not only the spoken language, but also the feelings and thoughts of Koreans than the ideogrammatic Chinese script in use at the time. The letter shapes of Hangul are designed around the physical act of speaking and with the relationship between the self, the world, and the divine in mind; the consonants mimic the shapes of the speech organs used to pronounce them, namely the tongue, lips, teeth, and throat, whilst the vowels consist of differing configurations of three elements, a vertical line signifying the upright figure of the human, a horizontal line signifying the earth, and a dot (which evolved into a short line) signifying the round

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[46] Cha, *Mouth to Mouth* Documentation', (preparation materials held in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Collection, Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA), Accession No: 1992.4.534).

heaven.[47] The written form of Hangul, then, is not only intimately connected to the act of speaking, claiming a mimetic relation to the physical act of producing sound, but also has embedded within it the idea that language is a quite literal description of the human in relation to the earth and the divine. Furthermore, Hangul has as its very *raison d'être* the belief that a Korean way of being in the world could not be represented in a 'foreign' script such as Chinese.

Cha's video begins by panning across nine Hangul vowel graphemes, whose various combinations of the three elements indicating the human, the earth, and heaven, suggest certain ways of speaking one's presence in the world.[48] Close-up shots of a mouth carefully and painstakingly forming six different sounds in succession follow; presumably these are the sounds of some of the Hangul vowels, but the shots are accompanied not by the sounds of a voice sounding these out, but of birdsong and the sound of running water, fading in and out. However, the overriding visual and acoustic dimension of this video is the incessant, although fluctuating, presence of video static (see figure 12). This unremitting white noise overlays the image of the speaking mouth and the sounds of the natural world, a combination which might otherwise work to posit the vowel phonemes as speaking a state of nature, and Hangul as a 'natural', unmediated expression of a pure, authentic Korean culture. The overwhelming static at times completely blots out the speaking mouth and the sounds of birdsong and running water, signalling an erasure of language and culture. This visual and acoustic muffling also once more recalls the historical suppression of Hangul by the Japanese during Korea's colonial period. Despite this visual and acoustic interference, the fantasy of a lost plenitude still persists in part, and when the video static is at its least hectic, manages almost to fight its way to the surface. However, Cha's video presents this ideal of a fullness of being in language *as* a fantasy and one that is always already lost. Perhaps, the video suggests, this fantasy of a lost plenitude is one that is engendered precisely from the experience of loss itself, just as the image of a mouth moving and the sounds of birdsong and trickling water seem to emerge from the white noise of the video, as if born from the materiality of this hectic visual and auditory chaos itself. Cha's preparation materials for *Mouth to Mouth* show that she had initially entitled this work *White Snow*, a working title which indicates the primacy of the video medium's particular form of interference in the processes of conceiving this work.[49] Indeed, the 'white snow' of the fully realised work very quickly becomes its central defining feature and

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[47] See, for example, Ho-Min Sohn, *The Korean Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 13.
[48] There are ten vowel graphemes in Hangul. Cha omits the grapheme which is sounded 'yu'.
[49] Cha, '*Mouth to Mouth* Documentation'

primary medium, and it is by means of this 'interference' that Cha's video embodies a process of losing one's language and culture and induces an attendant sense of profound disorientation. In this video, the very processes of interference and muffling by the materiality of the medium become the means by which processes of linguistic, cultural, and historical loss and disorientation are articulated.
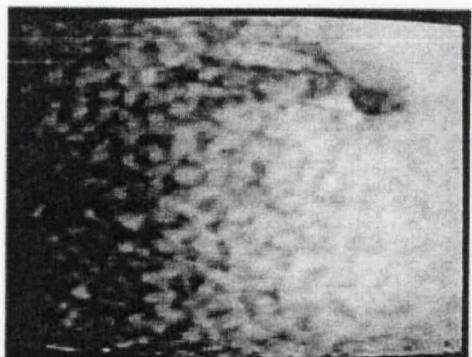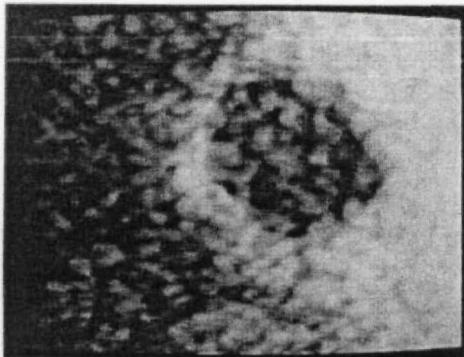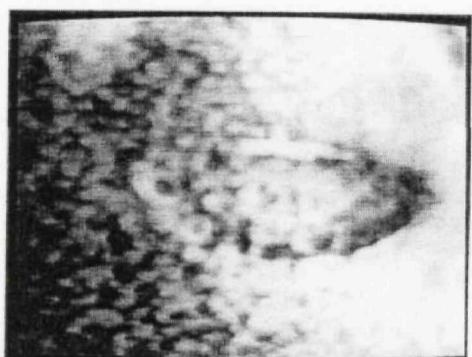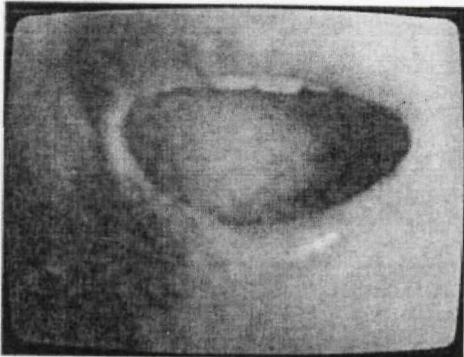
Figure 12. Stills from *Mouth to Mouth* (1975), from Constance M Lewallen (ed.), *The Dream of the Audience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 16–17

The physical motions performed by *Mouth to Mouth*'s disembodied mouth recall the struggles of *DICTEE*'s 'DISEUSE' whose attempts to speak may also be read in the light of the loss of connection with one's native language and culture highlighted by Cha's earlier video work. Indeed, when in the section of *DICTEE* entitled 'ELITERE LYRIC POETRY', the *diseuse* is invoked once more, the text quite explicitly draws attention to the possibility of a pun between *diseuse* and '*disuse*'(*D*, 133). What suffers '*From disuse*' in the processes of foreign language acquisition and in the efforts to 'mimick[ ] the speaking'(*D*, 3) in French and English, and is conspicuously largely absent from the pages of *DICTEE* itself, is Cha's own 'mother tongue'(*D*, 46), Hangul. Hangul itself appears only once in Cha's book, in the form of an image facing the title page (figure 13). The Hangul characters inscribed in this image are offered in *DICTEE* with no translation and no explanation, and for those readers

of this predominantly English-language work who lack any grasp of Hangul, these are indecipherable 'Dead words.'(D, 133) with no immediately discernable meaning. Yet even once the inscription is translated, these remain, in a sense, 'Dead words.' in a 'Dead tongue.' which have been 'Buried'(D, 133). According to Shelley Sunn Wong, the inscription reads 'Mother. I miss you. I am hungry. I want to go home.' and was taken from a coal mine in Japan to which Korean workers were forcibly imported during the colonial period.[50] Not only is this inscription literally 'Buried' within the earth, but because of the restriction of Hangul under the Japanese it is a written representation of a 'forbidden tongue'(D, 46) which had to remain 'Buried' within the muteness of the 'tongue tied' colonised Korean subject.
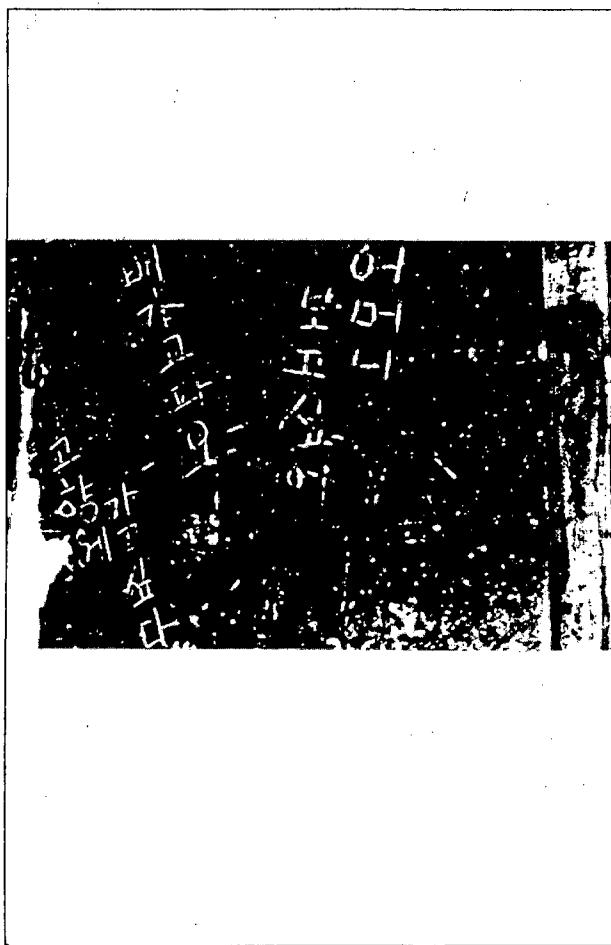
Figure 13. Hangul inscription: Frontispiece of DICTEE

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[50] Shelley Sunn Wong, 'Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée', in Writing Self, Writing Nation, pp. 103-140, p. 107.

DICTEE's image of Hangul characters, then, testifies to processes of muffling and loss on many levels, but I want to suggest that these processes are above all signalled by the image's material qualities. Firstly, as Rosalind Krauss indicates, the graffiti mark is one that is inescapably physical and indexical:

> With the graffito, the expressive mark has a substance made up of the physical residue left by the marker's incision: the smear of graphite, the stain of ink, the welt thrown up by the penknife's slash. But the form of the mark – at this level of "expression" – is itself peculiar; for it inhabits the realm of the clue, the trace, the index. Which is to say the operations of form are those of marking an event [...] even at the time the marker strikes, he strikes in a tense that is over... He delivers his mark over to a future that will be carried on without his presence...[51]

The graffiti depicted as DICTEE's frontispiece belongs precisely to this 'realm of the clue... trace... index', the slanting lines of hurried inscription pointing physically to the furtiveness and urgency of this illegal and dangerous act of inscription when, if to speak Hangul 'is a privilege you risk by death'(D, 46), then to etch it on the walls of a Japanese mine is undoubtedly a risky enterprise. So too this inscription physically points to the absence and anonymity of this inscribing hand, the hand that 'strikes in a tense that is over', that leaves the trace of its absence in the forms of its marks. But in Cha's rendering of the Hangul inscription, this sense of indexically signified loss is heightened by the material qualities of the image's reproduction. In DICTEE's frontispiece, the forms of the scratched words of the inscription are almost entirely eclipsed by the physical qualities of the reproductive medium itself. Resembling either an over-exposed photograph or a badly photocopied reproduction, this high-contrast printing renders the scratches, scrapes and fissures of the writing surface as blobs of white whose signifying potential is as powerful as that of the written characters, particularly for readers unfamiliar with Hangul. Equivalent to 'the smear of graphite, the stain of ink, the welt thrown up by the penknife's slash' these marks of poor-quality reproduction are the 'physical residue' left not by the 'marker's incision' but by the processes of this document's transmission. This 'interference' of the reproduced surface bears a striking resemblance to the video static of Mouth to Mouth; like the white noise of the video medium, the high contrast blobs, scrapes and splashes of the reproduced image become a central part of the document's signifying processes, literally enacting a muffling of Cha's own 'mother tongue'(D, 46). In this way, the deteriorations of the medium perform physical acts that in themselves indexically register a process of

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[51] Rosalind Krauss, The Optical Unconscious (Cambridge, MA & London, England: The MIT Press, 1993), pp. 259–60.

YU GUAN SOON

BIRTH: By Lunar Calendar, 15, March 1903
DEATH: 12, October, 1920. 8:20 A.M.

She is born of one mother and one father.

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Figure 14. *DICTEE*, pp. 24–5

disintegration and distancing which materially amplifies the affect of this articulation of loss.

Elsewhere in *DICTEE*, the degraded image bodies forth other kinds of suppression embedded in Korean history. The first opening of the section entitled 'CLIO   HISTORY' in *DICTEE* contains a photograph of a young woman facing a text detailing with almost absurd brevity the bald statistics of her prematurely curtailed life and the seemingly unnecessary statement 'She is born of one mother and one father'(figure 14). As the narrative following this opening indicates, Soon was an activist involved in the Korean independence movement during colonisation by the Japanese; she was arrested for her part in a wave of demonstrations, of which the March 1st 1919 is the best remembered. Her death, Cha's text suggests, came about as a direct result of her involvement with these protests and her subsequent arrest. But the image/text with which the section begins contains no such detail; the combination of the photographic portrait and perfunctory textual statements about this woman's life bring to attention something else, something in the photographic image that Roland Barthes calls a *punctum*, that 'which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.[52] For Barthes, the *punctum* is often held in a material detail, more particularly in an accidental or unintentional detail. This *punctum*, I would like to suggest, inheres in the particular material quality of the image of Yu Guan Soon; the heavily pixellated surface suggests that the image has been derived from a newspaper cutting and enlarged many times. The grainy but also highly mechanical quality flattens out the young woman's features, turning her eyes into black holes with only the merest hint of grey around the iris, making her features and the shadows of her face grainy and rough-edged, seemingly hurriedly sketched. Additionally, the processes of reproducing the image have introduced flaws, high-contrast blobs that add a further layer of imprecision to the photograph. The reproduced mass-media feel of the image indicates that Yu Guan Soon was not only 'born of one mother and one father' as the facing page asserts, but also of particular historical circumstances which briefly thrust her image into the public domain of media circulation. What the image also points to, though, especially in its visual interruptions, is a collective forgetting of this child revolutionary, or a failure to properly recognise her to begin with. Indeed, Soon's name is not one that appears in many historical accounts of the movement for independence, because Korean nationalist narratives are generally dominated by the names of men. The ragged definition of the young woman's features in this image, the printing errors that invade the picture act collectively as the

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[52] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 27.

'sting, speck, cut, little hole'[53] which in very literal and material ways points not only to the erasure of the details of this woman's life with her execution, but also to the failure of historical narratives to acknowledge her as a significant figure. Yu Guan Soon is pictured here in the process of disappearing into the graininess and the ephemerality of a newspaper cutting. Like the '5,000 years of [Korean] history... lost... to the Japanese'(D, 28) referred to in the following narrative, the memory of Yu Guan Soon is caught in the process of vanishing beneath the tumult of a history that has ravaged Korea: the Japanese colonial occupation, cold-war partition and the subsequent disastrous war, emigration, and exile. Moreover, the tale of Yu Guan Soon is muffled by male-dominated Korean nationalist narratives of the history of Korea and she is all but invisible, Cha feels, to an unconcerned global community for whom Korea itself, despite being so deeply affected by world affairs and by the policies of superpowers such as the US, is largely an unrecognised corner of the world, and a forgotten chapter of history.

The 'prick' of the *punctum* also occurs in the relation here between text and image. The placing of the image of Yu Guan Soon facing the token summary lines sketching out her life and death induces an experience like that described by Barthes on observing a photograph of a young man in a prison cell waiting to be hanged: 'the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence'.[54] So too, the photograph of Yu Guan Soon in conjunction with the words 'DEATH: 12, October, 1920. 8:20 A.M.', 'tells... death in the future'. The combination of text and image on these pages unavoidably becomes a 'discovery' of the death that the text tells us has already happened and that in the photograph is also yet to happen. The gaze of this young woman seems to contain an awareness of her coming death and defiance in the face of it. And yet, despite Barthes's claim, at the same time neither text nor image can claim 'equivalence' to the death that they purportedly record and foretell. Indeed, the combination of text and image point to the glaring inadequacy of 'the word. The image' to the task of articulating the specificity of history towards which Cha's text refers a few pages later. This image/text composite is as close as Cha comes to providing a caption for one of her images, and yet here image and text grate against one another. The text both provides too little information and too much apparently extraneous and puzzling detail which really tells us very little about the woman in the picture on the facing page. Why is

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[53] Barthes, p. 27.
[54] Barthes, p. 96.

the time of death but not of birth important? Why does the text provide such detailed information on the time of death but not the place and, crucially, the circumstances of this death? Do we need to be told that Soon is 'born of one mother and one father'? Above all, though, the text presents this information of a familial, personal nature, whilst the degraded image, especially in its material details, tells a different story of a public and political, if largely unacknowledged life, a life which jars with the personal statistics on the facing page. As in the badly reproduced image of Hangul that makes up *DICTEE*'s frontispiece, the degraded materiality of the image of Soon indicates the capacity of the photograph not just to embody traces of memory, but also to lay bare as material fact processes of erasure or forgetting. Cha redeploys the capacities and especially the failings of mechanical means of production to make these processes of simultaneous remembering and forgetting indexically visible. The aesthetic qualities of these images, and their relations and non-relations with textual inscription, evince and perform processes of muffling and interference which materially enact forms of loss and suppression linked in specific ways with Korean history.

'Layer upon layer' (*Passages Paysages*)

In both its archival presentation of a series of different kinds of testimonial fragments and in its deployment of degraded media in which the materiality of reproduction becomes an inseparable part of the materiality of the historical document and its witnessing capacities, *DICTEE* is profoundly palimpsestual. Turning the pages of this book is like leafing through an archive whose scraps are unarguably disjointed and decontextualised, but which represents an almost archaeological sedimentation of historical material. Thus whilst *DICTEE* follows an aesthetic of disjunction and fracture and frequently embodies processes of erasure and muffling, it physically enacts not only a process of loss but also of physical accretion. The palimpsestual aspects of *DICTEE* once again owe much to Cha's work with film; in her filmworks of the late 1970s, she became increasingly interested in making films involving some aspect of formal layering. In works such as *Other Things Seen Other Things Heard (Aillures)*(1978), she mixed slide projection with performance, moving her own body in and out of the projected image, whilst in *Exilée* (1980) Cha combined video and film by embedding a video monitor in the film screen, thus producing a composite layered image. Above all, Cha's films of this time tended to consist of a series of still images combined by a series of lap dissolves rather than of single moving images. One such work, *Passages Paysages* of 1978, is made up entirely of dissolves arranged as three different series of still images which are shown simultaneously on three monitors (figure 15). Sound, which
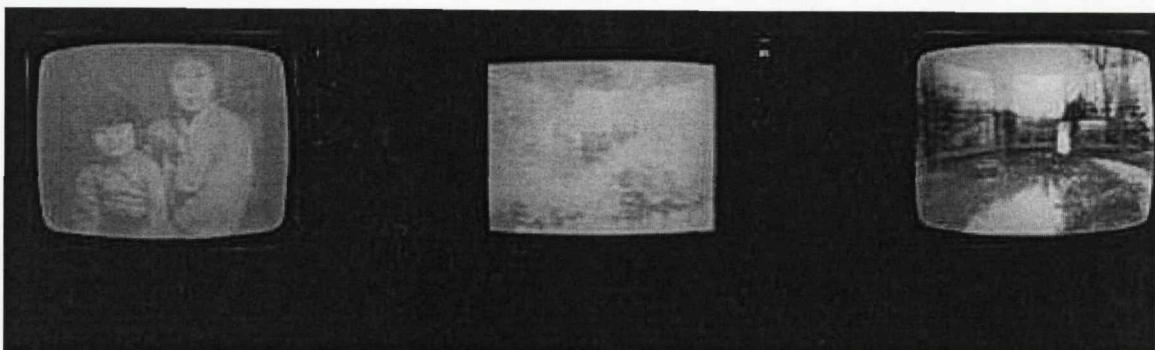
Figure 15. Screening of *Passages Paysages* (1978)

consists of voices, music, and spells of silence, is emitted from the far left and far right monitor. *Passages Paysages* is, then, multiply layered; not only are there three series of images being played, but sounds often overlap, and each image on each screen creates a palimpsestual effect as it dissolves into the next. As the title indicates, the constantly shifting images and acoustic effects of this work explore migratory processes, passages from one terrain or landscape (*paysage*) to another. Images of rooms, crumpled sheets, landscapes, bundles of letters, typeset and handwritten French and English words succeed, superimpose, and play against one another, describing and layering different kinds of cultural spaces and objects. A slide of a bundle of letters tied up in string dissolves into a bay window in a western Victorian style home, which dissolves into an image of an idyllic rural Korean or Chinese landscape, whilst other sequences of overlaid images play on the other monitors.[55] The work's multiple voices, meanwhile, enact a similar process of formal and cultural layering; for example, the theme of struggling with speech, memory, and a loss of language which recurs across the body of Cha's work is elaborated by a female voice reporting upon another woman's loss of language: 'I have forgotten everything, that is what she would say to them, forgotten how to speak at all. Those words were lost as if never spoken even, that once she would have been afraid to say them but would have risked anything to have spoken them, to have felt them in her mouth as they formed.' Meanwhile, an American man's voice, speaking as if reading a letter or diary entry out loud, says 'the radio's playing Jim Morrison from another era'.[56] Elsewhere in the film a voice uttering disjointed English phrases overlaps with a voice speaking halting Korean, and, at

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[55] Documentation for this piece indicates that the crumpled sheets and the bay window images are taken in 'R's room' (R presumably meaning Richard Barnes who Cha later married and who participated in the making of this film), whilst the landscape images we might be tempted to read as Korean are postcards of Chinese landscapes. Cha, 'Preparation materials for *Passages Paysages*', (Cha Collection, BAM/PFA, Accession No. 1992.4.162).
[56] Cha, *Passages Paysages*, 1978 (video work held in Cha Collection, BAM/PFA, Accession No: 1992.4.208).

another point, with traditional Korean music. The composite acoustic-verbal-visual nature of the work means that images, sounds, and words constantly overlap and collide with one another, creating a constantly shifting palimpsest of cultural references, impressions, and modes of expression. In *Passages Paysages*, Cha makes use of sound, word, and image, multiple channels, and the technique of the lap dissolve to create a palimpsestual sense of identity and cultural memory. The layered materiality of the work constitutes a sedimentation of fragmented traces of memory, of verbal, visual, and acoustic testimonial fragments.

Whilst *Passages Paysages* is infused with a sense of fracture, loss, and displacement, this filmwork also articulates an aspiration to form a 'memory bond', as a voice in the work itself puts it, by combining 'layer upon layer' the material 'embers' of lives lived in transition across cultures, languages, and eras.[57] As these snatches of speech from the film suggest, the palimpsestual materiality of this work enacts a process of recomposition, making something new from the scraps of a fractured diasporic existence, forging links which constitute a new kind of 'memory bond'. Whilst Cha's work seems to refuse consolatory gestures of any kind, her strategy of layering in *Passages Paysages* nevertheless points to a redemptive aspect of her collaging of testimonial fragments not only in this filmwork but in *DICTEE* too. In its rescue and re-deployment of cultural fragments, this redemptive dimension of Cha's work has affinities with the Benjaminian model of redemptive history mentioned in my first chapter. We may recall that Benjamin's view of history, rooted in an apocalyptic messianism informed by Kabbalistic mysticism, sees history in terms of an Adamic fall, an ongoing 'catastrophe' which leaves behind it a 'wreckage' of cultural ruins.[58] In 'the fight for the oppressed past', these remains must be sifted through to recover shards or 'spark[s] of hope in the past' which might transform the present into 'the "time of the now"… shot through with chips of Messianic time'.[59] Such an approach to history proposes a raking through of the past's remains in a quest to recover 'spark[s] of hope' that might be rekindled in the present.

Cha's reliance upon the materiality of the fragments of her composite testimonial object to carry forth the 'embers' of cultural memory into the present may be read in the light of this Benjaminian legacy. Furthermore, her recurrent emphasis on the capacities of the various material qualities of images, documents, and texts to make visible physically retained vestiges of memory and to act as a record of the vexed processes of their

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[57] Cha, *Passages Paysages*.
[58] See especially Benjamin's section on the 'angel of history', *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999) p. 249
[59] Benjamin, pp. 254–259.

transmittal suggests that for her the unfulfilled potentials of a broken past lie in the materiality of some of its fragmented remains. In *Passages Paysages*, the physical layering of multiple such fragments aims at a recomposition of remains gleaned from a broken history and a combining or accretion of the 'spark[s] of hope' held therein. By means of such palimpsestual strategies, Cha hopes to 'retrouver les passages – of memory',[60] to open up lost pathways to the past and thus enable its latent and fragmented potentials to infuse the present moment of viewing with potentially transformative 'embers' of redemptory promise.[61]

Via the material qualities of her testimonial fragments, Cha's recovery project in *DICTEE* seeks a mode of representation 'physical enough' to approach the fractured history upon which her work focuses. This emphasis on physicality, on making the potentially redemptory fragmented remains of a cultural history materially present in the artwork might also explain Cha's move to the book form in *DICTEE*. In her preparation materials for *Passages Paysages*, for example, she remarks upon the ephemerality of the film medium which in this work enables a nostalgic, constantly shifting, dreamlike 'sense of lost time and space' and articulates 'the desire to retrieve it, to know again'.[62] But whilst *DICTEE* is undoubtedly informed by the film techniques deployed in her wider body of work, this page-bound work moves towards a more concrete, physically tangible mode of expression, following an aspiration to 'write words more naked than flesh, / stronger than bone, more resilient than / sinew, sensitive than nerve'(*D*, Epigraph). In *DICTEE*, as the book's epigraph implies, it is the *written* word, the physical word printed upon the pages of a book and made subject to the book's form and conventions that promises to preserve as physical trace the latent promise of the 'embers' of a fractured history and deliver them into the present moment of reading.

Cha's rescue of cultural 'embers' and their unfulfilled potential resonates with what Jürgen Habermas refers to as Benjamin's rescue of 'semantic potentials' or 'semantic energies' which promise to bring new meanings to present critical endeavours.[63] Cha's emphasis on the physicality of these traces might seem to work in tension with the notion of 'semantic energies', however, because, as my discussion of materiality and meaning in chapter 1 indicated, sensuous materiality is generally thought of in opposition to, or as incompatible with, discursively-produced meaning. Indeed, as my readings have shown, in

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[60] Cha, 'Preparation materials for *Passages Paysages*', (Cha Collection, BAM/PFA, Accession No. 1992.4.162).
[61] Cha, *Passages Paysages*.
[62] Cha, 'Preparation materials for *Passages Paysages*' (Cha Collection, BAM/PFA, Accession No. 1992.4.162 and 1992.4.44).
[63] Jürgen Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising of Rescuing Critique', in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 90– 28, pp. 120, 112.

DICTEE the materiality of various documents certainly resists translation into any kind of straightforwardly discursively knowable account of the histories embedded here. However, as my discussions of *DICTEE*'s status as a testimonial object have also suggested, this work insists time and again on the capacities of physical form and material details to carry forth meaningful traces of the past and to bear witness to the fractured processes of historical anamnesis. *DICTEE*'s various materialities, then, are not entirely subsumable to semantic functioning and yet they certainly claim to embody 'semantic energies' or unfulfilled meaning potentials. To recall the thought of J.M. Bernstein discussed in my earlier chapter, Cha's text offers itself as the bearer of '*our now delegitimated capacity for significant sensory encounter*', Bernstein's '*significant*' here suggesting both the importance of the role of sensuousness in our relations with the world of things and its potential for generating meaning.[64] What J. M. Bernstein refers to as 'concrete particulars' function in *DICTEE* as ways of proposing alternative kinds of meaning making and relations with history that deploy materiality as a means for approaching aspects of history that, in ways structurally similar to rational modernity's 'delegitimation' of '*sensory encounter*', have been suppressed and marginalised.

DICTEE aims to recover, then, 'energies' that are perhaps not straightforwardly 'semantic' in the usual sense of the term, but traces that nevertheless carry unfulfilled meaning potential. The attempt to make these 'semantic energies' and their redemptory promise visible is discernable, for example, in Cha's frequent meditation upon slippages between languages, most particularly the printed forms of English and French which occur throughout her oeuvre, including *DICTEE*.[65] These languages, implicated in the operations of imperialism and the experiences of migration and exile, are sites of fracture in her work. And yet, as I have suggested, sites of fracture play a key role both in Cha's particular sense of cultural memory and in a Benjaminian activity of seeking the unfulfilled potentials of the past precisely in its ruptures. Furthermore, Cha's French/English wordplays participate in an activity of layering very similar to that in *Passages Paysages* which aims at an accretion and concentration of 'semantic energies'. A particularly interesting example occurs in the section of *DICTEE* entitled 'ERATO LOVE POETRY' where the influence of filmic works such as *Passages Paysages* is very much in evidence. The multiple narratives, images and scenes of this section evince unmistakable filmic associations and qualities; many of the scenes here focus on a cinematic experience and are narrated as if viewed on the screen or

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[64] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 7.
[65] Habermas, p. 112.

through the lens of the camera. In one narrated 'scene' echoing the 'Mouth moving' of the earlier video work *Mouth to Mouth*, a female speaker 'shapes her lips accordingly, gently she blows whos and whys and whats. On verra. O-n. Ver-rah. Verre. Ah. On verra-h. Si. S-i. She hears, we will see'(D, 97-99). The promise 'On verra'/ 'we will see' corresponds to the expectation of literal seeing provoked by the filmic narrative, but it also hints at the possibility of a visionary experience articulated by the overlap of languages here. The homonymic wordplay between 'verra' and 'Verre. Ah' brings to mind the association between vision and understanding; the combining of 'Verre' (glass) with the exclamatory 'Ah' suggests transparency, clarity, and sudden comprehension. By means of language's affinities and happy accidents, this play on words heralds a forthcoming moment of lucidity that seems to inhere precisely in the 'semantic potentials' of this layering of languages.[66] The speaking mouth of this section performs a series of linguistic slippages that are structurally similar to the lap dissolves in *Passages Paysages*. The 'Mouth moving' shifts from 'On verra' through 'Si' (if, yes) – both affirming and announcing the contingency of the initial statement – to an English phrase containing a homonym of 'Si' and translation of 'On verra', 'we will see'. The semantic sparks arising from the movements between languages here gesture towards the presence of what Benjamin calls 'pure language' or the 'one true language'.[67] This 'pure language', for Benjamin, reveals itself in the process of translation, in the simultaneous 'kinship' and 'foreignness' of languages that reveals 'the hidden seed' of 'that which is meant in all languages'.[68] This 'hidden seed' of language is not unlike the 'spark' or 'chip' of messianic potential that dwells in the ruins of history – both Benjamin's view of language and his view of history being highly influenced by Kabbalistic thought – and is similarly charged with redemptory potential. Indeed, Cha's layering of language seems to pursue something very like this 'hidden seed', an irreducible spark of energy *glimpsed in the slippage of languages which cannot be subsumed to meaning effects or contained by symbolic structures*. This spark offers a glimpse of a kind of understanding that transcends language, a redemptory moment of visionary insight.

A redemptory visual poetics?

As my discussion of Benjamin's historical materialism in Chapter 1 began to suggest, a number of critics have highlighted the problematic aspects of the redemptory promise of a Benjaminian model of history. Leo Bersani critiques the redemptory functions ascribed to

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[66] Habermas, p. 120.
[67] Benjamin, pp. 70-82, pp. 74, 76.
[68] Benjamin, p. 75, 80.

artworks with an eye to Benjamin's contribution to what he calls 'the culture of redemption'. According to Bersani, literary art in the modern period has been commonly ascribed a compensatory function for a historical sense of 'damaged or valueless experience' emerging from the traumatic shock of 'the apocalyptic nature of our own modernity'.[69] He argues against 'apparently acceptable views of art's beneficently reconstructive function in culture' because they 'depend on a devaluation of historical experience and of art. The catastrophes of history matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art, and art itself gets reduced to a kind of superior patching function'.[70] Bersani is right, I think, to argue against such a redemptive view of art; as his vocabulary here powerfully indicates, to suggest that art can act as a salve to historical trauma both implies that history's catastrophes can be compensated for – and thus resolved and ultimately dismissed as 'past' and 'over' – and it instrumentalises art, turning it into a tool for historical repair. But to what extent does the redemptory impetus of *DICTEE* fall prey to this danger? Does Cha's text really make a claim to redeem history in the way that Bersani describes? Is this work 'reduced to a kind of superior patching function' by its own enactment of redemptory activity?

As I have already begun to suggest, a redemptive impulse can certainly be detected in *DICTEE*'s project of cultural recuperation, but I think that Cha's text also acknowledges the problems and limitations of redemption in ways that point to blind spots in Bersani's arguments. The promise of a transcendent moment of vision enacted in the scene of linguistic exchange in 'ERATO' recurs, for example, in a different form, in *DICTEE*'s epiphanic ending where once again the promise of visionary enlightenment accompanies a narrated imminent moment of literal seeing. Set at 'early dusk or dawn'(D, 179), this last page of *DICTEE* positions itself at a moment of change when shifting light symbolises a process of transformation. Throughout the passage, a child repeatedly demands of her 'mom' 'Lift me up to the window', signalling the imminent prospect of visually witnessing a transformative moment which not only promises to bestow 'vision' upon the beholder but also raises the possibility of 'lifting the immobile silence'(D, 179) that recurrently haunts this work. The narrative moves impressionistically towards a final long sentence in which the child's request to be lifted 'to the picture image' also becomes a command to 'unleash the ropes' that bring forth the sound of 'bells'. This is a sound that not only forms 'a peal' but also an 'a[p]peal' to the reader to share the envisioning of a moment of transformative change, a

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[69] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 1, 48.
[70] Bersani, p. 1.

moment when that which has been hidden from view might be perceived and that which has been silent may attain voice.

Significantly, this passage which constitutes a metaphorical 'window' offering a moment of transformative vision also physically embodies the shape of a window. The shaping of this block of writing into a perfect square appears so vital to its articulation of visionary promise that it overrides the demands of language and grammar; in order to achieve the perfect alignment of the final full stop with the right hand margin it seems that the expected 'the' of the phrase 'a peal to sky' has been dropped. Yet throughout, this passage is hardly a smooth, grammatically correct articulation of imminent enlightened vision; in its last lines especially the narrative falters as it approaches the moment of 'vision' so that the particularly conspicuous absence of the expected definite article at the passage's tail end is only really the culmination of a radical stumbling in the face of the expected climactic moment of visionary insight. Furthermore, this block of writing visually resembles not so much a 'pane' as a semi-opaque screen or veil. Thus DICTEE's final testimonial fragment both proffers and withholds a redeeming moment of transformative vision by means that are simultaneously linguistic and material, verbal and visual.

By means of this embodied invocation and obstruction of redemptory promise, DICTEE both materially resists reduction to 'a kind of superior patching function' and indicates the limitations of Bersani's polemic against the redemptory possibilities of art. A central problem with his argument is that it hinges on a splitting-off of art from any kind of cognition. Bersani really ascribes the assigning of a redemptive role of art not to the works themselves, but to a critical culture of redemption. '[T]he corrective virtue of works of art' he asserts, 'depends on a misreading of art as philosophy. Art, as Plato rightly saw, cannot have the unity, the identity, the stability of truth; it does not belong to the world of perfectly intelligible ideas.'[71] Bersani thus disavows the possibility that art might be capable of functioning as a mode of thinking. True, a work of art such as DICTEE 'does not belong to the world of perfectly intelligible ideas', but does this necessarily mean that it cannot constitute a mode of cognition, of 'philosophy'? Indeed, to oppose art and cognition in the way that Bersani does is to participate in just the sort of excision of art from rational modernity described by J.M. Bernstein in a move which delegitimates art – and its modes of 'sensory encounter' – as a mode of cognition.[72] Art, Bersani asserts, cannot legitimately function as a corrective to history because it exists in its own autonomous domain walled off from historical experience. By trying to rescue art from its 'devaluation' as a redemptive

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[71] Bersani, p. 2.
[72] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 7.

tool, he strips it of any capacity for cultural and historical critique. Yet as I have suggested throughout this chapter, a work like Cha's DICTEE does indeed function as a mode of cognising not only a traumatic history but also the problems of articulating it. Furthermore, it embodies and reflects upon the very problems of redemption Bersani discusses, by means of a sensuous materiality and a concomitant investigation of the politics of sensory encounter that Bersani's argument would consign to an autonomous and mute realm of 'art'.

Cha's simultaneous offering and withholding of redemptive vision in her epiphanic last page is one instance of this thinking-through of redemption. But DICTEE investigates these issues further via a similar and somewhat more complex move in its 'ERATO LOVE POETRY' section. This section splices together a number of different narratives across a particularly intricate page layout. The main narrative, concerning the visual pursuit of a woman as object of the filmic gaze, is printed only on the verso (left hand) side, whilst the recto (right hand) pages contain other scenes and narratives such as the scene of the 'Mouth moving'(D, 97–99) and quotations from the autobiography of St Therese of Lisieux (see figure 16). Thematic parallels occur across the recto and verso pages – the pursuit of visual experience, and ideas about love, marriage, and the self-sacrifice of women are common threads – whilst the recto sides also often replicate words or phrases from the verso sides. But despite such correspondences and overlaps, reading this section is unarguably a fragmentary experience that not only constantly thwarts the ekphrastic quest after the feminine figure as visual object, but also works to constantly undermine any sense of narrative continuity. Whether following a conventional reading pattern which tackles each page in numbered sequence, or moving across the pages sifting their alternating chunks of text from top to bottom, or tracking one narrative across the verso pages before turning back to follow the recto side sections in sequence, the process of reading and the flow of narrative are invariably interrupted by the textual layout, by the large white gaps on each page, and by the constant vacillation between and splicing of storylines. Yet by recalling the filmic themes and techniques informing this section and Cha's own filmworks, this layout's logic begins to make sense. The two sides of the opening function very much like a split screen, each moving along a separate but interlinked narrative trajectory. Meanwhile, the relation between the recto and verso sides finds its correlative in the technique of the lap dissolve; the two sides of each opening are intimately connected in a visual dialogue: text on one side is answered by white space on the other and vice versa; in a sense, each opening describes the fading in and out of a dissolve. However, the dissolve only literally occurs when the pages are closed, when the 'split screen' of the opening

woman. Never to question. Never to expect but the given. Only the given. She was his wife his possession she belonged to him her husband the man who claimed her and she could not refuse. Perhaps that was how it was. That was how it was then. Perhaps now.

It is the husband who touches. Not as husband. He touches her as he touches all the others. But he touches her with his rank. By his knowledge of his own rank. By the claim of his rank. Gratuity is her body her spirit. Her non-body her non-entity. His privilege possession his claim. Infallible is his ownership. Imbues with mockery at her refusal of him, but her very being that dares to name herself as if she possesses a will. Her own.

One morning. The next morning. It does not matter. So many mornings have passed this way. But this one. Especially. The white mist rising everywhere, constant gathering and dispersing. This is how it fills the screen.

Already there are folds remnant from the previous foldings now leaving a permanent mark. This cloth

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She forgets. She tries to forget. For the moment. For the duration of these moments.

She opens the cloth again. White. Whitest of beige. In the whiteness, subtle hues outlining phoenix from below phoenix from above facing each other in the weave barely appearing. Disappearing into the whiteness.

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Figure 16. *DICTEE*, pp. 112–113

physically becomes the layered text with one page overlaying the last. In this position, text and white spaces would interlace to form one solid block of text with no overlaps or gaps, whilst when the pages are opened in order to be read, the invisibly interwoven text pulls apart to form two related but disjunctive and fragmented bodies of text (see figure 16). This visual dialogue gestures towards an imaginary plenitude, a wholeness of vision or a vision of wholeness which can only occur when the writing is removed from sight upon closing the book, or in the mind's eye as an imaginary process in which visual language floats free from the page.

In both *DICTEE*'s final epiphanic passage and its 'ERATO LOVE POETRY' section Cha ties the promise of a redemptive visionary moment to literal activities of seeing which are both textually referred to and materially enacted in various ways. What the 'ERATO' section makes clear though is that this interlinking of visionary insight to optical experience also problematises the whole idea of transcendent visionary insight by making visible the operations of power and domination at stake in processes of literal seeing. Cha's familiarity with French film theory and semiotics as a student in the 1970s, and her later editing of a book of collected essays on film theory, *Apparatus*, means that she would have been only too aware of critiques of the gaze and of 'ocularcentrism' conducted by critics such as Barthes, Baudry, and Metz with whom she worked in Paris.[73] As the narrative of pursuit of the female subject by a cinematic gaze in 'ERATO' suggests, she was also well versed in feminist contributions to these critical debates. Cha's narrative of a voyeuristic pursuit of a woman in 'ERATO' is conducted with an acute awareness of the power relationships between the gaze of the camera and its feminine object; as Laura Mulvey notoriously put it, 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly.'[74] 'ERATO' knowingly charts these processes of projection and styling; 'One expects her to be beautiful', the text announces, before *stalking its female quarry through her house, building up the 'anticipation' of her visual image, tracking her presence 'through her things, that are hers', tracing her absent body in her 'dress' which 'hangs on a door', constructing her image 'without actually seeing, actually having seen her'(D, 98, 100). The promised moment of 'actually seeing' never quite arrives, though, and when the narrative does make a 'her'(the same 'her'?) visible, the anticipated moment of visual pleasure is absent. Thus whilst Cha's narrative charts the

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[73] Cha (ed.), *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings* (New York: Tanam Press, 1980)
[74] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, [first published in *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), pp. 6–18] pp. 746–757, p. 750.

gendered power relationships at work in processes of looking and being looked at, it also withholds the image of the woman. References to 'whiteness', 'white mist', and 'snow'(D, 94–119) signal an increasing impediment of sight, and prefigure the eventual disappearance of the woman pursued by the camera's gaze. Cha's narrative both makes visible and refuses the power structures at work in the processes of looking, eventually enabling her female character to 'leave[ ] the frame... leave[ ] them empty'(D, 114) and escape the intrusive gaze of the viewer in a symbolic assertion of agency.

The 'ERATO' section of DICTEE also critiques the power relations of the gaze by pointedly enacting a failure of filmic suture. Defined by Kaja Silverman as 'the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity on their viewers', suture comprises techniques which mask the mechanical operations of the camera, inviting an identification between viewer and the (invariably masculine structured) gaze of the film's characters.[75] By including camera directions such as 'Extreme Close Up shot of her face' and 'camera begins to pan'(D, 96), DICTEE returns time and again to the mechanics of the camera's gaze, refusing to suture its readers into an approximation of visual fantasy. And as this section visually demonstrates, DICTEE also fails physically to suture its own various parts together. Just as the camera directions of 'ERATO' remind us of the apparatus of the filmic eye, its split narratives and visually fragmented page layouts return us time and again to the materiality of the unwhole page, the visually gappy text, refusing to cohere into any kind of transcendent vision of wholeness which would not only smooth over the gender inequalities focused on here but might also problematically suggest a healing or transcendence of the ruptures and fractures of the history with which this work is centrally concerned.

But there is yet more to Cha's negotiation of the politics of seeing in 'ERATO'; if processes of literal looking and visual suture are made problematic in this section, so are notions of achieving redemptory moments of visionary enlightenment. The female figure's evasion in 'ERATO' of the reifying and dominating masculine-structured gaze that pursues her functions as an analogue for a moment of enlightening vision which is implied but never wholly realised because to fully grasp this vision would be to fix it, to trap or capture it and in so doing, to strip it of its transformative potential. However, the redemptive impetus of this simultaneously offered and withheld visionary experience is not negated by this frustration of attainment but is, rather, ever more active because it is figured as ongoing, always in process, its redemptive promise left unfulfilled but always potential. In 'ERATO'

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[75] Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 195.

DICTEE aspires not so much to restore some kind of wholeness of vision by a piecing together of fragments, but rather to re-energise possibility, by means of materially-embodied 'semantic energies' which are all the more active precisely because they are never aesthetically resolved and thus exhausted, because they gesture continually towards a state of plenitude just tangible to the 'mind's eye', whilst persistently, concretely negating a completed vision of wholeness.

For all its resistance to notions of recuperation or recovery either of or from the traumas and fractures of history, and its awareness of the dangers of any notion of artistic compensation for historical damage, *DICTEE* does participate in the kind of Benjaminian redemptive activity which Vincent Pecora detects as a pervasive force in many contemporary investigations of lost pasts. As I mentioned in my first chapter, Pecora argues that the problem with this approach to past oppressions and trauma tends to be 'that the true diversity of the past actually yields an excess of these redemptive moments'.[76] His point is that 'a powerful ethical-political impulse to bring to light hidden or forgotten acts of oppression, to find a kind of memorial justice' for specific lost histories so often 'take[s] place in the name of something fairly particular and exclusive'. Such 'exclusive particularism' stands in opposition to and runs the risk of negating the true plurality of the past.[77] Projects to rescue the 'semantic energies' of specific submerged pasts, then, both depend upon the notion of multiple histories and at the same time fail to acknowledge the true multiplicity of history. Cha's focus on a very specific diasporic, gendered Korean American sense of cultural memory in *DICTEE* certainly appears to leave her text open to such charges. Her work's concern with the resonances of a very specific 'special history' does undoubtedly fasten particular significance to the testimonial fragments linked to this history and in so doing enacts a suppression of its own – a suppression of the true plurality even of *this* history let alone wider history. Indeed, in order to bring to attention the 'thisness' of the history that informs its sense of cultural memory, it seems that *DICTEE* must almost inevitably hold the real multiplicity of history in abeyance. And yet at the same time, *DICTEE*'s fragmented, disjunctive, many-layered form aspires to encompass the *thisness* of a specific history by means of a formally enacted principle of multiplicity which as a whole embodies a principle of inclusiveness rather than the kinds of exclusivism through particularity that quite rightly troubles Pecora. Cha's text formally acknowledges that its 'semantic potentials' 'can never be more than the discontinuous products of plural

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[76] Vincent Pecora, 'Benjamin, Kracauer, and Redemptive History', *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 67–100, p. 96.
[77] Pecora, pp. 98, 94.

traditions that are themselves multiple and layered, and in the end always subjectively synthesized'.[78]

Another way of looking at the problematic of particularist historical redemption in this work might be to invoke Seyla Benhabib's notion of 'complementary reciprocity'. In her essay on 'The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics', Benhabib makes a distinction between the perspective of the 'generalized other' and that of the 'concrete other'. By describing ethical relations from the standpoint of the 'generalized other', she writes, '[we] view each and every individual as a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves'. This relationship is 'governed by the norm of symmetrical reciprocity' and aims towards equality of 'rights and entitlements'. Approaching ethical responsibility from the 'standpoint of the "concrete other"', on the other hand, 'requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution.' The relation with the 'concrete other' is based upon 'complementary reciprocity: each is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behaviour through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents, and capacities. Our differences in this case complement, rather than exclude one another.' Benhabib points out that discourses relating to moral ideals have been 'restricted to the standpoint of the "generalized other"' whilst 'the standpoint of the "concrete other" has been silenced... even suppressed'.[79]

It is helpful, I think, to view Cha's DICTEE as an attempt to bring about an encounter with such a 'concrete other'. Notably, in the scene of the 'Mouth moving' in 'ERATO', Cha's book explicitly stages just such an encounter: 'With the hand placed across on the other's lips moving, forming the words. She forms the words with her mouth as the other utter across from her.' (D, 97, 99) Cha's suggestively punning use of 'utter' here points to an acknowledgement of the utterance of an alterity in a mode of 'complementary reciprocity' in which one kind of specificity might complement rather than simply exclude other kinds of specificity. Moreover, throughout DICTEE this encounter with the 'concrete other' is an encounter with concreteness, with physicality, in which the material forms of its various archivally presented testimonial fragments are tied in particular, indexical ways to 'silenced... suppressed' aspects of this 'other' history. In offering its testimonial scraps in the manner of an archive, DICTEE brings about a series of intersections and encounters with

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[78] Pecora, p. 94.
[79] Seyla, Benhabib 'The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics', New German Critique, 35 (1985), pp. 83–96, pp. 93–4.

materially embodied 'concrete others' in which physical fractures between and within Cha's various documents, the interferences of degraded media, and palimpsestual layering are connected to specific events in modern Korean history and to the particular problems of articulating this history.

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As I have suggested throughout this chapter, in DICTEE Cha has created a testimonial object constructed to bear witness not only to the traumatic history of modern Korea but also to the vexed processes of recording and recalling this history. This composite image-text embodies a series of often filmically-influenced aesthetic cleavages, disjunctions, mufflings and layerings as a means to articulate this history and the problems inherent in representing it. In so doing, DICTEE is often equally eloquent about the difficulties of historical anamnesis as it is about the traumatic history to which the work bears witness. Cha's text often reflects on its own failure to carry forth the 'thisness', the specific physical experience of the cultural history with which it is centrally concerned, and this 'failure' is often embedded in the materiality of the book's multiple documents, in their disjointedness from one another, or in their mistake-ridden and gappy textual surfaces, or in the degraded materiality of a much-reproduced image. Yet for all DICTEE's recurrent signalling of this apparent failure, it is also in many senses a redemptive project. The work's scrapbook-like rescue of material remnants of history undertakes a recovery of the 'semantic potentials' that inhere in this material as physical trace, its unrealised energies that promise to imbue the present of the moment of reading with new kinds of meaning. In offering itself as a testimonial object infused with such moments of unfulfilled potential, DICTEE hopes to bring about an encounter with the hitherto suppressed aspects of its history embedded in the concrete specificities of the work's various documents, texts, images – an 'Otherness' of the document and of its history which the work suggests might be affectively apprehended rather than epistemologically comprehended. Crucially, then, this work's mode of engagement with the material remains of Korean history also proposes new kinds of relation with this history. DICTEE hopes to constitute and bring about an ethical relation to its history in which its concrete specificity is neither ignored nor transcended, but rather acknowledged and engaged with in a relationship of complementarity.

Chapter 3

'Visible surface of Discourse':

Susan Howe's re-visualised textual histories

Words that penetrate sight

'I came to words through other visual artists', says Susan Howe in an interview, 'I just took years of moving around the edges of what was present for words to penetrate my sight'.[1] In this highly unusual narrative of poetic beginnings, Howe roots her formative development as a writer in her early career as a visual artist working in New York in the 1960s and early 1970s. She locates her shift to writing poetry in relation to other visual artists' incursions into language amidst the developments of pop, conceptual and minimalist art such as Carl Andre's concrete poems and Robert Smithson's geologically-inspired work on 'Language to be looked at and/or things to be read'.[2] Reflecting on her transition from visual to language-based art, the poet describes words as having entered her 'sight'; despite her move away from the studio and towards the poetic page, she has continued to imagine her medium as something seen.

The printed word increasingly began to enter Howe's visual arts practice in the late 1960s when she started using typewritten text in paintings and installations and producing her first written works in the form of artists' books.[3] Yet even when Howe claims to have been 'just list[ing] words' in works that comprised of names of birds or flowers juxtaposed with photographic images or chart-like arrangements of watercolour washes, she was really already writing poetry. Her early list poems were composed with words selected, combined and placed with an eye and an ear attuned to their visual and sonic shapes, rhythms, and semantic resonances.[4] By the time she had moved on to making word and image environments or installations such as her 'Walls' works of 1969–71, Howe was writing in paratactic poetic lines often combined in couplets or longer irregular stanzas largely devoid of capitalisation and punctuation – all of which have become distinctive traits of her later published poetry. These early poems were part of a verbal-visual environment in which space, placing, size, orientation, and relationships between word and image, artwork and viewer were carefully worked out, and Howe has retained an acute awareness of all these

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[1] Susan Howe and Janet Ruth Falon, 'Speaking With Susan Howe', The Difficulties, 3.2 (1989), 28–42, p. 29.
[2] Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings, ed. by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 61.
[3] As material from her early career held in the Susan Howe Papers in the Mandeville Collection at University of California, San Diego (UCSD) amply demonstrates. See especially MSS. 201, Boxes 12,15, 41 and 61. When citing from this collection I will adopt the cataloguing format used by UCSD.
[4] Howe and Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with Susan Howe', Contemporary Literature, 36.1 (1995), 1–34, pp. 5.

dimensions of the artwork in her later poetic practice. An attuned visual sensibility, manifested by textual arrangements that often disrupt the conventions of the printed page, has remained a persistent and characteristic feature of her poetic practice.

Howe's sense of words that 'penetrate... sight' is rooted in an intensively bookish sensibility. Even her visual work of the late 60s and 70s derives much from the artist's trawling of text books, libraries, and historical accounts. Her visual sensitivity is orientated towards the written word, rooted in an immersion in the archive, the library, the text, the page, the printed word. Historical records and literary history constitute the terrain upon which she conducts her historical enquiries, and her poems often have as their basis a number of source texts from which the poet appropriates and redeploys material. Howe's poems engage with the materiality of these textual traces of history, often via a visual disruption of what Jerome McGann calls the 'bibliographic codes' of the page.[5]

But what does it mean for words to 'penetrate ... sight', for words to be treated as a visual as well as a verbal medium? As I have already indicated in my discussion of one of Howe's poems in chapter 1, this poet's visually experimental work highlights the 'difficulty of talking about visual prosody; we lack a sophisticated critical tradition and ready vocabulary', to recall the words of Craig Dworkin.[6] Many of Howe's unusual-looking graphic surfaces not only outstrip the vocabulary of poetry criticism, they also pose fundamental perceptual problems for readers. Consider, for example, a page from Howe's long poem *A Bibliography of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike* (figure 17). The visual geometry of this page dramatically violates standard page layout, casting readers adrift. A primary difficulty is clearly that of sequencing: in what order are the lines to be read? Is this page really readable at all in the usual sense? At the very least, readers must discard conventional reading patterns – moving from top left to bottom right – in favour of a less predetermined and more physical act of reading involving a constant twisting and turning either of the book or of one's neck. But then to what extent do factors such as the orientation and placing of words and lines affect the making of meaning? Are the lines 'He bowed down his head and said / two or three words / in a low voice' near the centre of the page interpreted differently because they are compressed together, placed at an inverted and sloping angle, and printed to intersect with the partially erased word 'pass' and the line 'they kept'? What are the effects of these material factors? And what happens to the signifying capacities of lines or individual words when they become not so much graphic signs as visual marks? When, for example, the letters of the word 'steps' are pulled apart and rearranged to

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[5] Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.16.
[6] Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2003), p.32.

imitate a set of steps ascending from left to right, how does this typographical arrangement extend or limit the meaning(s) of the word?

That great sea of blood

crucified by ordinance

The malicious author or instigator Fort Navy Militia

Tract the treasons

throw down

Always causes set down

O make me.

of joy

Some passages

an intelligent message

for a different

thrown on this person

Was taken

A

pl

v

o

t

Through the populace

capitalist

Through the populace

Historic

Contemporary History

The People

In a low voice

they kept

He bowed down his head and said

of three words

pas-

that I hide Security and their

Security

strive against starry scruples

at times at times

and wall the brazen wall

I am weary of life

Pretend Justice to cover Perjury

The sentiment sentiment

Goes peers ferrets to the last

steps P r o n s between

Obligation

Figure 17. From Susan Howe's *Bibliography of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike* (Providence: Paradigm Press, 1989), (unpaginated)

Although critics such as Dworkin, Alan Golding, Michael Davidson, and Brian Reed have made valuable contributions towards the task of constructing a 'ready vocabulary' for talking about the visual elements of Howe's work by engaging with problems of reading such as these, the enormous variation in her visual effects, the particular challenges they pose for readers, and above all the complex nature of the links between these graphic surfaces and the historical concerns of her poems warrant further scrutiny.[7] What do Howe's interventions with the 'visible surface of discourse', as her poem *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* puts it, have to do with her poetic investigations of history and historical violence?[8] Critics interested in the visual aspects of Howe's work have often been tempted to make connections between her poems' visual effects and their historical themes. Brian Reed observes that 'the "exploded" pages occur at the points of maximum violence in Howe's work'.[9] And Craig Dworkin remarks that 'Howe structures her ... writing within a thematics of mythical and historical violence: Pearl Harbour, the colonizations of America and Ireland, pursuits and exterminations, captivities and expulsions, regicide, revenge.' Her poems, he contends, 'mate their [historical] themes to the visual violence... of Howe's disrupted folio pages.'[10] But what exactly is the nature of this 'mating'? Both Reed's and Dworkin's analyses assume – to some extent at least – an essentially mimetic relation between Howe's disruptions of page layout and her historical themes in which chaotic page layouts echo or even mimic historical violence. But I want to propose that this poetry does much more than use chaotic page layouts mimetically. Howe's dramatic visual disturbances of the printed page are not entirely shaped by a principle of randomness and disarray that approximates historical violence, nor are they innocently pictorial; rather, they perform an investigation into the paradoxes and conflicts of the visual use of the page for the purposes of historical enquiry.

In this chapter, I will scrutinise the nature of the link between disruptions of typographic convention and Howe's investigation of history by looking at the relations between the visual effects and the historical themes of three of her poems from the late

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[7] As well as Dworkin's aforementioned book, see Michael Davidson's discussion of Howe in his *Ghostlier Demarcations: modern poetry and the material word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Alan Golding, '"Drawings with Words": Susan Howe's Visual Poetics' , in *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, ed. by Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), pp. 152-164, and Brian Reed, '"Eden or Ebb of the Sea": Susan Howe's Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics', *Postmodern Culture*, 14.2 (2004) <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/v014/14.2reed.html> [accessed 11 January 2007].
[8] Howe, 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', *Singularities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. 36.
[9] Reed, (para. 9).
[10] Dworkin, pp. 36–7.

80s and early 90s: *A Bibliography of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike* (hereafter to be referred to as *Eikon Basilike*), 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' and 'Thorow', the latter two of which appear in the three-poem collection *Singularities* published in 1990.[11] In these poems, Howe's experimentation with the radically disrupted visual page as a means for approaching historical violence and trauma seems to reach a peak. Poems of the early 1980s such as *Pythagorean Silence* tend to make use of quite subtle graphic effects like spacing, indentation, and word grids in their negotiations of troubled historical and mythical themes. In more recent works such as *Pierce Arrow* (1999) and *The Midnight* (2003), Howe's focus has generally shifted to less violent histories, and the visual elements of her poems have also changed. Her poems of the late 80s and early 90s, then, combine a preoccupation with historical violence with her most radical visual manipulations of the page.

My discussion of *Eikon Basilike* will centre on the ways in which Howe's radical typographic disruptions work to register historical violence, investigate problems of historical anamnesis, and propose ways of reading history 'otherwise', for its suppressed and silenced dimensions. In my readings of 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' and 'Thorow', I will pursue the redemptive implications of this poetic project of reading history 'otherwise' and consider the ways in which Howe's poems reflect upon and grapple with the problematics of recuperating lost dimensions of history.

Eikon Basilike: icon vs. iconoclasm

Howe's *Eikon Basilike* essentially consists of three visually demarcated parts, beginning with a sequence of pages characterised by frequent violent visual disruption, followed by a long section of more ordered and conventional-looking stanzas only occasionally interrupted by minor visual disturbances, and ending with another short series of pages featuring unconventional page layouts. By means of this three-part structure, the poem moves from an intensely dramatic and almost visceral treatment of key historical and ideological flashpoints, to a sustained poetic sifting of material, to a final partial distancing from the specifics of the poem's theme and a contemplation of broader historical questions. It is my

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[11] Howe, *A Bibliography of the King's Book, or, Eikon Basilike* (Providence: Paradigm Press, 1989). I refer to this original version of the poem rather than the materially different version included as part of the collection *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (New York: New Directions, 1993) because in the later version Howe has had to compromise somewhat on layout. Subsequent references are to the Paradigm Press edition and will be given in parentheses in the text accompanied by the abbreviation *EB*, except where I am quoting from a page depicted as an illustration to which I am referring. No page numbers will be given as this version of the text is unpaginated. The other poems I will be consulting, 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' and 'Thorow' are both contained in the three-poem collection *Singularities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990). Subsequent references to these poems will be to this edition and will be given in the text accompanied by the abbreviation *S*.

contention that Howe's striking graphic surfaces in *Eikon Basilike* play a central role in her historical investigation by staging violent events and dilemmas of historical anamnesis as predicaments of reading and/or seeing. Her disturbances of conventional page layout aspire to induce a transformed historical sensibility attuned to the possibilities of reading textual and visual details for their capacity to embody the residues of ideological configurations and conflicts and to body forth traces of silenced and repressed elements of history. As its title indicates, the poem's historical enquiry in all its stages revolves around a book entitled *Eikon Basilike* (meaning royal image). So my discussion of this work will proceed by scrutinising one particularly striking example of textual disruption from the early pages of the poem which stages a clash between icon and iconoclasm in ways that resonate powerfully both with the poem's historical theme and with Howe's own aesthetic heritage.

Howe's *Eikon Basilike* derives its full title and much of its source material from an obscure bibliography, written by Edward Almack and published in 1896, cataloguing and describing the multiple editions of *The Eikon Basilike*, the book supposedly written by King Charles I during his imprisonment and trial prior to his execution in 1649. First printed on the very day of the monarch's beheading, the King's book was instantly outlawed by Cromwell's government, but royalists continued to secretly print and distribute it, and it became hugely popular and widely read. Due partly to the underground nature of its production, partly to the relative fluidity of print culture at this time, and partly to controversies concerning the book's authorship, the King's *Eikon Basilike* exists in numerous materially different versions. Howe's poem treats Almack's scholarly documentation of this troubled textual history as a belated manifestation of the violent history of the regicide and its aftermath which carries traces of this history in its pages. Appropriated and redeployed fragments of the bibliography and the King's book become historical fragments for which Howe's poem claims an indexical capacity. As I have pointed out in previous chapters, C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory designates indexical signs as those that work by 'physical connection', like a pointing finger or a footprint, or a thunderbolt which 'indicates that something considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was'.[12] In a similar way, text appropriated from Almack's bibliography is offered in Howe's poem as material remains of a particular history which constitute a 'physical connection' with that history's modes of production, its ideological conflicts, and its traumas.

Howe's *Eikon Basilike* attempts to tease out its source texts' indexical properties by radically foregrounding the materiality of the printed text, bringing to attention its status as

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[12] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), II (1932), p. 159, p. 161

physical material to which historical residues cling. A crucial way in which the poem performs this move is of course by rendering trauma and violence in dramatically visual terms, as in the page poem depicted in figure 18, which comprises cut-and-pasted textual material from Almack's bibliography and from a version of the King's book reprinted therein. What Howe refers to as the 'vertically jagged' effect of this particular textual layout is, she says, 'based around the violence of the execution of Charles I, the violence of history'.[13] The text on this page re-enacts this violence. Referring to a speech made by chief judge Bradshaw at the King's trial, one 'vertically jagged' line slices downwards, turning this 'harangue misapplying Law and History' into an assault that literally attacks the horizontal text. Meanwhile, another almost-vertical line demonstrates the irreversibility of the 'Steps between Prison and Grave' that the King was forced to tread. This line, cut off immediately after the 'I', suggests the severance *of* the 'I': both the termination of the self speaking here and of the Roman numeral I as in the title Charles I. As if to emphasise the finality of this severance, the vertical line physically forms an impermeable barrier, or 'Brazen Wall', symbolising the irreversible line crossed at death. The line's vertical arrangement and positioning makes it both an embodiment of this 'Wall' and, in the upward-moving direction of reading it induces, a description of the direction of the 'Steps' that, as Bishop Juxon promises Charles elsewhere in the poem, 'will carry you from Earth to Heaven'(*EB*).

This mode of interpreting the page's visual drama begins to suggest, however, that a record of *any* historical violence could be treated in this way as a means of registering traumatic effects. But Howe's page does something beyond mimetically signalling the violence of the King's execution. It stages a conflict between the diametrically opposed guiding principles of two textual adversaries at the centre of a struggle between royalists and regicides that continued long after the execution: the King's *Eikon Basilike* and John Milton's *Eikonoklastes* (meaning image smasher). Milton's counter-attack, written by the poet-propagandist for the Puritan cause shortly after the initial publication of *The Eikon Basilike*, defended the regicide and cast doubt on the authenticity of the King's book (and the debate about the book's authorship rumbled on for hundreds of years afterwards). Embedded in these warring textual factions are two ideologically saturated principles: the royalist position which elevates the visual image or icon as a reliquary for divinely ordained power, and an iconoclastic purging which pursues the systematic destruction of images in the name of a religious doctrine of Puritanism.

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[13] Howe and Keller, 'An Interview', p. 8.

ΕΙΚΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΚΗ.

Gave a Brazen Wall I

Steps between Prison and

Bradshaw went on a long harangue misapplying Law and History

Language of state secrets

The pretended Court of Justice

Upon the picture of His Majesty sitting in his Chair | before

the High Court of Injustice

Small trespas to misprison

now nonexistent dramatis personae
confront each
other

Heroic Virtue & Fame

Figure 18. 'Chair' page from *Eikon Basilike*

Howe's poem stages a scene in which these 'now nonexistent   dramatis personae / confront each / other', enacting the conflicts and moral dilemmas of the debate between icon-worship and spiritually-motivated iconoclasm, and bringing to attention the political stakes of this struggle over visual representation. The radically disrupted page partakes of Milton's iconoclastic violence by means of a cut-and-paste collaging that literally carves up the King's book and scatters its fragments in a manner that breaks the conventions of the printed page. And yet to describe the material on this page as 'scattered' is slightly erroneous, because this would imply a principle of randomness, whereas the material here is actually very carefully placed. As Howe's remarks about the effects of this 'vertically jagged' layout indicate, whilst the visual composition of this page in one sense participates in an iconoclastic impulse, in another sense this is a highly choreographed smashing-up which does not randomly 'scatter' fragments around, but carefully rearranges them in order to achieve specific effects. This is a page composed with an artist's eye for design and with an acute interest in how the reading/viewing eye perceives its object. In an article written in 1974 for *Archives of American Art* journal on Ad Rheinhardt and Ian Hamilton Finlay, Howe conducts a visual reading of the shapes of letters in Finlay's poem *Homage to Malevich*, remarking that 'the vertical letters l, k, and b, positioned as they are, make vertical lines that pull the eye up and down, and that pulls the o, a and c letters apart... The round short letters give a horizontal tug which prevents the poem from being read up and down'.[14] This sensitivity to how a poem is not just read, but viewed, and to how that process of viewing might be directed by the active agency of specific shapes and arrangements that 'pull' and 'tug' readerly attention is clearly at work in the 'vertically jagged' arrangement in *Eikon Basilike*.

By a careful positioning of re-composed textual fragments from Almack's bibliography, Howe's 'vertically jagged' page embodies a potential alternative to the iconoclastic act; the same arrangement that acts out the violence of iconoclasm also enables the pieces of text on this page to congeal into the ghost of an image. Suggested by the central, demarcated scene-setting lines, the apparition of a sideways-on 'Chair' seems to float upon the page, formed out of lines of text.[15] This 'Chair' is both the seat in which Charles appears as the accused 'before/ the High Court of Injustice' and the throne from which 'His Majesty' is unseated. The throne here is, of course, an empty one, inhabited only by 'the ghost of an absent king'(*EB*). And the spectral chair is not the only visual phantom

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[14] Howe, 'The End of Art', *Archives of American Art*, 14.4 (1974), 2–7, p. 7.
[15] This is even more evident in the version of the poem printed later as part of the collection *The Non-Conformist's Memorial* (p. 54), in which the text forms an even better likeness of a chair.

that emerges from the textual wreckage; the text's shape also suggests a cross or a series of overlapping crosses. These can be read as symbolically signalling the erasure of the King, but they are also the crosses of the Christian faith and of the martyr; as Howe's introduction to the poem indicates, '[King Charles'] fate was compared to the Crucifixion and his trial to the trial of Jesus by the Romans'(*EB*). According to historian Andrew Lacy, 'it has to be said that Milton failed in his task of iconoclasm' because his counter-attack 'did nothing to stem the popularity or dissemination of the King's Book, or the "image" of Charles presented therein'.[16] Howe's highly iconographical page suggests, then, that Charles' image lives on as a kind of afterlife in his *Eikon Basilike*. On this page, the icon persistently haunts the act of iconoclasm, re-forming itself out of the fragmented remains of the smashed image to hover, spectre-like, upon the page.

This haunting of the iconoclastic act by the icon not only references a violent historical struggle between Puritans and Royalists, it also signals an ambivalence towards the image within Puritanism itself, an attitude to the icon more complex than a simple repudiation of the visual image based on an adherence to the Second Commandment 'Thou shalt not make thee any graven image'.[17] According to Ann Kibbey's engaging study on this subject, Puritanical iconoclasm was the manifestation of a simultaneous fear and reverence for the image stemming from a Calvinist mimetic theory of art that invested the visual image with lifelike properties: 'Protestant iconoclasts believed it necessary to attack the visual images in church sculpture, glass, and painting not because they disbelieved these images but rather because they believed quite strongly in their power'.[18] Furthermore, iconoclastic rhetoric relied heavily upon verbal imagery which was conceptualised as not entirely distinct from visual imagery. Exemplified in the poetry and prose of Milton or the sermons of John Cotton, for example, the war against the icon was often carried out, textually and verbally, in a battle that pitted word and visual image against one another. These iconoclasts' modes of articulation were rich with verbal imagery whose appeal to the 'mind's eye' paradoxically invoked the power of the icon, albeit only figuratively. Yet Kibbey argues that Puritanical iconoclasm was 'informed by a concept of figuration that was qualitatively different from what we usually take "figurative" to mean in literary thought', because of its reliance on the classical concept of *figura* which 'defied the conventional

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[16] Andrew Lacy, *The Cult of King Charles the Martyr* (Woodbridge, Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003), p. 8–9.
[17] Deuteronomy 5:8.
[18] Ann Kibbey, *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism: A study of rhetoric, prejudice, and violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 47. Howe cites Kibbey's book as an influence on her historical thinking in *The Birth Mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. x.

metaphoric opposition between "figurative" and "literal"'.[19] Therefore, Puritanical iconoclasm has to be understood not simply as a repudiation and destruction of icons, but rather as a complex and paradoxical set of concepts and practices in which religious icons and visual imagery more generally were simultaneously feared and revered, renounced and reappropriated.

By staging a clash between icon and iconoclasm, Howe's page not only investigates a specific history, but also raises questions about how that history is politically entangled with questions of representation and aesthetics. The disruption of the visual cues and codes of the page in this example and elsewhere in her work appears to constitute an embrace of an iconoclastic impulse, and indeed Howe has been read as an iconoclast by critics such as Rachel Tzvia Back and Craig Dworkin.[20] But what the 'Chair' page in *Eikon Basilike* also powerfully signals is a return to the haunting power of the icon. Another way to think through this tension between icon and iconoclasm in Howe's work more broadly is to look at her engagement with the minimalist sensibility that was highly influential for her in the formative years of the 1960s and 70s. When an interviewer asks her to imagine how she might translate her writing into the medium of paint, Howe's response evinces a minimalist aesthetic: 'Blank. It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White'.[21] In a later conversation, she explains that this remark 'springs from my love for minimalist painting and sculpture' naming artists such as Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman and her husband David von Schlegell as among her most enduring influences. Yet she also reflects that 'Now I can see minimalist art of the sixties and seventies as an American movement rooted in Puritanism'.[22] Howe does not expand on this intriguing statement, but what she is doing here is aligning minimalist art's eschewal of representational imagery with a Puritanical tradition of disavowing the graven image. She is not alone in making this link; Robert Morris states that '[t]he origins of abstract art lie far back in the history of the West. Iconoclastic proscriptions against making recognizable images reach at least as far back as the Second Commandment'. 'Minimal art', he argues, 'was the attempt to recuperate transcendent Puritan values by reencoding them via an iconoclasm of austere formal spatial purity.'[23]

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[19] Kibbey, p. 3.
[20] Rachel Tzvia Back 'On Iconoclasts, Enthusiasts, and the Printed Text: A Reading of *A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike* and *The Nonconformist's Memorial*', *Led By Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2002), pp. 121–180.
[21] Howe and Falon, p. 42.
[22] Howe and Keller, pp. 7, 4.
[23] Robert Morris, 'Size Matters', *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (2000), 474–487, pp. 475, 480.

Whilst Howe's own work is certainly shaped by a minimalist sensibility, she also remains wary of the iconoclastic violence she detects at the root of minimalism. A simultaneous embrace of and cautiousness towards a minimalist principle is evident even in her early visual works when minimalist art was at the forefront of her aesthetic thinking and practice. The Susan Howe Papers collection at UCSD holds slides of Howe's paintings from the late 1960s depicting a number of visual works which feature loosely applied washes or daubs of colour derived from a restricted palette and thinly applied to paper or canvas, sometimes overlaid by series of lines.[24] These aspects of the paintings echo the pared-down sensibility of minimalist painters such as Martin; yet the lines and colour washes of Howe's paintings are more often that not juxtaposed with images, frequently stuck-on photographic images of birds, trees, or landscapes. These early works, then, exhibit both a spare, 'minimalist' aesthetic and a desire, or even an imperative, to retain the representational image; whilst Howe seems to find the visual language of minimalism compelling, she also resists minimalism's iconoclastic demand for the image's effacement.

A similar tension is at work in the 'Chair' page of *Eikon Basilike*, which participates in an iconoclastic act even as it resuscitates the spectre of the icon. Howe's disrupted page wants both to reference and to tap into the revolutionary energy of an iconoclasm whose capacity to disrupt and deconstruct established aesthetic and social structures contains an appealing transformative promise. But by invoking rather than disavowing or effacing the visual icon, this page embodies iconoclasm's reviled 'Other'. By doing so it critiques the destructiveness of the iconoclastic gesture and its tendency towards negation, effacement, and suppression which for Howe, as I will show in a moment, has serious social and ethical implications. Howe's poem undertakes a resurrection of the power of the icon by bringing to attention the signifying potential of the visual dimensions of printed text which normally go almost entirely unacknowledged in everyday reading practices. '[W]ords, even single letters, are images', she says, 'The look of a word is part of its meaning – the meaning that escapes dictionary definition, or rather doesn't *escape* but is bound up with it'.[25] This notion of the poetic image resonates with the struggle between icon and iconoclasm enacted in *Eikon Basilike*, recasting this struggle as a debate between literal, concrete, visual imagery in the space of the poetic page and verbal imagery directed at the 'mind's eye'. The poetic image offered by Howe's page simultaneously invokes and defies Romanticist distinctions between a sublimated poetic image of the intellect and a degraded poetic image of the senses. It also recalls and questions Pound's dictum that '[t]he image is not an idea. It is a

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[24] These materials can be found in the Susan Howe Papers, UCSD, MSS. 201, Box 61, Folder 10.
[25] Howe and Keller, p. 6.

radiant node or cluster; it is a … VORTEX, from which ideas are constantly rushing', which claims to transcend the Romantic notion of the image as idea even as it continues to privilege the abstract and non-material aspects of the image, its intellectual energy.[26] Unlike either of these formulations of poetic imagery, both of which disavow the brute, material fact of the 'look of a word', Howe wants to acknowledge the role of visual materiality in the meaning-making processes of printed language. As demonstrated by the 'Chair' page of *Eikon Basilike*, her poetry insists on a sensuous, concrete dimension of the poetic image, an iconic power of the printed word, a capacity not only to carry semantic meaning but to materially embody residues of presences which hover on the threshold of signification but cannot be entirely subsumed by linguistic or conceptual structures.

'To understand what went wrong'

Howe's engagement with the issue of iconoclasm embodied in the dramatic graphic surfaces of *Eikon Basilike* provides a way in to the question of why the history of the English regicide and its textual 'aftershocks' hold such interest for this poet, given her abiding concern with American history, and particularly with the unacknowledged, erased, and marginalised elements of this history. Her interest in history at least partly stems from a sense of dismay at the violence and racism of American society, 'our contemporary repudiation of alterity, anonymity, darkness'.[27] 'I feel compelled in my work to go back', she says in an interview, 'I am trying to understand what went wrong when the first Europeans stepped on shore here'.[28] For her, this process of 'going back' involves tracing the cultural roots of New England Puritanism which are inextricably tangled with the history of the English regicide. Speaking of a failed attempt to write an essay on 'American voice' and the seventeenth-century Mather family, she states 'The Mathers were over here, so they didn't actually do the killing, but they were of the killing party'. So in *Eikon Basilike*, she claims, 'the Mather essay I couldn't write is there too'.[29] For Howe, the New England Puritan settlers were 'of the killing party' because their ideological and religious convictions made them supportive of and complicit with the regicides. In *Eikon Basilike*, then, Howe investigates the iconoclasm that played itself out in the violent killing of the king largely because this iconoclasm is shared by the American Puritans.

This line of thinking owes much to the new historicist sensibility which was very much in the air when Howe was writing *Eikon Basilike* in the late 80s. Like Stephen

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[26] Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism', *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 81–94, p. 92

[27] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 89.

[28] Howe and Edward Foster, 'Talisman Interview', *The Birth Mark*, pp. 154–181, p. 175.

[29] Howe, 'Talisman Interview', p. 175.

Greenblatt, for example, she seeks the 'larger cultural patterns' to which her historical sources promise access, 'enlist[ing] them in a kind of historical drama', the purpose of which is to 'reflect upon our shared historical origins'.[30] In a new historicist vein she uses her chosen source texts to trace a cultural legacy that might cast light on the cultural configurations of the present. Howe detects patterns of violence at work in the history of the English regicide which her own contemporary society has inherited, and these patterns are strikingly evident in the Puritanical iconoclasm whose revolutionary energy *Eikon Basilike* both embodies and wants on some level to resist. Kibbey's compelling account of the forms that seventeenth-century iconoclasm took in early American culture is a major source for Howe's thinking on this matter.[31] Kibbey argues that because of Puritanism's reliance on the classical concept of *figura*, which blurred distinctions between figurative and literal, graven image and living 'image', '[t]he violent destruction of artistic images of people developed into a mandate for sacrosanct violence against human beings'.[32] Clearly the English regicide, committed against a figure that was both a man and a self-fashioned idolatrous image, is an instance of this 'sacrosanct violence'. But Kibbey's study indicates how iconoclasm, in its translation into early American society, became a mode of prejudicial violence, directed 'especially against people whose material "image," whose physical characteristics, differed from the Puritan man's own'.[33] She cites the condemnation and banishment in 1637 of Anne Hutchinson during the antinomian controversy and the genocide of the Pequot tribe in the same year as instances of the extension of the iconoclastic principle to physically 'different' human beings. This thinking clearly chimes with Howe's broader historical interests and with her poetic investigation of iconoclasm in *Eikon Basilike*. For her, the beheading of the King and the subsequent censoring of his book are manifestations of violent Puritanical purging which lies at the heart of 'what went wrong' in early American history and which is at work in her society's contemporary repudiation of Otherness. Whilst Howe's mode of historical enquiry seeks to map such 'larger cultural patterns', her related quest to recuperate the traces of a repudiated alterity also leads to a contrary impulse to scrutinise the contradictions and fractures of these larger cultural configurations. By looking for ruptures or moments of ambivalence within hegemonic structures, Howe aspires in her poetry to retain the possibility that traces of

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[30] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 6.
[31] See Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. x.
[32] Kibbey, p. 2.
[33] Kibbey, p.2.

silenced presences might be detected in the struggles, contradictions, and tensions, the fault lines opened up when 'Dominant ideologies drift' (*EB*).

Verbal/visual conflict

As my discussion of icon and iconoclasm has already begun to suggest, *Eikon Basilike* conducts its excavation of history's fissures partly by formally embodying another kind of fault-line: that between text and visual image. Howe's 'Chair' page (figure 18) holds icon and iconoclasm, visual 'image' and text in a state of tension, allowing neither side to gain the upper hand. This antagonistic relationship between image and text echoes Michel Foucault's analysis of Rene Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une Pipe* which I discussed in chapter 1. Foucault declares that a verbal/visual tension in which neither word or image dominate over the other requires that we 'admit between the figure and the text a whole series of intersections – or rather attacks launched by one against the other, arrows shot at the enemy target, enterprises of subversion and destruction, lance blows and wounds, a battle.'[34] As I indicated in my earlier discussion, Foucault is referencing a long history of discursive separation between language and visual arts which can be summed up by invoking G. E. Lessing's categorisation of painting as an essentially spatial art made up of 'figures and colours in space' and poetry as a temporal art, composed of verbal signs which unfold as 'articulated sounds in time'.[35] For Lessing, we might recall, poetry and painting 'should be like two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other's domain'.[36] Even more overtly than Howe's grid poem discussed in chapter 1, this page from *Eikon Basilike* takes just such 'unseemly liberties', and Foucault's language of warfare and conflict is wholly appropriate for the violent and irresolvable collisions which ensue, between visual and textual entities and the different qualities of attention they demand. Howe's visual page requires that readers follow both a time-bound process of reading, unpicking the text word by word and line by line, and a process of looking in which the space-bound, visual dimensions of the carefully-arranged text are taken in instantaneously, 'at a glance'. Her visual text knowingly stages a border skirmish at the long-contested dividing line between poetry and visual representation.

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[34] Michel Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, ed. and trans. by James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 26.
[35] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 78.
[36] Lessing, p. 93.

Yet as W. J. T. Mitchell's extensive work on word-image relations suggests, this 'battle' might also be seen as a form of dialogue, or dialectical struggle, in which 'the very identities of words and images, the sayable and seeable, begin to shimmer and shift... as if the image could speak and the words were on display'.[37] Whilst Howe's 'Chair' page stages a clash between icon and iconoclasm via a 'battle' in which verbal and visual aspects of the page and the modes of reading they demand 'confront each / other', there is also a sense in which textual material and its visual dimension become conjoined: reading leads to seeing and vice versa. To point to an obvious example, were it not for the words 'Upon the picture of his Majesty sitting in his Chair', which form the 'seat' of the ghostly throne, it is unlikely that this image would suggest itself so strongly, if at all. By means of an 'argument or dialogue' between reading and looking, then, the verbal and visual dimensions of the page extend one another and stimulate recognition of aspects of this textual material that might otherwise remain hidden.[38] By calling upon different modes of perception, this hybrid verbal-visual page indicates ways of reading across and between the conflicts and points of intersection of textual history. It proposes a way of reading history 'otherwise', indicating by means of its verbal-visual form a mode of attentiveness to hitherto unacknowledged aspects of textual remains.

Dismembering / remembering

In its tracing and formal embodiment of historical, ideological and aesthetic fractures, Howe's *Eikon Basilike* articulates a historical sensibility akin to Foucault's sense of counter-memory, which seeks to make visible the inconsistencies, irregularities, errors, and discontinuities of history and to recognise that history 'operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times'.[39] In a Foucauldian vein, Howe's historical investigations proceed from the textually embedded nature of knowledge about the past, bringing to attention the 'entangled', 'confused', 'scratched over and recopied' nature of this textual history and proposing ways of reading the past for its editorial decisions, erasures, contradictions, and discontinuities.

Yet for all its reliance on textual material, Howe's notion of counter-memory is not based solely on a textual understanding of historical knowledge. As Ming-Qian Ma notes, 'In Howe's work, history, particularly in the sense of historiography, has two diametrically

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[37] W. J. T Mitchell, *Picture Theory: essays on verbal and visual representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 68.

[38] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 45.

[39] Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 139–163, p. 137.

disparate versions. On the one hand, history is viewed as "the record of winners. Documents... written by the Masters'", but 'On the other hand, history is keenly felt by the poet as "an actuality"'.[40] Howe's poetic critiques of history and historiography are often infused with a sense of despair about the gap between these two versions of history. Her poems mourn the loss of the voices of non-Masters – marginalised cultural 'Others' and especially women – which form part of historical actuality, but which have been written out of textual history. 'I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate', says Howe.[41] Her 'I wish', though, expresses some doubt about the recoverability of these voices of a suppressed actuality because from the vantage point of the present they are always already excluded from documented history. Furthermore, there is a sense in Howe's poetry that, along with these silenced voices, something else is missing in the textual history that constitutes our knowledge of the past, that some quality of historical experience – especially a lived, sensory dimension of experience – has been irrevocably lost. The immediacy of historical actuality, of history as it is materially lived, cannot be retrieved from historical texts because of the gap between word and thing, representation and world.

But at the same time as it points to the gap between the historical document and material history, Howe's poetry also aims to make visible their interrelatedness. If, as Ma puts it, 'history is keenly felt by the poet as "an actuality"', then for Howe this actuality is sensed in the gaps and silences, erasures and errors of the text which indexically reference something of the lost sensuousness of historical encounter. Howe's poetically embodied counter-memory is a kind of editing; if textual history written by 'winners' / 'survivors' / 'Masters' writes out the voices of cultural 'Others', then her poetry constitutes an editing project that aims not to smooth over, but to highlight and scrutinise the marks of erasure and moments of error or uncertainty in 'documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times'.[42] Often, Howe seeks the physical traces of a suppressed actuality in errors and uncertainties visible to the poet on the textual surfaces of documented history. But her poetic editing also radically alters textual history by cutting, pasting, scattering and rearranging its remains. Hence at times this activity cannot help but be at least structurally complicit with the very tyranny of historical editing that it aims to reveal and oppose. In Howe's own account, editing can both be a quest to 'reach the truth' and an act of (often

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[40] Ming-Qian Ma, 'Poetry as History Revised: Susan Howe's "Scattering as Behaviour Toward Risk"', *American Literary History*, 6.4 (1994), 716-737, p. 718-9.
[41] Howe, *The Europe of Trusts: Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002), p. 14.
[42] Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', p. 137.

well-meaning) selection, 'sensible partitioning', effacement and muffling.[43] In its pursuit of 'the truth' of a particular textual history, Eikon Basilike partakes of acts of mutilation which not only work to register historical trauma, but also perform editorial moves which leave themselves open to charges of effacement, erasure and dismemberment. And yet this is a double-edged activity because in dismembering its source texts, it also works as a particularly apposite form of remembrance of historical rupture.

One such act occurs in a one-page poem that functions as an epigraph or preface to Eikon Basilike (figure 19). Beginning with the refrain 'Oh Lord/ o Lord', this poem's first lines reference a prayer which has been at the centre of the debates over King Charles' idolatry and his book's questionable authorship. Charles' last prayer on the scaffold was included in some of the early editions of the King's book. It allegedly borrowed heavily from the shepherdess Pamela's appeal to a pagan deity in Philip Sidney's Arcadia, and, as Howe's introduction to her poem indicates, Milton's attack on The Eikon Basilike makes much of Charles' plagiarism of this 'vain amatorious Poem' (EB), using this choice of a profane pagan supplication to point to the King's sin of idolatry and his deficiencies as a ruler. Royalists accused Milton himself of arranging its insertion in order to discredit the rest of the book and cast doubt on its authorship. Due to its central role in the debates around idolatry, authorship, forgery, and authenticity, Pamela's prayer has been variously excised from and readmitted to the various versions of the King's book. Notably, Howe's primary source text, whose author was anxious to demonstrate royal authorship, minimises the whole contentious issue, whilst a version of The Eikon Basilike edited by Almack neither contains the prayer nor makes any reference to it. Howe's epigraph poem seizes upon this evasiveness, invoking the shepherdess's supplication and thus the unresolved controversy it provoked. Furthermore, the shape of her poem, with its first section tilted forward and to the left, visually echoes the theme of prayer by suggesting the attitude of a person praying, with head bent forward at an angle from the torso. Yet this layout also suggests something else besides an attitude of prayer: the top section seems to topple forward as if decapitated. This inference is reinforced by the placing of the word 'zeal' at the base of the poem's first section, the point at which these lines appear to have been zealously severed from the body of the text. Colliding with the upside-down word 'transposed', the word 'zeal' indicates the point at which a 'beering' or 'bearing' is 'transposed' and one thing becomes another: text printed on a page becomes the suggestion of an image, an attitude of prayer becomes a decapitation, religious 'zeal' becomes murderous fanaticism.

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[43] Howe, The Birth Mark, pp. 58, 8.

Oh Lord
o Lord
different from
Laws
zeal
transposed   OMne
bearing   obwruction
envions
comand

nnfortunate Man
s

un ust
woule
Futnre
audPaged doe of Title-page
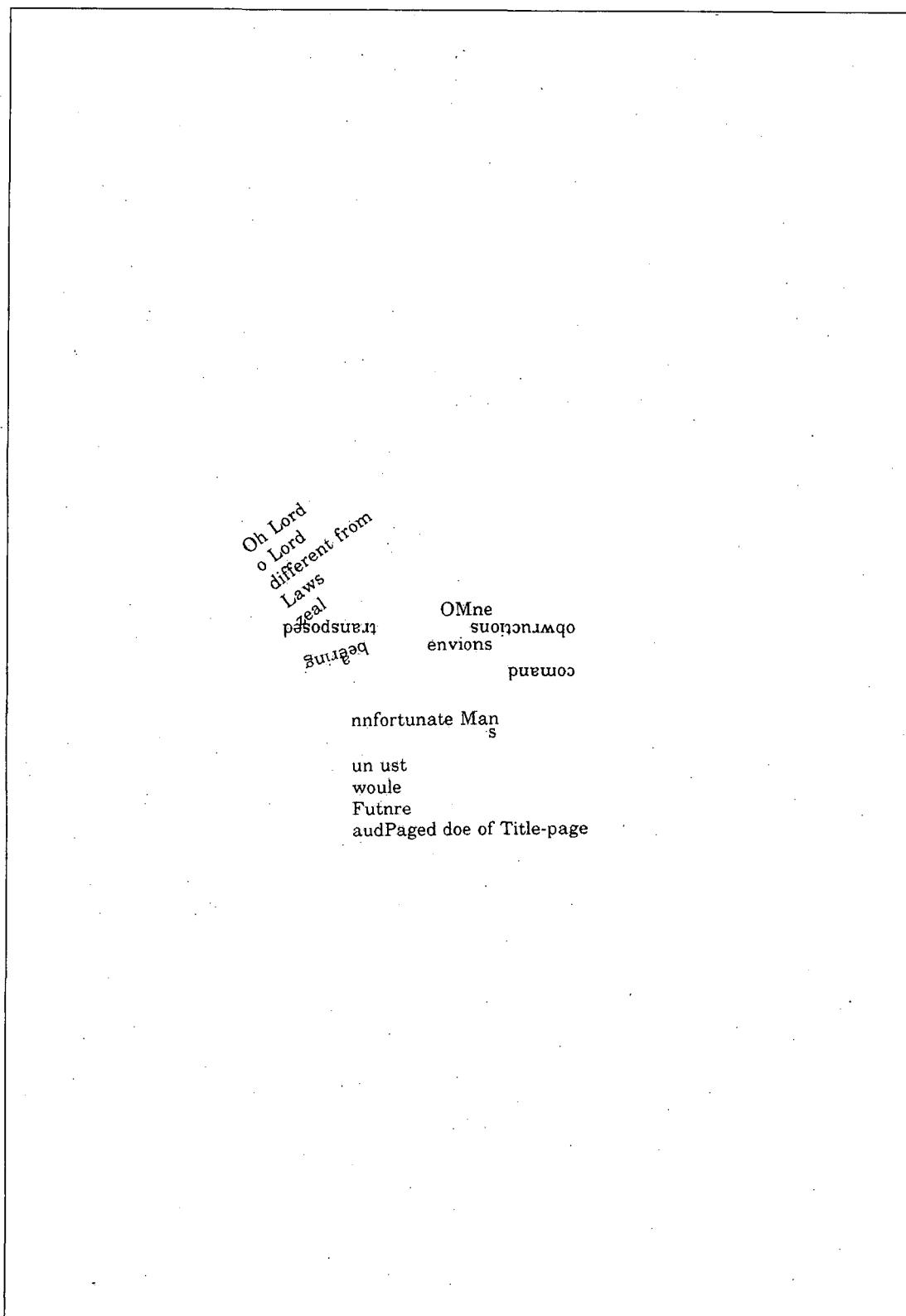
Figure 19. Epigraph or preface poem from *Eikon Basilike*

But to what extent does Howe's poetic editing project merely repeat the dismemberment and excision referenced here? Does this pursuit of the fractures and disavowals of textual history make visible or replicate the activities of a tyrannical editing practice? And how does this seemingly violent textual dismemberment achieve its own tipping point; how does it recover excised presences from the fault-lines, evasions, and absences of the text? Of course Howe is particularly interested in Pamela's prayer not only because it has played such a central role in the textual aftershocks of a major historical rift, but also because it represents a sounding of the feminine in the midst of this rupture; Pamela's prayer is an emblematic marker for 'voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate'.[44] Hers is a voice that comes and goes from various versions of the King's book, a sign of uncertainty, unresolvedness, instability.

In Howe's poem, the decapitated fragment of Pamela's prayer comes to stand for a mode of remembering historical events and their textual after effects which is fraught with violent acts, gaps, erasures, forgeries, and instabilities, a mode of memory that retains the uncertainties, paradoxes, and fractures of this history. To Charles' enigmatic charge to 'Remember' (*EB*), allegedly one of the last words he spoke on the scaffold, Howe's poem responds with a memory out of joint, embodied in a graphic surface that is dismembered, fragmented, and fractured. The process of dismemberment initiated in the first lines of the poem continues in the 'body' of the epigraph poem, in the form of disjointed words almost all of which are misspellings and archaisms. These words testify to a process of editing that aims to retain, to emphasise, and even to insert, error and illegibility into the textual record. Flouting the 'Laws' of standardised spelling by including a plethora of misspellings, as well as those of page layout via the oddly tilted printing of the poem's first section and by an inversion of words that literally overturns the 'Laws' of textual orientation, Howe's textual interventions seek not so much to unsettle the self-assured voice of the historical record as to emphasise the uncertainties and crises the poet perceives to be already present within her source texts.

This amplification of textual instability is particularly visible in a number of literal inversions within some of the words themselves; several of the misspellings here are attributable to upside-down 'u's: 'envions', 'nnfortunate', and 'Futnre' would read as 'envious', 'unfortunate', and 'Future' were it not for an apparent printing anomaly which has upended the vital 'u's. Whilst this transgression of the graphic surface makes a nonsense of these words' legibility, this mere physical reversal of a single letter also opens

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[44] Howe, *The Europe of Trusts*, p. 14.

up semantic possibilities that would otherwise not have come to light. Thus 'envions' suggests not only 'envious' but also 'environs', and in so doing this word points to its own physical surroundings on the page, consisting of the other words that make up this particular word cluster and the white space that separates this cluster from others. The words surrounding 'envions' are also all misspellings or misprintings, each in their own way an aberration and an engenderment of previously unrealised meanings. 'OMne' suggests both 'O Mine', whose prayer-like tones echo with 'o Lord', and the Latin word 'Omnis' meaning 'all', thus single-handedly performing a movement from the personal to the universal. Meanwhile 'obwructions' brings to mind 'obstructions' but also 'ructions', thus evoking a sense of both constraint and rebellious conflict, which tussle together within one word. And without its double 'm', the authoritative power of 'comand' seems diminished. The relationships between these words spark off further meaning effects; 'envions comand', for example, gives to 'envions' the power of 'comand'. But these two words might equally be read 'comand envions', making 'envions' the object, rather than the subject of 'comand', and thereby reversing power relations. This textual material's arrangement in alternating right-way-up and upside-down layers with staggered margins means that there is no prescribed order of reading, and that any or all of these readings is possible whilst at the same time not necessarily inevitable or 'correct'. Furthermore, the placing of these lines visually evokes a process of sedimentary layering, suggesting the palimpsestual nature of each word and each set of relations between words.

Howe's poetic editing, then, exploits, emphasises and inserts textual mistakes and instabilities which act as markers not only of historical trauma but of residual competing and alternative textual 'voices'. The 'mistake'-ridden and visually non-normative opening poem of *Eikon Basilike* proposes a mode of interpretation which aspires to induce a historical sensibility with a keen sense of the possibilities of reading textual and material details for the residues of 'anonymous, slighted – inarticulate' elements in the historical document. *Eikon Basilike* suggests that historical texts – and the poem that appropriates material from such texts – can embody something of history's suppressed actuality as physical fact, and this constitutes a claim for the testimonial capacities of the material dimensions of the printed word.

Tangled threads of truthfulness

Questions of historical truth come most to the fore in visually interesting ways in Eikon Basilike's final pages with the foregrounding of two key figures from classical myth seemingly unrelated to the history of the English regicide. In its final phase, Howe's poem

invokes the figures of Ariadne, who found her way through the Minotaur's labyrinth by means of her 'Thread', and Arachne the weaver-turned-spider as part of an elaboration of a trope of thread and weaving which constitutes a poetically embodied investigation of historical truth-telling. With a page poem whose graphic surface features mostly one-word lines which appear to drift gently, or hover like 'mote[s]' caught in the 'light' (figure 20), *Eikon Basilike* enters its calmer concluding phase. Ariadne's name, from which the reading of this page tends to proceed, is central here. Importantly, like King Charles' *Eikon Basilike*, her story has many differing versions, and the fragmented lines of Howe's page recall its beginnings. Most sources agree that 'Ariadne', 'Minos' / daughter' 'led Theseus' by means of a 'Thread' out of the Minotaur's labyrinthine lair. In return for saving his life, Theseus had promised marriage, and so the two absconded to the 'distant / / Island' of Naxos. Here, however, Ariadne's story splits into many different versions. In Homer's rendering, she was killed there by Artemis.[45] In other tellings, she was abandoned by Theseus and hanged herself, or died in childbirth, or was picked up by sailors.[46] According to Ovid and others, she was rescued by Bacchus (Dionysus) who married her and immortalised her with a 'Crown' of 'Stars'.[47] Howe's poem does not, of course, tell any of these stories, but rather offers single words or small word clusters, which gesture towards one or more of these various versions. More important than the nature of these stories, however, is the fact of their multiplicity; Ariadne's tale consists of several frayed and intertwined strands, many of them contradictory, and none of them authoritative.

Ariadne's page embodies the principle of multi-stranded narrative in its graphic surface, whose layout is made up of a number of loosely formed columns. These 'hang' on the page like stray threads, sometimes touching on and cohering with one another, as in the line 'away who remember' which stretches across columns, a 'weft' that threads itself across the warp of the their downward movement. This graphically embodied trope of thread is picked up again on the last page of Howe's poem, (figure 21) where the upside-down capitalised name of 'ARACHNE' hangs halfway down a drifting column of words like a spider hanging from her 'S i lk'. Here even the building blocks of words, letters, become unravelled and intertwined, as in the interlacing of the characters that make up the words 'Thread' and 'shield'.

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[45] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by E.V. Rieu (London: Penguin, 2003), Book II, 320, p. 148.
[46] Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. by John and William Langhorne, 6 vols (London: Sharpe and Son, 1819), I, pp. 19-20.
[47] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 176.

utmost
light
mote

Sp^{ir e}

Ther^{from}
evry

all ^{edge}

Ariadne led Theseus^{Illimited}

in every

let down

perceptive

Minos' from
daughter

Sphere

Thread pierced
Light symbolism

Thought Trace
weft

daughter
SWADLIER Centuries I No
rhid

To her Face
Fire CLOATHE

fate

distant

the lay

Island place

deathless

Place they stood on

Stars

away who remember

Flood Crown
she wore

and the sea
Eyes

up

to
Fire

Figure 20. Ariadne's page, *Eikon Basilike*

S i lk

symbolic

Praeparative

faith

Ariagne

Idman   satter

the   s e t
                  Penned

stars

ARACHNE   SUN'S

deft
        ray

through

She   s h i e l

was   T h h ie ea l d

winding   tr a ce

wool   we f
                    t

Cloud

soft

threada

twist
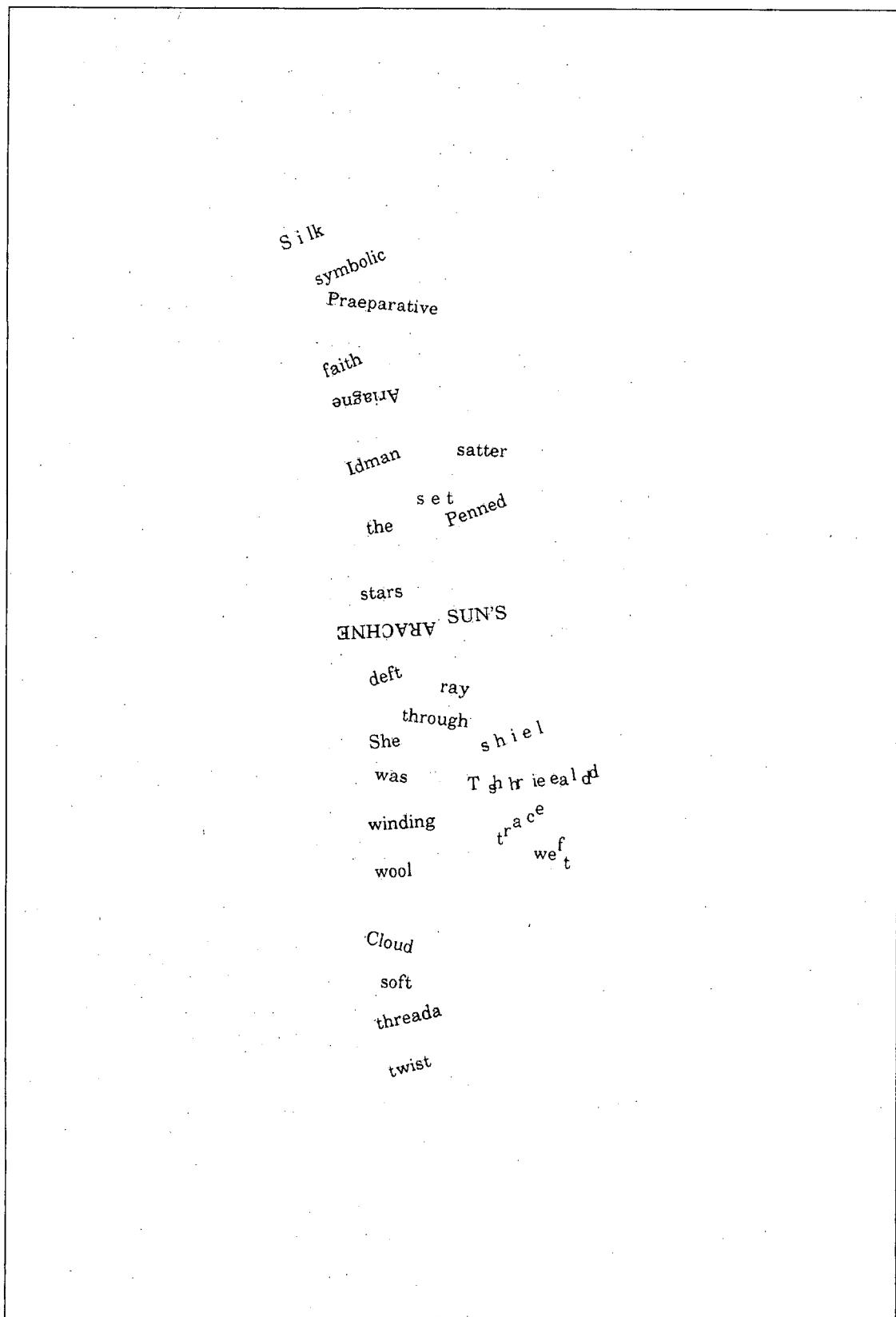
Figure 21. Final page, *Eikon Basilike*

Readerly negotiation of Ariadne's and Arachne's pages involves threading a way down and across these columns, following textual filaments and stitching meaning out of both the semantic fields of the verbal material and the physical facts of the graphic surface.[48] This readerly weaving functions as an analogue for a kind of counter-memory that is concerned with questions of historical truth raised by the tangled textual history of King Charles' execution, proposing a readerly engagement with the materiality of the textual surface that functions as a mode of recognising and participating in the manifold nature of stories and histories in whose various threads are embedded contradictions and gaps as well as overlaps and conjoinings. Like the numerous, contested versions of the King's book or the multiple filaments of Ariadne's story or Arachne's web, Howe's poem embodies a history comprising many broken, frayed, and tangled threads. These matted textual remains cannot be unpicked to reveal a truth or an origin 'Disembodied beyond language'(*EB*), as another line of these last pages has it, nor is there a master copy of textual history which is truer than any other: 'in those copies are copies' (*EB*). However, this is certainly not to deny or abolish the notion of truth or the authenticity of narratives; in Howe's poetry the textually embodied tangled tale is the bearer of a kind of truth. She says in an interview 'I think there is a truth, even if it's not fashionable to say so anymore'.[49] In her thinking, there is the possibility of 'a truth', but not *the* incontrovertible truth: 'the Truth a truth / Dread catchword THE' (*EB*). Whilst she is acutely aware of poststructuralist critiques of truth, Howe is committed to what Bernard Williams refers to as 'truthfulness'. 'The desire for truthfulness', he argues, can go together (albeit somewhat uneasily) with a suspicion of the truth, because it 'drives a process of criticism which weakens the assurance that there is any secure or unqualifiedly stateable truth'.[50] Howe's poem proposes a way of negotiating history that recognises the truthfulness embedded in tangled, frayed, and broken textual threads which can indeed tell us something about the past, albeit in indirect and fragmentary ways. These trails provide access not to *the* truth of history but to a kind of truth replete with disparity, paradox, and uncertainty. Howe's *Eikon Basilike* suggests that it is sometimes in the material qualities of history's textual remains that this truthfulness becomes most palpable; archaic spellings and misspellings, printing errors, editorial inclusions and exclusions, multiple versions, carry or embody a truthfulness that

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[48] I say this despite the fact that in her *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985) Howe objects strongly to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's description of Emily Dickinson as a 'spider artist'. She protests: 'This is poetry not life, and certainly not sewing' (p. 14). However, I am not inferring that Howe is taking part in anything so domesticated as sewing in her poem. Rather, the poem offers the threads and it is the reader who is asked to participate in an activity akin to stitching or weaving.

[49] Howe and Keller, p. 30.

[50] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: an essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.1.

points to a contradictory, inconsistent, and paradoxical material history. As the prominence of the figures of Pamela, Ariadne and Arachne at key moments of this poem's articulation of counter-memory suggest, this understanding of historical truth raises the possibility that textual remains might yield traces of marginalised or silenced voices held in the weft of their intertwined threads.

'Calls to awakening'

Eikon Basilike's quite different graphic surfaces, from violent 'scattering', to careful and quite conscious placing, to gentle drifting, function not only mimetically but also iconically, indexically, symbolically, allegorically, and analogically. Howe's visually dramatic pages play a key role in the poem's engagement both with a specific textual history of the English regicide, and with wider historical questions by raising questions about the politics of verbal and visual representation, and the possibilities of historical truth-telling. Different as they are from one another, Howe's disrupted graphic surfaces do produce a common effect, providing a visually-induced jolt to readers' usual modes of decipherment and cognition. To hark back to the eloquent words of Jerome McGann,

> Texts like Howe's transmit, at their first level, the simple signal of an emergency or a possible emergency: Stop. Look. Listen. They are Thoreauvian calls to awakening. This may be a special and relatively localized awakening – to the resources of language, to new possibilities for poetry – or it may involve more serious ethical and social questions.[51]

As my close readings have shown, the many radically unsettled pages in *Eikon Basilike* do signal such an 'emergency or a possible emergency' and this signal is certainly orientated towards the 'serious ethical and social questions' raised by the poem's historical theme. In Howe's poem, such questions are tied in intricate ways to the productive verbal-visual tensions of her disrupted pages, which urge readers to 'Stop. Look. Listen': to attend to the textual rubble of history, to its splits and ruptures and to the silenced presences towards which it indexically gestures.

To recall a problematic with which my discussion started out, as readers and critics we have no pre-established strategy for reading Howe's dramatically reconfigured graphic surfaces, nor any 'ready vocabulary' for their description and analysis, and I think this is absolutely key to the link between her visual poetics and her historical project.[52] In *Eikon*

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[51] Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 107.

[52] Dworkin, p. 32.

Basilike, Howe's visual pages present readers with a wreckage of textual history radically dismembered and carefully reconstituted in ways that flout the conventions of the printed text. Her various graphic disruptions of conventional page layout restage the problems of recovering a traumatic past and grasping the nature of its interconnectedness with the present as problems of reading and/or seeing. Howe's visual pages, for which we have no pre-prepared script for their navigation and interpretation, function as sites of emergency that also hope to bring about an emergence – or 'awakening' – in McGann's vocabulary. They call readers to a consciousness of and engagement with an unacknowledged aspect of textual history: its material, sensory dimension. If this physical aspect of text presents readers and critics with a number of problems that parallel some of the difficulties of negotiating the past, then it also functions as a way of indicating possibility – the possibility of reading history otherwise – for its fractures and silences that open out onto absences, losses, traumas, and also nodes of resistance. Howe's graphic surfaces are an argument for or demonstration of the capacity of poetry to aim at dimensions of the past for which, like the visual pages themselves, we collectively have no 'ready vocabulary'.[53]

History 'Scattered asunder'

As my discussion of Howe's word grid from *Secret History of the Dividing Line* in chapter 1 began to suggest, Howe's poetic 'calls to awakening' are part of a more or less Benjaminian project 'to brush history against the grain'.[54] The affinities between Howe's and Benjamin's historical approaches have been pointed out before, most notably by Rachel Tzvia Back, who argues for an 'analogous "historical consciousness"' between Howe and Benjamin. Invoking his well-known observation that historicism empathises 'with the victor' at the expense of the 'anonymous toil' of the subjugated classes, she draws a parallel between his declaration that '[t]here is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism'[55] and Howe's very similar remark that 'History is the record of winners. Documents written by the Masters'.[56] Whilst Back points out that the poet's focus is more often 'on issues of gender rather than class', for both Benjamin and Howe, she remarks, 'the question is who is forgotten in historical documentation'; both insist that 'the past must be read and written differently.'[57] What Back sidesteps, however, is the issue of

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[53] Dworkin, p. 52.
[54] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 248.
[55] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248.
[56] Howe, *The Europe of Trusts*, p. 11.
[57] Back, p. 60–61

redemption with which a Benjaminian brushing of history 'against the grain' is inextricably entangled.

As I have already indicated in this thesis, Benjamin proposes a model of historicism which aims to 'blast open the continuum of history', to recognise history not as progress, 'a chain of events', but as 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' such as that witnessed by his 'angel of history'.[58] Moreover, he charges the historical materialist with the task of searching through these cultural debris for shards of redemptive possibility which, once recovered, might transform the present into 'the "time of the now"... shot through with chips of Messianic time'.[59] To 'brush history against the grain' in a Benjaminian sense, then, is not just to tell the stories of the past differently, to represent those who have been left out of history's account, to read the historical record against itself. Rather, as I have indicated in previous chapters, such a project amounts to a quest to recover the unfulfilled potentials of cultural residues in order to infuse the present with new kinds of meaningfulness. Howe shares much more with Benjaminian thinking than an insistence that 'the past must be read and written differently'.[60] Like Benjamin, she seeks traces of 'those others whose efforts and suffering constitute a true knowledge that was never directly recorded and must be restored, even by mystical means', as Vincent Pecora succinctly puts it.[61] Her pursuit of silenced, unacknowledged, and obscured aspects of history looks very much like a somewhat mystically-inflected project to rescue hitherto undiscovered 'chips' of redemptive 'Messianic time'.

Furthermore, I want to suggest that this redemptive approach to history is right at the heart of Howe's visual poetics. Benjamin's instructions to the historical materialist are 'to *brush* history against the grain'; history is to be engaged with in all its materiality, to be *brushed* physically, not just read. For him, cultural artefacts contain 'sensory data', which might yield a kind of 'felt knowledge.'[62] This trope of physical interaction with history is played out quite literally in many of Howe's poems. Her most radically visual pages frequently seem to enact or to capture a literal 'blast[ing] open' of textual history, and it is often in the material details of the fragmented remains that her poems seek the hitherto unfulfilled potentials of these remains. Howe shares with Benjamin 'his interest in the fragment, the material object, and the entrance of the messianic into the material object',

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[58] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 254, 249.
[59] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 254–259.
[60] Back, p. 60–61
[61] Vincent Pecora, 'Benjamin, Kracauer, and Redemptive History', *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 67–100, p. 98.
[62] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 880 (e°, 1).

to use the poet's own words, and her poetry invests faith in the broken materiality of textual remains as a site where hitherto untapped redemptive potentials might dwell.[63]

In order to further investigate this Benjaminian aspect of Howe's visual poetics and its possible problems, the rest of this chapter will now turn to an examination of two important poems published in the early 90s in which Howe's abiding concern with a specifically American history and with its occluded and silenced elements comes to the fore. The poems in question – 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' and 'Thorow' – both appear in *Singularities*, a collection which appropriately enough, given the line of enquiry I want to pursue, bears as one of its epigraphs, the following: 'She was looking for the fragments of the dead Osiris, dead and scattered asunder, dead, torn apart, and thrown in fragments over the wide world'(D.H. Lawrence). This quotation, from Lawrence's short story 'The Man Who Died', points to a process of gathering 'fragments ... scattered asunder' conducted by a 'She'. The allusion to the myth of Isis and Osiris, in which Isis gathered Osiris's scattered body parts, reassembled them, breathed life back into him, and then conceived Horus, powerfully signals a redemptive impulse at the heart of the poems in *Singularities*.

The stuttering of 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk'

The first line of 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' comprises one such fragmented remnant from American literary history, referenced in a footnote as having come from 'The Genetic Text' of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. But what hitherto suppressed aspect of the past does Howe hope to recover in this fragment? As she has said in interviews, she is drawn to 'the feminine in Melville'; for her, his writing carries traces of 'the feminine', and this is particularly evident in *Billy Budd*.[64] As one of Howe's epigraphs for her collection of essays *The Birth Mark* makes clear, the eponymous hero of this tale exhibits 'an occasional liability to a vocal defect ... under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice ... was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse.'[65] This 'vocal defect' is feminised in Melville's text because it is presented as a flaw that exists in sharp contrast to the Handsome Sailor's 'otherwise' masculine qualities, and it is

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[63] Howe and Keller, 'An Interview', p. 29

[64] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 181.

[65] See the epigraph to *The Birth Mark*: 'Though our Handsome Sailor had as much of masculine beauty as one can expect anywhere to see; nevertheless, like the beautiful woman in one of Hawthorne's minor tales, there was just one thing amiss in him. No visible blemish indeed, as with the lady; no, but an occasional liability to a vocal defect. Though in the hour of elemental uproar or peril he was everything that a sailor should be, yet under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse.' Howe also invokes Billy Budd later on in this collection, linking him to femininity: 'lashed in a hammock, hemp around his neck, dragging cables, cordage, without volition under language, in a measure mysteriously woman, Billy drifts fathoms down dreaming *Obey* pinned to a clip now gone.' (p. 37)

compared to the blemish worn by a female character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birth Mark*. So for Howe, the stutter is an indexical trace of a suppressed feminine dimension of American literary history: 'we [women] are in the stutter... We have come on to the stage stammering.' Just as she detects the suppressed feminine voice in the indeterminacy invoked by the shepherdess Pamela's prayer in *Eikon Basilike*, she seeks traces of the feminine in the uncertainty signalled by the stutter: 'I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced.'[66]

If Billy Budd's stutter is 'a sounding of uncertainty', then in the fragment of Melville's text that Howe borrows for the first line of her 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' this 'uncertainty' manifests itself in very literal terms. Melville's novel was unfinished at the time of his death in 1891, and the manuscript he left 'may be most accurately described as a semi-final draft, not a final fair copy ready for publication' as Melville scholars Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts put it.[67] These scholars' solution to the problem of the unfinished work was to prepare a 'Reading Text' for general readers, and also a 'Genetic Text' which shows the process of the novel's composition and includes Melville's corrections and revisions. This 'Genetic Text', then, is *Billy Budd* in its unresolved and unstable state, with many of its uncertainties still very much apparent.

"on a [*p*<suddenly ... on a > was shot thro with a dyed→<dyed→a soft]"*
(S, 63)

This fragment which makes up the first line of Howe's poem is lifted in its entirety from the 'Genetic Text' and shows the text itself in the act of stuttering, 'sounding' its 'uncertainty':[68] The 'stuttering' effect of this line is brought about not only by the disjointed nature of its words and phrases, but also by the plethora of diacritical marks with which this line is 'shot thro'. As Peter Quartermain's insightful close reading of this poem's opening indicates, this line brings attention to its status 'as written rather than spoken language ... Voiced or not, it proceeds in bits and pieces, stops and starts, repeats. Problematic, and emphatically for the eye.'[69]

But how is this line which is 'emphatically for the eye' to be read? Quartermain helpfully provides a translation by using the editors' code, but I am not sure (and nor in the

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[66] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 181.
[67] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative): Reading and Genetic Text*, ed. by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 1.
[68] This line can be found in the 'Genetic Text' of Melville, *Billy Budd*, p. 412.
[69] Peter Quartermain, 'And the Without: An Interpretive Essay on Susan Howe', *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 182–194, p. 184.

end is he) whether this is really the point. These marks are highly suggestive on their own terms, without recourse to the source text and its code; they are rich, in Benjaminian terms, with unfulfilled meaning potentials which inhere in their material forms. The line's diacritical marks non-verbally indicate a compositional activity of bracketing off, erasing and inserting. Caught in the process of reshaping the text, the line of Genetic text reveals precisely the stuttering indeterminacy and unresolvedness that the process of editing seeks to eliminate, or at least minimalise. Notably, this line comes at the point of climax in the story, the moment when Billy Budd is hanged. The reading text version of this moment proceeds thus:

> At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn.[70]

Interestingly, one of the things that the genetic text makes visible via its halting verbal and non-verbal language is a kind of violence that is erased from the reading text. The serene scene of Billy's execution depicted in the reading text is in its 'genetic' form a site of struggle and inferred brutality suggested by the combination and juxtaposition of verbal and non-verbal material. Most notably, the sequence 'was shot thro with a dyed→<dyed→a soft]' suggests the piercing and killing of something 'soft'. Together, the phrase 'was shot thro with a' and the collection of arrows that punctuate the second half of this sequence, one of which seems to be just about to pierce 'a soft', verbally and visually signal an activity of spearing or darting. In this context, the word 'dyed' reads equally as a misspelling of 'died' and as the past participle of 'dye', and its repetition reinforces its semantic doubleness, suggesting that it can be read differently the second time around, surrounded by a cluster of arrows. In any case, 'dyed' points simultaneously to the action of dying and to something stained, both of which connect with the image of 'a soft' body having been 'shot thro'.

But as well as obliquely referring to an act of violence, this line shows another kind of violence in action – that of making a text conform to standards of coherence and lucidity, of imposing 'Shackles' on its indeterminacy and uncertainty. For Howe, as my earlier discussion of editing began to suggest, this process is an analogue and even a symptom of a wider cultural and historical process of containment and erasure. Or, in Quartermain's

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[70] Melville, p. 124

eloquent analysis, it is a trope for a history in which women are silenced and restricted, Native Americans exterminated, and the Irish repressed by the English, a history

> of the hegemony of an intellectual and economic power which would, by revising and acculturating the texts it recognises as central, marginalise and even abolish the actual texts as written because it seeks, by stabilising the world so that its processes are arrested or invisible, to manage it.[71]

For Howe, the climactic line borrowed from the genetic text of Melville's novel affords a glimpse of a text that is in the process of being shaped, acculturated, managed, so it makes visible something of the processes that hegemonic power seeks to keep invisible. But in its unresolved state, it is also teeming with unfulfilled potentials, the traces of that which has not yet been erased or contained or silenced.

To return to the genetic text, then, is to at least partially retrieve the 'stutter' and all that it might open out onto; says Howe, 'History has happened... A return is necessary, a way for women to go. Because we are in the stutter. We were expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier. The drama's done. We are the wilderness. We have come on the stage stuttering.'[72] Above all, then, what Howe hopes to find in 'the stutter' is a trace of 'the feminine' which has been repressed, contained, bracketed off, as the fragment '(the rea)' seems to evince. As Quartermain points out, 'rea' is a Latin juridical term predominantly applied to an accused party, and it is also a Spanish word for whore.[73] Crucially, 'rea' is gendered feminine. But 'the rea' also reads as a very literally truncated version of 'the real' with its final 'l' lopped off in a physical demonstration of how a bracketing off of the feminine in literature and history leads to an impoverishment, a truncation of the real.

. The visual stutter rescued from the genetic text of Melville's novel is a moment of radical stumbling and faltering from which the rest of Howe's poem takes its cue. Careering from line to paratactic line in a fashion that leaves large conceptual gaps and requires huge cognitive leaps, the poem moves rapidly away from *Billy Budd* and proceeds 'on wild thoughtpath'(S, 64) to question the discourses, processes and structures of thought that make up the 'Violent order of a world'(S, 65) which the visible editing process of the fragment from Melville's novel embodies. The poem is centrally concerned with tracing the 'Birth of contemporary thought' in which 'Counter thought thought out'(S, 65) by intuitively ranging across and combining a host of references to various historical, literary,

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[71] Quartermain, p. 191.
[72] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 181.
[73] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, pp. 186-7.

and philosophical moments, eschewing the teleological marching of 'the old army / Enlightened rationalism'(S, 64) in the movement of its lines. In its final pages, the poem also explodes the strictures of the 'Rules', the 'guards and fences'(S, 67) of the page in a literal, visual act of 'Scattering'.
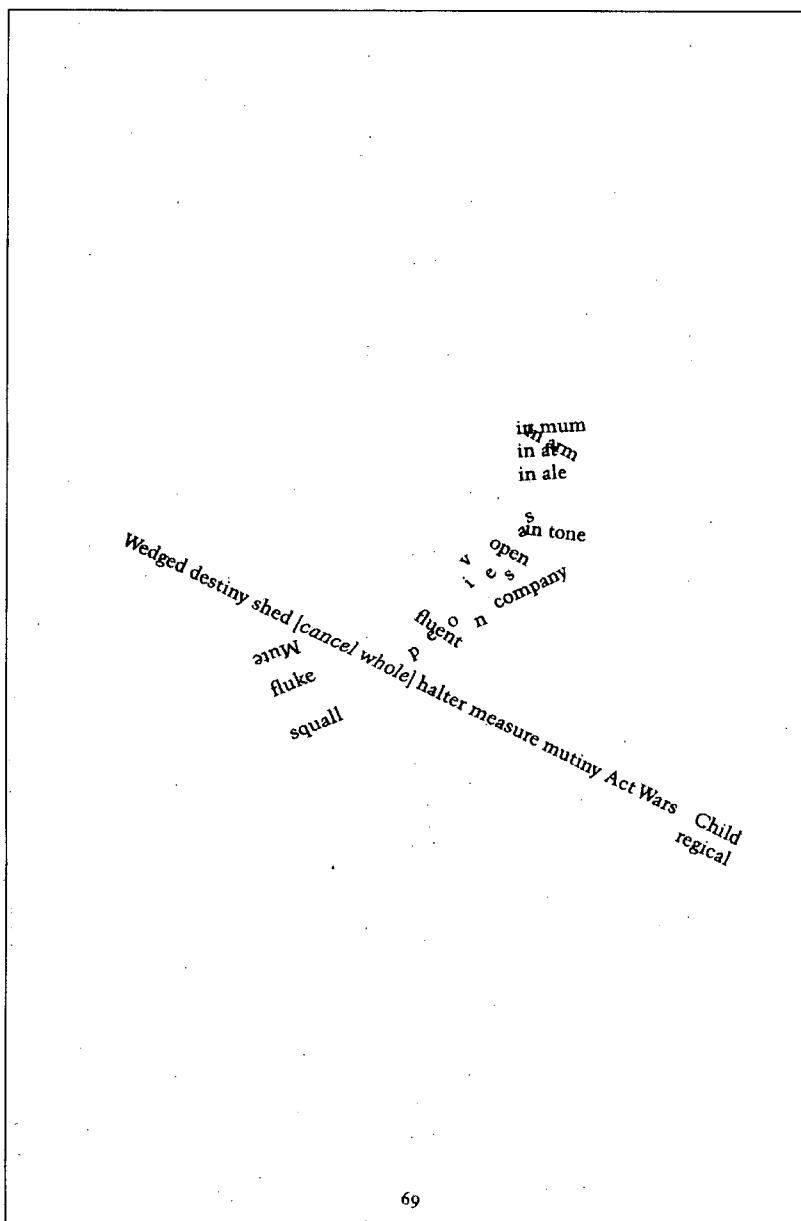
Figure 22. Penultimate page of 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk', *Singularities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. 69

In terms of its textual material, the penultimate page of the poem (see figure 22) performs a return to the Genetic Text of *Billy Budd*. Many of the words that make up this verbal-visual composition can be found in Melville's novel: the 'Wedged' of the one long line, for example, echoes the 'wedged mass of upturned faces' of the story's climactic

moment. Terms like 'halter', 'mutiny', 'Act', 'Wars', 'Mute', and 'squall' all appear more than once in *Billy Budd*, and even without recourse to the source text they evoke the naval setting of the tale. The phrase '[*cancel whole*]', meanwhile, is an editorial transcription of Melville's processes of revising his manuscript and appears many times in the Genetic Text. This editorial direction, of course, signals a process of erasure and, interestingly, forms a kind of central point or 'pivot' around which the visual structure of the page is composed. Indeed, the layout of this page visually resembles a structure that is in the process of overbalancing, its single long line tipping violently and seeming to topple the words and even individual letters of the words above it. That this collapsing movement is visually centred on the phrase '[*cancel whole*]' infers that a process of revision and erasure is at the heart of this moment of radical tumbling. But the seemingly appended section 'Child / regical' also appears to have something to do with the overbalancing depicted here. Resonating with the line 'My heavy heavy child'(S, 68) on the opposite page, 'Child / regical' associatively takes on a weighty presence, whilst the word 'regical', suggesting 'regicidal', is burdened with revolutionary associations. In *Billy Budd*, the spectre of 'immeasurable revolt'[74] epitomised by the 'regicidal' French revolutionaries haunts the text and feeds the fears of 'mutiny'(S, 69) aboard Billy's ship underpinning the events that lead to his execution.[75] 'Child / regical', then is semantically loaded, and at the same time its two-line arrangement gives it a blocky physical presence which seems to tip the long line and accordingly the whole visual structure.

The poem's penultimate page poem thus forms a response to the title's imperative to carry out a practice of 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk'; it conducts a visual toppling of textual material as a possible means to perform what Benjamin might refer to as a 'blast[ing] open [of] the continuum of history', or at least of literary or textual history.[76] From the wreckage (or perhaps the shipwreck, given the nautical theme here) of this frozen moment of scattering or blasting, Howe's poem makes a wager that this material's unfulfilled and previously muffled semantic energies might be recovered. The inverted word 'Mute' is particularly instructive – literally enacting an aspiration to overturn muteness, or to let hitherto unrecognised dimensions of this material 'speak'. Its scattering of textual material opens phrases, words and single letters up to a multiplicity of chance encounters which might amount to a recuperation of latent possibilities. The collision of 'fluent', for example, and the separated letters 'p e o n' acts out a struggle between two

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[74] Melville, p. 300.
[75] Melville, p. 300.
[76] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 254.

words, one of which claims physical wholeness and semantic coherence, whilst the other is disjointed. Here, 'fluent' slices across 'p e o n', performing a situation in which that which is 'fluent' cuts across and symbolically silences the 'peon', a word originating from the Latin *pedō* meaning 'man who goes on foot' and denoting a range of marginalised, disempowered, or expendable positions such as 'unskilled worker', 'very poor person', 'messenger', or 'foot soldier', for example (*OED*). And yet 'p e o n', by its very disaggregated nature links up with a 'company' of other scattered letters, 'v i e s' and 'a s', which might together be read as 'peon vies as', in which the disempowered 'foot soldier' 'vies', or contests, its marginalised and silenced status. The fragmented word enacts this vying by means of another kind of contest: that between the semantic drives of reading and the material qualities of the letters which are particularly brought to attention by virtue of their scattered status. In a sense it is precisely this physical dimension of printed text which is the 'peon', the foot soldier, the unrecognised ground of textuality which here 'vies' with a 'fluent' semantic functioning of the printed text. These dimensions of the text signify 'in mum', as the topmost line of this page suggests, bringing to mind both maternal femininity and silence – as in 'keeping mum'. But 'mum' also has a third and less frequently deployed usage, as a verb meaning 'to act in a traditional masked mime or mummers play'(*OED*). The material on this page does indeed visually perform a kind of mime, a theatrical staging which physically 'blasts open' material from literary history, enabling it to signify 'in mum' by means of the meaning potentials of its physical dimensions in combination with the more abstract linguistic resonances of this material.

The poem's revolutionary-redemptive activity continues in the last page of the poem, (figure 23). The visual disturbance of this page, though, is less dramatic than the previous arrangement. The collection of lines here, concentrated in a small area of the page describe not so much a collapsing movement as a process of settling following a disturbance, because as the reader moves from top to bottom (and the fact that all the lines and words are the right way up encourages this conventional direction of reading) the angles of the lines become less skewed away from the horizontal. The textual material here hails a 'Human [authoritative] human!'(S, 70), perhaps the constructor of the 'Record' which lurks just beneath the first 'Human' of this phrase. The square brackets of this first line echo the square brackets elsewhere in the poem, and especially with those of '[*cancel whole*]'(S, 69) upon the previous page, which indicate processes of revision and erasure involved in making the text or 'Record' 'authoritative'. Indeed, the material on this page is overwhelmingly concerned with precisely this process, as the capitalised phrase forming

Human [authoritative] human!
They cumbered the ground.
Record
Freak inside the heart
Secret fact a title given
THE REVISER

70
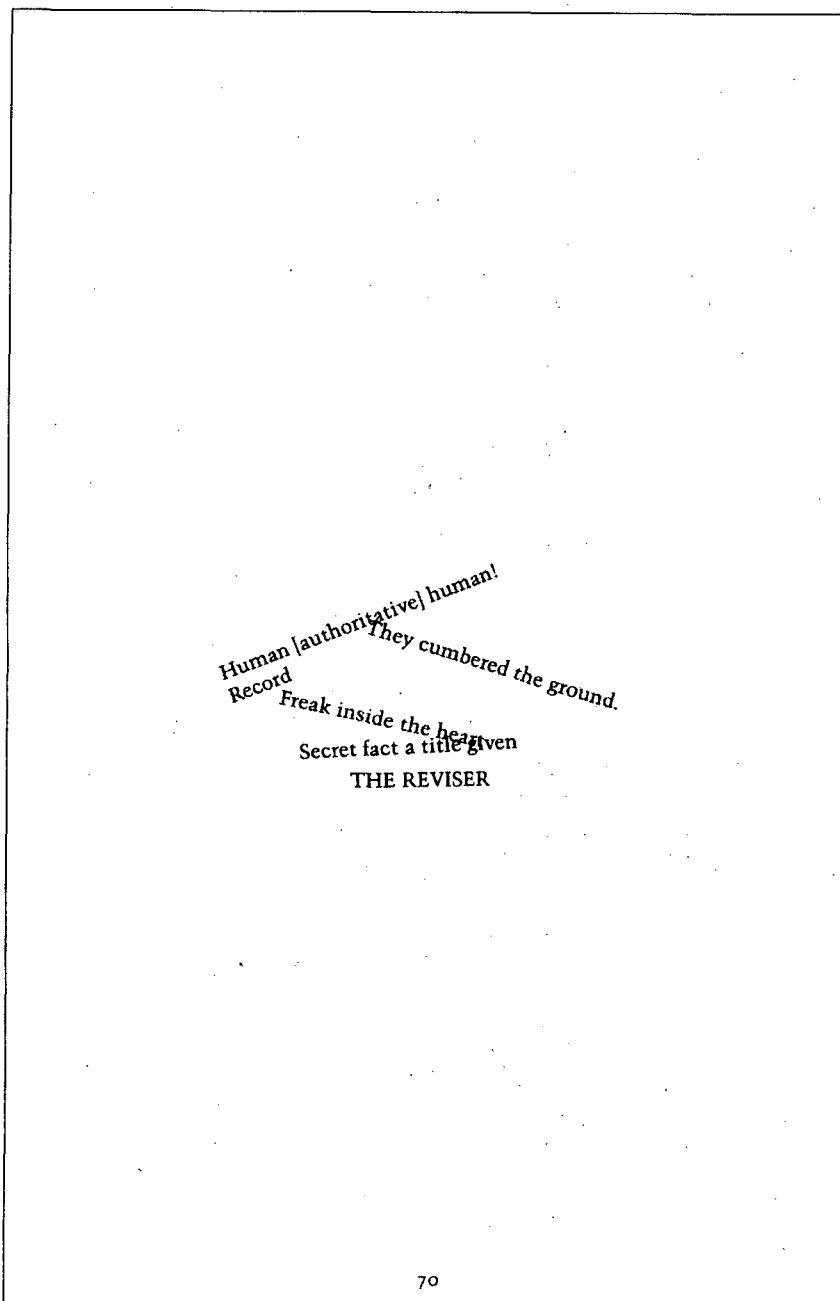
Figure 23. Last page of 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk', p. 70

the bottommost line or visual stratum of this composition suggests; 'THE REVISER' thus
positioned is a sign of a 'Secret fact a title given', a making-visible of an unacknowledged or
disavowed activity underpinning textual history. It is this 'REVISER', suggests Howe's
composition, that makes the 'Record' 'authoritative' by bracketing off all that is not
properly 'Human', all that is 'Freak', all that stutters. And yet at the same time the poem
suggests that 'THE REVISER', especially once made visible, provides an alternative
possibility, that of tracing a way back to that which has been erased, that which is 'Freak

inside the heart' and which, as the almost-intersection of this line with the word 'Record' implies, is always there, just touching, or even 'inside the heart' of the 'authoritative' 'Record'. 'THE REVISER' can be a means of retrieving the stutters of history, and indicating the points at which the 'authoritative' itself stutters – as indeed this word itself seems to do when spoken aloud. 'THE REVISER', occurring as the last line of Howe's poem, is placed quite literally as the underpinning of the very work of scattering which forms part of this poem's strategy to recover and redeem the silences and stutters of textual and literary history.

'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' enacts a return to the stutter of American literary history to seek out its hitherto unrealised potentials (and particularly those that carry the traces of a suppressed feminine).[77] Thus the poem demonstrates ways in which Howe's project participates in a revisionary desire to recover fragments of a lost past which might 'in turn seed the present with redemptive, transforming "energy"' as Vincent Pecora puts it.[78] But as my earlier chapters have suggested, Pecora's analysis of this redemptive tendency in contemporary articulations of counter-memory is useful for an investigation of projects such as Howe's not just because he identifies this tendency and traces its roots to Benjamin, but also because he sounds a cautionary note about the possible shortcomings of such recuperative-redemptive modes of historical enquiry. As I have previously indicated, in Pecora's thinking the problem for such projects is that they 'risk... a certain exclusive particularism' which obscures a multiplicitous 'excess of... redemptive moments' inherent in 'the true diversity of the past'. He worries that in privileging 'special histories', in seeking 'memorial justice' in the cause of 'present interests', the 'irreducibly plural and contradictory' nature of the past is negated.[79] Projects to rescue specific submerged pasts, he argues, both depend upon the notion of multiple histories and fail to acknowledge the true multiplicity of history. But to what extent might Howe's historical project be susceptible to the pitfalls identified by Pecora? In sifting through textual history in search of stutters, gaps, silences and fragments whose unfulfilled potentials might transform the meanings of the past and of cultural configurations in the present, is her poetry and criticism particularist or exclusivist, as Pecora's theory might suggest? What, for example, might we make of Howe's aligning of the stutter with the unacknowledged feminine? Might not the stutter contain an excess of unvoiced presences, traces of a plurality of other

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[77] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 181.
[78] Pecora, pp. 96, 93.
[79] Pecora, p. 96.

histories 'expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier'?[80] Certainly, Howe's historical investigations of American history rely upon a particular sense of this history. She tends, for example, largely to focus on a particular version of American history – the history of the Pilgrim Fathers' settling of New England which forms her own cultural roots as a New Englander and has undoubtedly become the privileged 'Mythology of the American Frontier'. This focus serves to suppress other versions of American history within which alternative kinds of marginalised histories might lie; for example, Howe's historical investigations are entirely silent on the history of slavery, a history which seems central to any investigation into 'what went wrong' in the early years of American history.[81] Furthermore, one might ask to what extent is Howe's project really interested in the histories of America's native peoples? She often mentions the erasure of Native Americans, but how exactly do their lost histories figure in her wider project and in her poems themselves? And what bearing do the visual dimensions of Howe's poetry have on such questions? By way of investigation into these issues, I will now turn to a consideration of 'Thorow', a poem which is explicitly concerned with American colonial history, with the ways in which that history informs contemporary reality, and with the barely discernable traces of Native Americans in American historical narratives. I would like to suggest that whilst 'Thorow' ostensibly sets out to rescue the 'irreducibly plural and contradictory' sense of the past of a particular geographical locale, the poem actually constitutes an investigation of its own limited capacities to do so.[82]

'A history of the world where forms of wildness brought up by memory become desire and multiply' (S, 40)

Howe's introduction to 'Thorow' relates how this poem has its beginnings in 1987, when she spent time as a writer in residence at Lake George in upper New York State. Describing the town, 'or what is left of a town'(S, 40), as an embodiment of the materialist 'travesty' of late capitalist American culture 'grafted' onto a landscape previously rich with 'spirits' and the traces of 'once-upon'(S, 40), the poet brings into focus a sense of meaninglessness that pervades her own disenchanted present. Her introductory prose section presents this specious materialism as a motivation for her turn away from her contemporary moment to stand 'on the shores of a history of the world where forms of wildness brought up by memory become desire and multiply'(S, 40). Two terms in particular here, 'history' and

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[80] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 181.
[81] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 164.
[82] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 175.

'wildness', constitute key areas of enquiry for the poem that pursues the 'primal indeterminacy' of a landscape even whilst it investigates the ways in which this has been 'appropriated' by a colonial history whose legacy, Howe suggests, is the superficial 'graft' of the poet's present moment. The introduction of the poem represents Lake George as a kind of palimpsest in which primordial 'wildness', a history of colonisation, and the empty materialism of contemporary capitalism become a spatiotemporal mesh. The poem itself conducts a sifting-through of layered residues comprising material culled from the papers of Sir William Johnson, the eighteenth-century colonialist who led the British at the Battle of Lake George and built Fort William Henry, the writings of Henry David Thoreau, and the poet's own meditative communings with the landscape.[83] What this process seeks, Howe's introduction claims, is 'the uncertain plurality of history', to adopt Pecora's terms.[84] Furthermore, the poem's introductory section implies, this plurality is sought in the hope that it might reinvigorate a disenchanted and banal present moment.

One way in which Howe's introductory prose section invokes the idea of a multiplicity of competing and contradictory histories is by bringing processes of naming and renaming to the fore. She points to the role of naming in the project of European expansionist imperialism: the lake central to her poem is first 'spelled ... into *place*' by its early European 'discoverers' and has been 'renamed ... several times since'(S, 40). Known variously over time via the Iroquois appellation Andiatarocte, the French Lac du Saint Sacrament and the English Lake George, the lake's changes of name reflect a history of colonisation and battles over possession of territory between the British and the French.[85] In processes of imperialist exploration and colonial claiming, naming functions as a way of fixing a space in '*place*', thus making it knowable and manageable, and as a way of constructing it as property and stamping ownership upon it. But the multiple names of Lake George stand as testament to moments of contestation and fracture within these colonial processes and the shifting status of this place in various histories. Thus Howe's introduction also offers another way of understanding names and naming. Quoting Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, she proposes that 'The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity. The proper name is the subject of a pure infinitive comprehended as such in a field of intensity.' For Deleuze and Guattari, the proper name 'does not designate an

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[83] I am indebted here to Will Montgomery's meticulous research presented in his article 'Appropriating primal indeterminacy: language, landscape and postmodern poetics in Susan Howe's *Thorow*', *Textual Practice*, 20.4 (2006), 739–757, in which he points to Johnson's papers as one of Howe's primary source texts in this poem. Montgomery's thorough research and very careful readings of Howe, both in his published articles and his unpublished doctoral thesis, entitled '"Pilings of thought under spoken" : the poetry of Susan Howe, 1974–1993' (University of London 2003) have been very helpful to my own thinking on this poet.
[84] Pecora, p. 93.
[85] John Romeyn Brodhead, *History of the State of New York* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), p. 422.

individual', but, rather, a 'true proper name' acts as a nexus of 'the multiplicities pervading him or her'(S, 41). Howe's prose juxtaposes this notion of multiplicity with a series of meditations on the proper name of Thoreau which raise the possibility of an 'instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity.'[86] Howe quotes a letter from Thoreau in which he commends his addressee's achievement of having 'studied out the history of the ponds, got the Indian names straightened – which means made more crooked - &c., &c.'(S, 42), endorsing an indeterminacy which he sees as inherent in 'Indian names'. This is followed by a response from the same correspondent who makes a play on Thoreau's name in a line of verse: 'So leave the land of *Thor*, and *row* along our shore!', turning the name into a watery-themed invitation to come visiting. Another quotation recounts the scorn of one of Thoreau's neighbours at the writer's twisting of his own name from David Henry to Henry David. Thoreau's name, then, like that of Lake George, undergoes processes of transformation in these quotations, and Howe's poem extends these processes in its title. 'Thorow' is obviously a homonym of Thoreau's name, but, due to its (mis)spelling, it can also be read as an archaic or idiosyncratic spelling of 'through', as in Howe's quotation of Sir Humphrey Gilbert's assertion that 'there is no thorow passage'(S, 41) and her lines 'thorow out all / the Five Nations'(S, 46). In this second instance, however, 'thorow' suggests not only 'through' as in 'throughout' but also 'throw', as in 'throw out', a reading which points to a process of expelling the native peoples of the Five Nations from their ancestral lands. Furthermore, 'Thorow' can be read as a lisping rendering of the word 'sorrow' and thus as a lament for all that has been lost to the ravages of the violent colonial history negotiated in the poem, a loss which is manifested in the superficial 'graft'(S, 40), the hollow and pernicious version of contemporary society depicted at the beginning of Howe's introduction.

If the stutter functions as the 'sounding of an uncertainty'[87] and the mark of gaps and erasures in 'Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk', then the lisp constitutes the primary verbal metaphor of 'Thorow'. As my discussions of the multiple possible readings of the signifier 'Thorow' have begun to suggest, the slipping, lisping, drifting activity of the poem is allied to its pursuit of multiplicities; the poem's lisping title makes of Thoreau's name 'the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity'. So too, its larger enactments of lisping aim at

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[86] These quotations on Thoreau's name occur in my version of *Singularities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), but not in the first edition of this collection (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1990). No indication is given that the two versions are materially different. I include the page containing the quotations concerning Thoreau's name as an appendix.

[87] Howe, *The Birth Mark*, p. 181.

the multiplicities embedded in the history of the Lake George landscape. Consider the following, for example:

> To be sent in slays
>
> if we are not careful
>
> To a slightly place
>
> no shelter
>
> (S, 48)

These lines, like the poem's title, demonstrate that lisping is not simply a primary metaphor for the poem's activities but an enacted verbal activity that foregrounds a sound-based dimension of textual materiality. These lines perform verbal slippages: alliteratively from 'sent' to 'slays' to 'slightly', and assonantly from 'slays' to 'place', for example. I would like to propose that such sound-based materiality functions in this poem in parallel ways to the forms of visually-foregrounded materiality I discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to *Eikon Basilike*: that is as a mode of emphasising sensory dimensions of writing that might open texts up to alternative modes of meaning.

Garrett Stewart, in his book *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, conducts what he calls a 'salvage operation... of phonemic reading' in which he 'contemplates a sensory – encroached upon a cognitive – processing of texts'.[88] For Stewart, the sonic resonances of voicing are repressed in normative processes of reading, in parallel to the ways that, as I have argued, the literal visual presence of writing normally goes unacknowledged in the semantic drives of reading. As his notion of the sensory dimensions of voicing 'encroached upon a cognitive' process indicates, Stewart sees sound-based materiality as a dimension of reading that disturbs or unsettles cognitive processes. Furthermore, he understands sound as functioning in a series of sensory tensions and dialogues with the graphic surfaces of the text; 'the acoustics of textuality' he declares, constitute 'a malleable "signifying" energy floated upon the counterplay of phonemes against graphemes within the order of signification.'[89] This positioning of 'phonemes against graphemes' suggests a relationship of conflict comparable to that detected by Foucault and Mitchell in their discussions of word-image relations. For Stewart, as for Foucault and Mitchell, such a relationship is potentially productive, generating a

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[88] Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 18, 27.
[89] Garrett Stewart, p. 11.

'"signifying" energy' whose effects might even be considered revolutionary: 'graphic and vocal patterns intersect each other, cross and discompose the text.'[90] For Stewart, this frictional 'play' between different sensory dimensions of the text forms 'the alternating resistances that get in the way of reading, the energies that reading as we know it must for the most part override'.[91]

The invocation of lisping sounds in 'Thorow' deploys such 'resistances' and their 'energies' as a way of 'discompos[ing] the text' and in so doing approaching the multiplicities of its own language and of the history of the landscape upon which it meditates. The acoustic slippages between 'sent' and 'slays' and 'slightly', and from 'slays' to 'place' in the lines quoted above, for example, make of this text 'a slightly place', a domain that embodies a migratory drift into a marginal terrain. Indeed, the 'we' here is under threat of expulsion; these lines with their odd spelling and references to a process of geographical relocation, have the quality of a historical record of the experiences of early settlers, exiled in 'a slightly place', a marginalised and exposed domain with 'no shelter'. Accompanying the acoustic lisps, are semantic slippages; 'slays' working most obviously as a misspelling of 'sleighs' that might carry the 'we' into exile, but also as a correct spelling of the present participle of 'to slay', suggesting a violent threat that might accompany the expulsion of the 'we' in their banishment to an unprotected and dangerous domain. The phrase 'slightly place', meanwhile, with 'slightly' failing to make complete sense alongside the noun 'place' operates on the margins of meaning in ways that nevertheless manage eloquently to designate a site that is itself marginal, peripheral, tenuous, unstable, outcast, slighted. In this stanza, acoustic and semantic lisps and slippages enact a 'wildness' of verbal articulation that describes a movement into the margins or the 'shores of a history'(S, 40).

'Complicity battling redemption' (S, 55)

By means of its meditations on naming and the embodied sound-based and semantic lisping, drifting activities of its poetic lines, 'Thorow' aspires to rescue traces of 'primal indeterminacy'(S, 40), to open up textual material to the multiplicity Howe detects in the remains of history and in a prior 'primal' state whose vestiges she senses in the landscape of Lake George. Such an avowed embrace of multiplicity would seem to enable Howe's poem to transcend the charges of particularism and exclusivism levelled by Pecora's critique of postmodern cultural criticism. But the relation of this work to a truly plural vision

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[90] Garrett Stewart, p. 15.
[91] Garrett Stewart, p. 27.

of history is more complicated and troubled than the poem's declared pursuit of multiplicities might at first suggest. The poem's avowed route to the plurality of the past, via the historical and literary texts of European settlers and colonists and their descendants and by means of the poet's own highly mediated contemporary relationship to the landscape in which her poem dwells, makes any attempt to acknowledge and recover the true plurality of the histories of Lake George rather limited. Howe is anxious to detect the traces of these histories in the absences and appropriations of her source texts, in the citing of Native American place names, for example, or in references to 'Indian shoes'(S, 43) and canoes. But these indexical markers tend throughout the poem to become part of a non-European 'wilderness'. As Will Montgomery puts it, 'the non-European, Native American presence is swept into a category of inarticulate otherness that assimilates it to the "wilderness" of the land that surrounds them'.[92] Furthermore, this 'wilderness' is approached only in relation to and through the 'we' of the poem, the European presences that ultimately appropriate, manage, and quash the 'primal indeterminacy' of the land they encounter. As Nicky Marsh cogently points out, in Howe's wider investigation of American history, 'the decimation of [the] first peoples by American colonization is given only the meaning that colonization gave it'. She quite rightly points to

> Howe's complicity, ironical as it may present itself as being, with the absence of narrative for Native Americans ... The retention of such absences jars against the ostensible purpose of much of Howe's political agenda to discover presences within the scission of American identity.[93]

Whilst a poem like 'Thorow' claims to be interested in rescuing the traces of a Native American past, then, in retaining the absence of Native American histories *as* absence and lack, it runs the risk of presenting them as part of an 'exotic' Otherness that is only knowable by means of colonial discursive engagements with it. For both Montgomery and Marsh, Howe's project of historical recovery is at its most visibly faulty in its engagement – or perhaps non-engagement – with aboriginal histories. Both critics in their different ways suggest that Howe's poetic aspiration to recover the traces of these histories tends to repeat the very structures of othering, coercion and containment she wants to oppose.

'Thorow', then is at least partly complicit with the restrictive viewpoints of the history it critiques, constituting an embodiment of the problems it aspires to redress. As Marsh's comments indicate, Howe is well aware of a complicity with narratives that negate

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[92] Montgomery, 'Appropriating', p. 743.
[93] Nicky Marsh, '"Out of My Texts I Am Not What I Play": Politics and self in the Poetry of Susan Howe, *College Literature*, 24.3 (1997), 124–137, p. 132.

certain histories, and yet it seems to me that, in 'Thorow' at least, the acknowledgement of this collusion is not so much an 'ironical' nod to the poetry's immanent position as it is a knowing investigation of the limitations of the work's own capacity as an 'apprehension of a multiplicity'(S, 41). The repeated couplet 'Revealing traces / Regulating traces'(S, 46), for example, reflexively points to a practice that both uncovers a plurality of 'traces' and counters their very plurality by means of a process of imposing order and control. These lines emphatically enact a knowing but seemingly inescapable return to the very structures of rationalisation, management, and control that the poem seeks to eschew in its quest for multiplicity. As Montgomery suggests, we might read such a return, via Freud's familiar notion of the 'compulsion to repeat', as the manifestation of 'an irresistible urge to return to the scene of the originating trauma', [94] the violent imposition of a 'Regulating' colonial order. The poem registers its own inability to reconcile its pursuit of a plural notion of history with the limitations of its vision, which is unavoidably shaped by the very discourses and structures that form this 'Regulating' power.

At the end of its second section the poem names a process of 'Complicity battling redemption'(S, 55). This line neatly describes a conflict in the poem itself between a compulsive kind of complicity with the configurations and power relations of a discourse that excludes, contains, and marginalises, and an aspiration to redeem the pluralities negated by these very processes. And yet as I have begun to suggest, Howe's particular mode of redemption – the recovery of particular traces of the past – might also be read as a kind of complicity with exclusivist forces that ends up 'Regulating' the surfeit of plurality history has to offer. But the placing of the line 'Complicity battling redemption' as the very last line of the second part of the poem is, I think, instructive with respect to the radical visual disruption of page layout which follows and which characterises the short third section of the poem. If the last line of the poem's second part can be read as an acknowledgement of at least a partial failure of the poem to rescue history's multiplicities, even in its redemptive activities, perhaps the final section of the work functions as the staging of a last-ditch attempt to imagine multiplicity, if in rather constricted terms.

The first opening of part three of 'Thorow' (figure 24) contains one of Howe's most dramatic instances of radical 'scattering', as the poet herself calls it in an interview.[95] This vocabulary is significant, I think, because as in the title of 'Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk', the term 'scattering' indicates a desire to admit chance and error into the poem. Although, as I indicated in my earlier discussion of Eikon Basilike, Howe's meticulous

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[94] Montgomery, 'Appropriating', p. 749.
[95] Howe and Keller, p. 9.

3

Cannot be
every
where I
entreat
snapt
Re solution
picked up arrowhead
hieroglyph

Parted with the Otterware

at the three Rivers, & are

Gone to have a Treaty

with the French at Oswego
battean
islet

At this end of the carry
& singing their war song
neck

sheen   The French Hatchet
                drisk

Their Plenipo   squall   Messages
                                    splint
disc   coin   cedar
        lily root   grease   chip   cusk
                a very deep Rabbit
swamp   wavelet
        of which will not per|mit| of
                                shrub
        fitted to the paper, the Margins
                                    mud
        Frames should be exactly
                                waterbug
Encampt   Fires by night
    wood   c o v e r
canoes   Cove
                                    Places to walk out to
    Tranquillity of a garrison
            Escalade
Traverse canon night siege Constant firing
Traverse canon night siege Constant firing

Gabion
Parapet

Gabion
Parapet

Traverse canon night siege Constant firing
Escalade
        Tranquillity of a garrison

Places to walk out to
Cove

waterbug   The Frames should be exactly   wood   canoes
                                                Fires by night   Encampt
mud   fitted to the paper, the Margins

shrub   of which will not per|mit| of
                                            swamp
wavelet   a very deep Rabbit
                                        lily root
    cusk   grease   chip   coin
cedar   splint   disc
                        Messages   Their Plenipo
    drisk   sheen
            The French Hatchet
    neck
        & singing their war song   At this end of the carry
        islet
            battean   The War Bell   hieroglyph
            Messengers say   Picked up arrowhead

        over the lakes

Of the far nations

Figure 24. Penultimate opening of 'Thorow', Singularities, pp. 56–7

attention to the visual effects of page layout make it unlikely that her 'scattered' visual pages have been created via a process of chance operations, her highly choreographed disruptions of page layout physically explode conventional writing and reading practices. This 'scattering' reads as an attempt to shrug off the 'regulating' processes, not only of discursive language but of the conventions of the poetic line and the rules of the page, and in this way to enable its textual material to function something like an 'apprehension of a multiplicity'(S, 41).

Howe's 'scattered' pages challenge and eschew the grid of the page in an attempt to disrupt the 'European grid on the forest'(S, 45), a central symbol in Howe's poem of the instrumental rationality that has shaped American colonial history. The 'grid' placed both conceptually and physically 'on the forest' by European settlers, Howe suggests, has functioned as the means of mapping, dividing, and apportioning land (and its effects are of course still very much visible in the grid-lines which carve up the geography of almost all of North America today, from its state borders to its street layouts). In this poem – and, as my discussion of Howe in my first chapter indicates, in others such as *Secret History of the Dividing Line* – the 'European grid' becomes a symbol of colonial processes of mapping, knowing, rationalising, managing, controlling, and owning the lands of North America. 'Thorow' suggests that the printed page, visually arranged according to a set of coded rules contrived to physically manage, order, and control textual material and the process of its decipherment is itself structurally complicit with, or even a manifestation of, these same forms of rationality.

The set of framing instructions placed at the visual centre of the textual thicket of the 'scattered' pages of 'Thorow' (figure 24) exhibit something of the logic of the 'European grid'. These prescriptive instructions, beginning with the direction 'The Frames should be exactly / fitted to the paper' are highly concerned with 'Margins'. Significantly, the 'paper' of these instructions dictates the size of the 'Rabbit', presumably a variant spelling of the framing term 'rabbet' (which is the rebated part in the back of a picture frame in which the artwork and sometimes the glass sits) whose depth determines how much of the edges of the contained artwork are consequently covered up by the frame. By not allowing 'a very deep Rabbit', the paper page of these instructions exhibits an aspiration to eliminate as far as possible that which is marginal from within the frame of representation. However, with the misspelling 'Rabbit', error creeps in to this prescriptive statement and the dictatorial instructions go awry as sense unravels. The transgression of this errant 'Rabbit' recasts the whole set of instructions in relation to an *Alice in Wonderland* world of non-sense which destabilises the 'grid' of rationality that underpins them.

Significantly, this challenge to the 'grid' of the page occurs via a set of instructions relating to practices associated with visual images, and whilst the linguistic unsettling of the framing instructions is one way in which Howe's poem points to a disruption of the usual rules of the page, it is of course primarily by visual means that this disturbance is carried out. Much of the text on these pages comes from Howe's two main sources for 'Thorow'; the references to warfare are derived from Sir William Johnson's papers, and those pertaining to the natural word from Thoreau's writings.[96] Howe's pages 'scatter' their textual fragments, creating a verbal-visual palimpsest which interlaces references to processes of framing, eighteenth century colonial battles, and nineteenth century communings with nature. This arrangement induces literal textual tangles in which, for example, a list of nouns pertaining to elements of the natural world impinge upon and interlace with fragmented notes on the French and Indian wars of the eighteenth century in which Johnson was embroiled. These physical intertwinings spark semantic connections; the almost-collision of 'Hatchet' and the inverted 'neck' which occurs on both sides of the opening, for example, mimetically suggests a violent act of beheading, whilst the intersection of 'French' and 'batteau' brings about a more benign meeting in which the words seem to mutually reinforce one another, creating an 'islet' of Frenchness, another nearby term suggests, in a sea of predominantly English words.

This visual disruption of the conventions of the printed page, then, does raise the possibility of multiplicities in that it turns the printed page into a field or constellation of plural semantic potentialities. The textual material here, both the framing instructions in the centre of the page and the scattered layout suggest, functions multiply – verbally and visually, semantically and physically, mimetically, allegorically, and indexically. Furthermore, Howe's visual placing of her textual fragments creates almost infinite relationships between these fragments. This multiplicitous effect is undoubtedly heightened by the repetition and inversion of textual material on either side of the opening. As Howe herself indicates, the mirroring that occurs between the two sides of the opening intensifies the visual power of these pages. Speaking in an interview about the process of writing 'Thorow, she says 'it seemed to me the scattering effect was stronger if I repeated them so the image would travel across facing pages. The facing pages reflected and strengthened each other.[97] Of course, 'Thorow's facing scattered pages do not literally reflect one another's 'image' – one is an inversion of the other, and there are quite significant material

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[96] Many of the isolated words here come from various places in Thoreau's works. The unusual words 'drisk' (meaning light drizzle) and 'cusk', for example, can be found in 'Allegash & East Branch' in *The Main Woods*.
[97] Howe and Keller, p. 9.

differences between the pages. But these differences in the 'image' of the page only further increase the multiplicitous effect; one page is not just a repetition of the other, but a 'reflection' that introduces small changes, thus producing further sets of relationships between elements both on the single page and between facing pages. In breaking the usual conventions of the printed page, then, the 'scattered' pages of the first opening of 'Thorow' embody an aesthetic of multiplicity.

The palimpsestual pages with which the third part of 'Thorow' opens constitute a kind of graphic fulfilment of the forms of 'wildness' Howe's poem pursues. The visual thickets and clearings of these 'scattered' pages can be thought of as a kind of symbolic 'map' of the landscape in which the poem locates itself, a landscape which for Howe holds residues of 'primal indeterminacy' and of the layers of history that have made their mark on this American 'wilderness'. And it is perhaps in its attempt to bring about a poetic encounter with this specific landscape in a mode prescribed not by the 'grid' of western instrumental rationality but by the 'drift' and the 'lisp' for which Howe's scattered pages function as literal embodiment that the poem comes closest to the multiplicitous excess of suppressed and marginalised pasts whose traces the poem pursues. Nature as cultural 'Other', Howe's poem suggests, acts as a symbolic repository for all kinds of suppressed and marginalised histories; as she says of 'the feminine' in *The Birth Mark*, '[w]e are the wilderness'.[98] Indeed, as Lawrence Buell points out,

> nature has been doubly otherized in modern thought. The natural environment as empirical reality has been made to subserve human interests, and one of these interests has been to make it serve as a symbolic reinforcement of the subservience of disempowered groups: nonwhites, women, and children.[99]

Buell's remarks help to indicate the ways in which the natural world is symbolically entangled with other kinds of marginalisation and suppression in ways that are of interest to Howe. Her early work as a visual artist persistently turned to material relating to the natural world and especially to the impact on the environment of the arrival and expansion of Europeans in North America. This was a major preoccupation in her installation 'Walls' of 1969-71, in which she placed photographs of birds, trees, and forest scenery, for example, in relation to images of stone walls, extracts from historical records remarking upon bird calls and snow, and a found text expressing a concern that 'with the coming of cats, pigs, and

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[98] Howe, *Birth Mark*, p. 181.
[99] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 21.

rats, the birds will disappear'.[100] Howe also produced a number of 'list poems' consisting primarily of nouns pertaining to some aspect of the natural world, and these were often juxtaposed with water-colour washes and/or images, often of birds or trees. For example one of these works lists plants, 'sea holly / hares ear / wild hop / sea lavender / thrift', to quote the first few lines, in a list that descends vertically down the left-hand side of an A4 page, juxtaposed with a vertical rainbow strip of bright watercolour washes on the right-hand side.[101] The list form of these early works can be read as a cataloguing of nature, naming and itemising flora and fauna as a mode of knowing, categorising, and managing it in ways that echo the functioning of the 'European grid'. But at the same time, the cataloguing activities of the list poem are also a way of indicating multiplicity; there is a sense, especially in Howe's non-hierarchical lists, that the list could go on and on indefinitely. Indeed, as Buell points out, transcendentalists such as Walt Whitman and Thoreau valued the catalogue poem 'as the closest verbal approximation they were able to achieve to the boundless vitality of nature.'[102] In Howe's work the list poem marks an encounter between (European) humanity and nature's 'primal indeterminacy' (S, 40) which both acts as recognition of the ways in which rationalising systems of thought unavoidably structure this encounter and at the same time aspires to acknowledge but not contain or subsume nature's true multiplicitous 'indeterminacy'.

In the visual pages of the last section of 'Thorow', Howe's interest in the natural environment returns. So too does the list poem; in the poem's 'scattered' pages, for example, two lists reminiscent of Howe's early verbal-visual works make up part of the tangle of textual material. Thoreau is Howe's source for the nouns that make up both columns, one of them beginning 'Cove / waterbug / mud' and the other consisting of 'sheen / disc / lily root / swamp'(S, 56,7); all the words that make up these lists can be found scattered throughout *The Main Woods* and *Walden*.[103] Thoreau is, in a sense, Howe's guide in her poetic encounter with the American 'wilderness'. His writings and way of life are an attempt to think ecocentrically, to recover a sense of an unappropriated 'primal indeterminacy'(S, 40). Yet for all his respect for the natural world Thoreau did not quite manage to let go of European anthropocentrism and individualism; as Buell points out, '[h]e could not get past the Emersonian axiom that "nature must be viewed humanly to be

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[100] Susan Howe Papers, UCSD, Box 15, Folders 5 & 1. Most other folders in this box also contain evidence of Howe's interest in the natural world and the impact of European settlement on it.

[101] This piece can be found the Susan Howe Papers, UCSD, MSS. 201, Box 15, Folder 8.

[102] Buell, 'Catalogue Rhetoric', *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 166–187, p. 187.

[103] All except 'disc' which is not, strictly speaking, derived from Thoreau's works. However, as my discussion below demonstrates, I read 'disc' as part of 'discovery' (a word that occurs a great many times in Thoreau).

viewed at all''', whilst his 'notion of land apportionment', for example, 'follows the European settlers' practice of assigning explicit titles to specific parcels of land.'[104] Meanwhile, his encounters with the 'wilderness' are often imagined in terms of a romanticist relationship between the solitary individual and nature. And despite his admiration for the indigenous peoples of America, Thoreau's writings often find themselves 'under a spell of savagism'(S, 49), frequently portraying Native Americans in terms of a naïve simplicity that not only romanticises their ways of life, but infantilises them and tends often to reduce the native people to part of the landscape itself.[105] For Montgomery, Howe's poem inherits such tendencies embedded in her source texts, following Thoreau in her 'sweeping' of 'the non-European, Native American presence... into a category of inarticulate otherness that assimilates it to the "wilderness"'. But Howe is drawn to Thoreau's writings precisely because of the tensions they exhibit between a mythology of the American frontier which seeks to conquer and manage the 'wilderness' and a quest to imagine ways of approaching the natural world outside of structures of thought which 'other' it.

These tensions form part of the cultural frame for Howe's own staging of 'Complicity battling redemption' in 'Thorow'. Her lists of Thoreauvian nouns in the 'scattered' pages of this poem are an embodiment of such struggles; as my previous discussion of this form suggests, the list poem participates in an activity that seeks to name, to classify, to itemise and to order, whilst also aspiring to indicate the multiplicity of the natural environment. Yet the visual arrangements of the lists that make up part of the textual thickets in the 'scattered' pages of 'Thorow' complicate such tensions further. Howe both uses the list form that appeared so frequently in her earlier work and simultaneously disrupts it as part of her project of disrupting the grid of the page in an attempt to imagine ways of unsettling the 'European grid on the forest' and the modes of thought it symbolises. By printing her word series upside-down or at odd angles and by tangling the orderly list up with other textual material, Howe's lists in a sense return the written trace of an itemisation of the natural world to an approximation of (textual) 'primal indeterminacy'. In one such dismantling, the series 'sheen / disc / lily root / swamp', printed upside-down on the recto side of the opening is unravelled on the verso side, its separate

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[104] Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, pp. 125, 213
[105] I am especially thinking of an incident in *The Maine Woods* when Thoreau's guide sings a song and Thoreau imagines the first Europeans' encounters with this 'native simplicity': 'His singing carried me back to the period of the discovery of America, to San Salvador and the Incas, when Europeans first encountered the simple faith of the Indian. There was, indeed, a beautiful simplicity about it; nothing of the dark and savage, only the mild and infantile. The sentiments of humility and reverence chiefly were expressed.' 'Allegash and East Branch', *The Maine Woods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) p. 179.

components printed at odd, disturbed angles rather than parallel to one another. Meanwhile, the disjointed series of letters 'c o v e r y' towards the bottom of this page suggest that one of the terms in this list, 'disc' has been severed from its remainder and should read 'discovery'. Indeed, the word 'disc' appears nowhere in Howe's most likely source texts, Thoreau's *Walden* and *The Maine Woods*, whereas the word 'discovery' and its variants make frequent appearances, particularly in 'Allegash and East Branch' where most of the other listed terms of these pages can be found. Howe's appropriation and *détournement* of the word 'discovery' performs a critique of the whole notion of discovery so central to the imperialist explorations that sought out the 'New World', and to Thoreau's less avaricious contribution to the mythology of the American frontier alike. European claims to 'discovery' of the American continent – whether this term is used in relation to early explorers' first landings upon that continent's shores or to later expeditions into the 'wilderness' – posit America as something previously wholly unknown and can therefore only be made by disavowing the presence of indigenous cultures or by viewing those cultures as part of the 'discovery' itself. Furthermore, by disaggregating this word in her 'scattered' page, splitting the term into 'disc' and 'c o v e r y', Howe points to the ways in which processes of discovery are always also engaged in a 'covery', a covering over or veiling of previous presences and claims. Perhaps, this dismantled word suggests, this also applies to processes of re-covery – and of the recoveries Howe's own poem hopes to make – every recovery might also be read as a 'covery' which elides other presences.

Howe's 'scattered' pages embody a process of 'Complicity battling redemption', then, by both invoking and unravelling processes of naming, sorting and organising, processes of imposing European notions of order and control upon nature and the other 'Others' that are symbolically intertwined with this 'wilderness'. The textual thickets of these pages reflect upon the poem's own complicity with the 'European grid' imposed literally and symbolically upon the American landscape and upon American history. Yet in its unsettling of the grid of the page, 'Thorow's 'scattered' section also attempts to imagine, at least partly by means of the visual capacities of text printed upon the page, this landscape and the history with which it is entwined in terms of tangled multiplicities rather than as series of binaries and categories, lines and grids.

If Howe's 'scattered' pages embody an aesthetic imagining of what a plural vision of history might look like, then its final opening conducts a slightly less visually dramatic pursuit of multiplicity. The bulk of text on the first page of this opening (figure 25) is made up of two interlaced columns visually reminiscent of the word lists of the previous pages and of the poet's earlier work, but more complex linguistically than those lists of nouns.

You are of me & I of you, I cannot tell

Where you leave off and I begin

      selving

      forfending
             Immeadeat Settlem
      but wandering
             Shenks Ferry people
      unhoused
             at or naer Mohaxt
      elect
             Sacandaga vläie
      vision
             Battoes are return
      thereafter
             They say
      resúrgent
             "Where is the path"
      laughter

      ankledeep

      answerable   last
PASSACAGLIA   Strict counterpoint
Moon wading through cloud   reassemble
                Union
         Stress
    distant   mighty
       day helter No nd
             wa
  Awake! top hill demon daunt defiant lenght
              brested   Premis
            a
            ce
            first

58

anthen   uplispth   enend

  adamap   blue wov   thefthe

folled   floted   keen

              Themis

thou sculling me
Thiefth

59

Figure 25. Final opening of 'Thorow', *Singularities*, pp. 58–9

This interlocking text enacts a blurring of boundaries indicated by the page's first two lines: 'You are of me & I of you, I cannot tell / Where you leave off and I begin'(S, 58). A notion of 'selving', suggesting a constitution of selfhood, carried out by means of 'forefending', a defence or fortification, rapidly gives way to an erosion of barriers. The breakdown of a distinction here between the 'I' and 'you', the self and other, in the poem's first lines points to a whole series of permeabilities and intersections for which the rest of the page acts as a verbal-visual demonstration. The interlacing of mostly one word lines with slightly longer, differently indented lines also works as an interleaving of concepts designated by a single word with fragmented historical references. The line 'Shenks Ferry people', interlocked with the lines 'but wandering / unhoused'(S, 58), for example, brings to mind a process of displacement and migration, because the 'Shenks Ferry people', can only be imagined as 'unhoused'. This tribe is thought to have disappeared around the beginning of the seventeenth century, but the manner of their vanishing is uncertain, as is the extent to which the arrival and expansion of European settlements at this time might have contributed to their disappearance.[106] Named by archaeologists after the site in Pennsylvania where the remains of their settlement was found, the lack of a proper name means that this lost tribe is 'unhoused' even in language. The appellation 'Shenks Ferry people' thus designates a site of radical homeless 'wandering' and uncertainty which pervades much of the material on this page. Fragments presumably from historical records such as 'Immeadeat Settlem' and 'Battoes are return' signal a sense of instability by means of their incompleteness and idiosyncratic spellings. Even the description of a location, 'at or naer Mohaxt', is plagued with misspellings and extremely imprecise; 'Mohaxt', presumably a misspelling of 'Mohawk', appears to designate a location somewhere in the Mohawk Valley region, but the 'at or naer' makes for an even greater degree of inexactness. Towards the bottom of the page, the printed text is even less sure of itself; tilting lines intersect with a column of disjointed and radically incomplete words such as 'nd' and 'ce' which also become increasingly compressed so that parts of the letters of the last three lines 'ce / it / first' touch. The physical intermingling of these last three fragments enacts in a materially compressed form the blurring of boundaries verbally invoked in the page's first lines.

The sense of permeable boundaries continues on the last page of the poem in which a skewed word grid, made up almost entirely of misspellings or 'non words'

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[106] See for example 'Commonwealth's Archaeological Program', PHMC: Bureau for Historic Preservation <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bhp/cap/cap_report_36LA1100.asp?secid=25> [accessed 12th December 2007] 'Late Woodland Period in the Susquehanna and Delaware River Valleys' <http://www.paarchaeology.state.pa.us/pub_penarch_over_prehise.htm> [accessed 12th December 2007]

repeatedly performs a 'lisp' or even an 'uplispth' by which the boundaries of the known and the nameable touch upon aspects of 'primal indeterminacy'. The word 'uplispth', for example, performs a typographical 'slip-up', making a nonsense word out of recognisable words and sounds, thus inhabiting a border between the world of sense and the world of non-sense, the world of the known, the recognisable, and the readable and the world of the unknowable, the strange, and the illegible. The word also of course constitutes a verbal demonstration of its central term, 'lisp', by means of its final 'th', but its initial 'up' also performs a stutter, a jittery inaugural sound from which the rest of the word proceeds. In this slippage along the edges of printed language, which recurs in numerous ways in other terms upon this page, Howe's poem plays with the borders and boundaries of printed language in a parallel move to Thoreau's correspondent's achievement of having 'got the Indian names straightened – which means made more crooked – &c., &c.,'(S, 42) mentioned in the poem's introduction. This remark suggests that linguistic markers 'made more crooked' might produce more truthful kinds of names, names which are true proper names in Deleuze and Guattari's sense because they perform an 'opening up to … multiplicities', or in Howe's vocabulary, 'primal indeterminacy'(S, 41, 40). As Thoreau's '&c., &c.' obliquely indicates, such names are inherently unstable, always producing a surplus of possible meanings and designations, a radical indeterminacy. Howe's numerous erring, archaic, or non-sense words constitute a similar site of instability and linguistic permeability, an unsettling of the borders and boundaries of language that parallels the visual skewing of the grid of the poem's last page.

In its final two pages, then, 'Thorow' foregrounds a process of testing boundaries, borders, perimeters and coordinates, the concrete and conceptual markers of the 'European grid' which the poem works both within and against. 'Thorow' does at times achieve an aesthetic approximation of 'multiplicities', as in the 'thickets' of its most radically 'thrown' pages or in its lisping language. But this poem is in the end rather ambivalent about the possibilities of such a move and doubtful about whether its aesthetic embodiment of the principle of multiplicity can be translated into an apprehension of historical multiplicity. In its return to rather less radically disrupted page layouts in its last opening, the poem signals this sense of uncertainty by means of a partial return to the normative principles of the 'grid' of the page and, by association, of the European-centred thought for which the page acts as analogue and demonstration in this poem. Indeed, the textual layout of the final page of 'Thorow' visually refers to the figure of the grid, its first three lines arranged as a word grid, a layout that recurs throughout Howe's oeuvre. But of course this is a skewed grid, its second line indented and thus quite noticeably misaligned

with the words above and below. Meanwhile, the page's last three one-word lines fail to fit into the grid formation altogether, following instead a slightly different logic that aligns each word physically with some of the terms in the grid but that introduces irregular gaps and varying line spacing. This simultaneous visual invoking of and slight twisting of the grid formation works, I think, as an allegory for the larger problem that Howe's poem both embodies and struggles with. 'Thorow' articulates a yearning towards multiplicities, towards the recuperation of unfulfilled potentials that might open out onto a truly plural sense of history. And yet it also recognises its own complicity with rather selective and constricting modes of thought and representation that hinder an 'apprehension of a multiplicity'(S, 41). In short, 'Thorow' embodies and reflects upon the very difficulty Pecora points to when he remarks that projects to redeem the semantic sparks of 'special histories' often end up suppressing the 'uncertain plurality of history', thereby repeating at some level the very structures of violence and repression that such recuperative histories seek to contest.[107] Rather than vowing to transcend the limitations that preclude its representation of multiplicities, then, Howe's poem makes a more modest claim. For all its pursuit of multiplicities embodied in its strategies of drifting, lisping, and unsettling the grid of the page, 'Thorow' is ultimately a selective investigation of history that recognises its inability to entirely shake off rationalist, colonialist, and anthropocentric models of thought and representation and the limitedness and selectiveness of its vision. In its sifting of history's fragmented remains, 'Thorow' ends up looking very much like a knowing embodiment of the very problems that Pecora's analysis of counter-memory brings to the fore. As its last page suggests, Howe's poem is more a skewing of the 'European grid' than a dismantling or transcendence of it. Rather than an 'apprehension of a multiplicity'(S, 41), then, 'Thorow' is a description of a struggle, an enactment of 'Complicity battling redemption'(S, 55).

I concluded my reading of *Eikon Basilike* by proposing that Howe's visual pages offer the materiality of the printed page as a way of indicating the possibility of reading history 'otherwise', for its unacknowledged dimensions. My reading of 'Thorow', however, suggests ways in which this process of reading 'otherwise' might be partial and selective, limited in its capacity to embody the irreducible multiplicity of history, even as this process relies upon the very notion of plural histories. But if 'Thorow' embodies both a complicity with a partial and limiting vision of history and a struggle to aesthetically imagine multiplicities beyond such strictures, then it does afford glimpses of a palpable sense of plurality. In its radically scattered textual thickets and skewed grid formations, Howe's

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[107] Pecora, p. 93.

poem offers a sensuous encounter with the struggle it embodies. To recall the thought of J.M. Bernstein, the foregrounding of the material dimensions of the printed page in 'Thorow' points to 'the *orientational significance of sensory encounter, sensory experience as constitutive of conviction and connection to the world of things*', a kind of '*significance*' that has been 'excised from the everyday' in modernity.[108] The poem's aesthetic embodiment of principles of multiplicity cannot be fully translated into an 'apprehension of [the] multiplicity' of history because it offers a kind of 'significance' tangled up with printed language and the material page which constitutes 'meaning beyond or without discursive redemption'.[109] Whilst the kinds of 'redemption' the poem offers, then, cannot be fully redeemed in discursive terms, they nevertheless perform an '*orientational*' function, indexically pointing to unarticulated multiplicitous presences and providing a sense of '*connection to the world of things*' where a sense of 'primal indeterminacy' might dwell.

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This chapter has traced Susan Howe's bookish visual poetics, examining the relations between her interventionist page layouts and her historical investigations in some of her poems of the late 1980s and very early 90s. By means of a restricted, but nevertheless varied range of visual effects, Howe's dramatic disruptions of conventional page layouts and reading patterns constitute a rich vein of historical enquiry. Her material poetry rethinks the poetic image, reinvesting it with a visual, material dimension of meaningfulness. In so doing, Howe's visual experimentation proposes a mode of historical enquiry that pays heed to a hitherto unacknowledged aspect of the historical record: a material, sensory dimension that might carry indexical traces of suppressed actualities. Her disrupted graphic surfaces not only mimetically enact the ruptures of historical violence and allegorise the predicaments of historical anamnesis; they also embody sustained investigations into the specific historical and political resonances of 'bibliographic codes', verbal-visual relations, and processes of mapping and editing.[110] Yet her visual poetics also provide an occasion for reflecting on the redemptory claims of such a project, and on the potentials and failings of any such attempt to redeem violent and fractured histories. Howe scrutinises the possibilities and failings of her poetry's own historical positioning and legacy which, even in its most radical re-visionary moments, it cannot claim to entirely overcome or transcend.

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[108] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 3.
[109] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 120.
[110]*The Textual Condition*, p. 16.

Chapter 4

Maggie O'Sullivan's Poetics of Salvaging

A 'body-intensive' practice

Whilst she has been writing, publishing, and performing her poetry both in Britain and abroad since the late 1970s, Maggie O'Sullivan's work is generally less well-known in literary studies than either Susan Howe's or Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's. Yet her ongoing active involvement in the performance of her poetry and in small-press publishing means that she is a very visible figure on the British experimental poetry scene. Her work is highly regarded by many critics and practitioners involved with experimental poetics both in Britain and America, and although there is not yet a large amount of critical material on O'Sullivan's poetry to be found in prominent scholarly journals, a modest body of criticism is beginning to accumulate.[1] This poet's work deserves attention here because it provides ample opportunities to investigate questions relating to the recovery of unacknowledged and marginalised dimensions of history and culture in relation to a multidimensional practice that aims for a high degree of synthesis between the verbal, visual, sonic, and tactile dimensions of its poetic materials. This multimedial poetry proposes a visceral sense of connection with history, a sense of cultural memory as embodied and articulated by means of corporeally-based practices of enunciating and inscribing.

Maggie O'Sullivan's poetic practice integrates physical, bodily activity into processes of writing and composition. Says O'Sullivan in a recent conversation on Charles Bernstein's Studio 111 recording series at Penn Sound, 'writing is a body-intensive activity… the whole body is engaged in the act of writing'. This emphasis on the corporeal substrates of writing makes for a material poetry rooted in a sense of performance which comprises not just the bodily activity of the poet, but of the written word made flesh in a very visceral sense. In O'Sullivan's work, this notion of the poetic work as embodied performance makes for a multidimensional poetic practice that results in a fusion of its various dimensions such as the verbal, the sonic, and the visual. '[T]he words are the visual form and the visual form

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[1] Notable examples include Robert Sheppard's final chapter on Maggie O'Sullivan in his *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents, 1950–2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), Isobel Armstrong's essay 'Maggie O'Sullivan: The Lyrical Language of the Parallel Tradition', *Women: a cultural review*, 15.1 (2004), 57–66, Marjorie Perloff, '"The Saturated Language of Red": Maggie O'Sullivan and the Artist's Book', *No: A Journal of the Arts*, 3 (2004), 191–204, and the long-awaited and hopefully forthcoming *Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan*.

are the words,' as she puts it, 'there isn't a division for me… they cohere in the making of the object, the construct, the composition that is for me the poetic text, the poetic work'.[2]

This poet's aspiration towards producing a corporeally-based synthesis between performance and writing and a concurrent melding of verbal and visual forms distinguishes her visual poetics from the verbal-visual tensions and dialogues I have traced in Cha's filmically-informed and often awkward text/image juxtapositions and Howe's text-based disruptions of the conventions of the printed page. So too does O'Sullivan's extensive use not only of striking visual layouts and typographic experimentation but also of coloured inks, visual collage and drawings. Furthermore, O'Sullivan's practice emerges from a rather different context to Cha's background in conceptual and performance art or Howe's involvement with New York minimalist art. Her work belongs to an experimental tradition with its roots in what Eric Mottram has labelled 'The British Poetry Revival' of the 1960s and 70s which critiqued the conservatism and anti-modernism of 'mainstream' writers such as Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis. The activities of writers associated with this experimental tradition centred on poetry readings and on publishing work with small presses and in little magazines often run by the poets themselves. Writers associated with the 'Revival' or 'British Poetry Renaissance' as Robert Hampson calls it, shared affinities and struck up dialogues with American and European modernist poets and were influenced by the work of earlier American modernists of the 1920s such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. As an article by Hampson on the contexts for cris cheek's poetry indicates, this 'Renaissance' not only fostered international links and networks of influence, but also provided the ground for cross or inter-medial practices.[3] Bob Cobbing, both in his own intermedial practice which encompassed and intertwined sound poetry, performance, and visual experimentation, and in his instigation of the Writers Forum press and workshops, was a particularly influential figure for many experimental writers in the 1960s and 70s, especially those working in London. His workshop formed an important nexus of activity for numerous poets, including Bill Griffiths, cris cheek, Lawrence Upton, Allen Fisher, Tom Raworth, and Paula Claire, among others. O'Sullivan became involved with Cobbing's workshops in the 70s, and she also worked with him making and printing books at his Writers Forum press.

O'Sullivan's involvement with Writers Forum has had a significant bearing on her subsequent 'body-intensive' practice. In Cobbing's workshops, participants often

[2] Maggie O'Sullivan and Charles Bernstein, 'A conversation with Maggie O'Sullivan', (sound recording of an interview) Penn Sound Centre for Programs in Contemporary Writing <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/OSullivan.html> [accessed 30th June, 2008].
[3] Robert Hampson, 'cris cheek in manhattan', Pores, 1 <http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/1/>[accessed 15th May 2006].

performed their work as part of the process of composition, and performance has remained a crucial aspect of O'Sullivan's poetry both in terms of the poet's continuing commitment to public readings of her work and in the sense that her poems are highly embodied performances on the page. This latter performative dimension also owes something to her participation in the actual physical processes of printing and bookmaking, through which she has become involved in a physical relationship with the printed word as stuff – as paper and ink – and with the book as a made, material object. In a roundtable discussion on Bob Cobbing's life and work in 2007 at the University of Pennsylvania, O'Sullivan recounts her experiences of printing her book *From the Handbook of that and Furriery* (1986) with Cobbing. She describes an improvisatory, collaborative and homemade process carried out 'at his place' with photocopier and coloured inks, and even poster paint; 'he would find anything at hand and make the work', she says.[4] In an interview with Dell Olsen, she describes printing the original, handmade version of her *A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts*

> which I brought out from my own Magenta press in 1985 when I lived in London and which Bob Cobbing and I made together at his place – (we constructed the entire book going from xeroxing my original pages, collating, binding, glueing [*sic*], trimming the A5 pages, etc. and it took us a 5-day working week – Monday – Friday – to do this – working intensively from 10 til 5 every day and getting to grips with the brand-new binding machine Bob had just bought!). We'd planned to launch it on the Saturday, so it simply had to be done that week![5]

O'Sullivan tells of a hands-on experience of manually 'getting to grips' with the equipment and physical processes of making her books, of the 'intensive labour' of making the material poetic artefact.[6] By becoming directly involved with the actual labour of making poetry books, O'Sullivan joins other 'Renaissance' poets such as Cobbing in a refusal to produce works that are the results of alienated labour. Thus in their very material forms, as well as in their formal and thematic concerns, such small-press works embody a resistance to the 'mainstream' values and commercial pressures which they both contest and find themselves marginalised by.

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[4] 'Bob Cobbing: a roundtable discussion of the life and work of Bob Cobbing' (sound recording of round table discussion) <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Cobbing.html> [accessed 6th January 2008].
[5] O'Sullivan and Dell Olsen, 'Writing / Conversation: an interview by mail November – December, 2003', *How2*, 2.2 (2004)
<http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal//archive/online_archive/v2_2_2004/current/workbook/writing.htm> [accessed 30th April 2007], (para. 52 of 58).
[6] 'Bob Cobbing: a roundtable discussion'.

In the 1980s, O'Sullivan expanded on her interest in processes of material making when alongside her poetry she began to work on 'assemblages or visual constructions', some of which she has used as cover images for her books of poetry (figure 26).[7] These were highly influenced by Kurt Schwitters's Merz works made up of the debris of everyday modern life, and also by the work of Joseph Beuys whose shamanistic commitment to the transformative potentials of materials has informed much of O'Sullivan's work.[8] These early influences, experiences, and experiments with different media have contributed to the shaping of a thoroughly hybrid and highly physical practice.
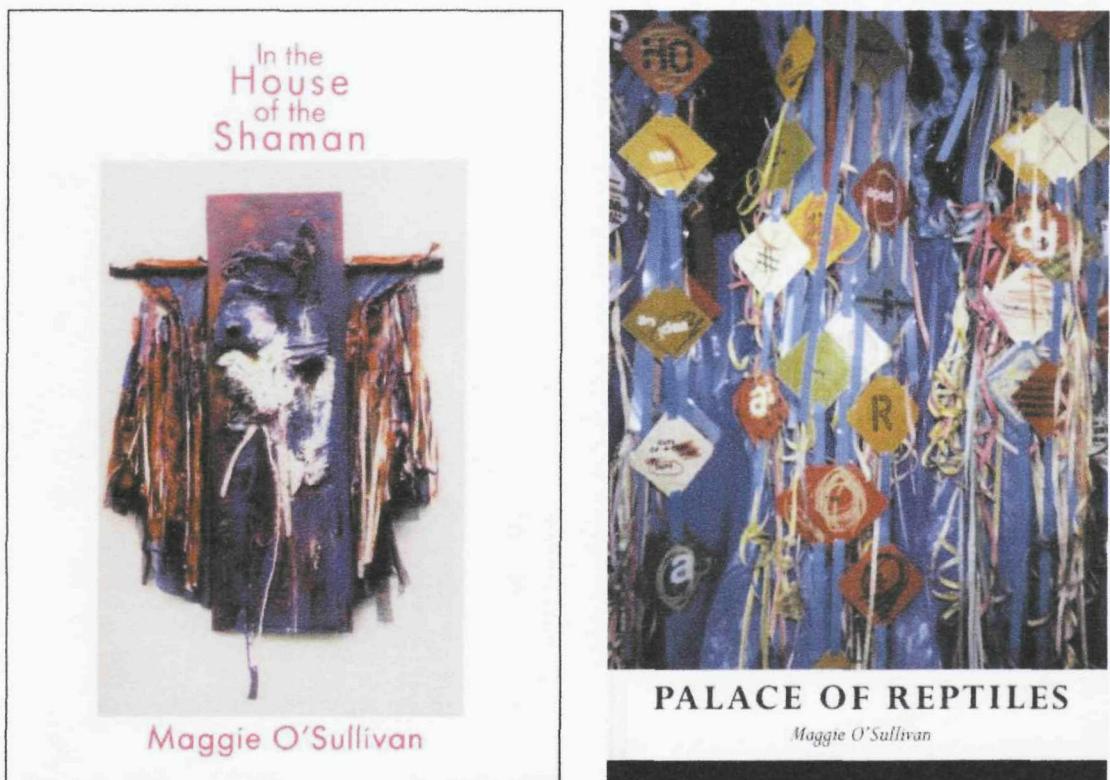

Figure 26. (left) Front cover of In the House of the Shaman (London: Reality Street, 1993) featuring O'Sullivan's assemblage An Order of Mammal (1987, mixed media, 4' x6') and (right) Front Cover of Palace of Reptiles (Willowdale, Ontario: The Gig, 2003), featuring Bound to Be Blue by O'Sullivan (1984, mixed media assemblage, approx. 5m x 3m)

This poet's 'body-intensive' poetry provides opportunities for an investigation into a practice that is not only highly multidimensional in its aesthetic forms, but also grounded in an intimate hands-on understanding of and relation with its own physical modes of

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[7] O'Sullivan, 'RIVERRUNNING (REALISATIONS', Palace of Reptiles (Willowdale, Ontario: The Gig, 2003), p. 67.
[8] O'Sullivan also attributes her shift of career to Beuys, describing how in 1988, after the 'transformative' experience of working on a film on Beuys as a researcher with the BBC, she gave up her job and her life in London and moved to Yorkshire to work full-time on her poetry. ('RIVERRUNNING (REALISATIONS', p. 67. See also O'Sullivan's conversation with Dell Olsen, (para. 28 of 59).

production, not only at the writers' desk and in the artists' studio, but also in the printing press. This is a poetry that is keenly aware of and engaged with the social relations with which its own forms, materials and modes of production are entangled. Furthermore, O'Sullivan's work brings this 'body-intensive' practice and engagement with the physicality of making to bear on a materialist sense of marginalisation and silencing; like Howe and Cha, O'Sullivan is concerned with addressing issues of voicelessness and inarticulacy engendered by the poet's own sense of her cultural heritage, which in O'Sullivan's case is closely related to issues of class as well as colonialism, diaspora and gender. Her poetry's pursuit of silenced or erased aspects of history and culture is linked to her Irish ancestry and the diasporic experiences of her parents whom she describes in a biographical sketch as 'southern Irish agricultural poor'.[9] In an interview with Andy Brown, she expands upon the formative influence of her upbringing: 'My background undoubtedly has shaped who I am / how I am in the world / my work. My father and mother had little schooling and my father worked as a labourer in and out of work all his life. We were brought up on the edge, locked out, without any voice.'[10] It is, she declares, her parents' 'oral culture / struggle for voice despite centuries of repression which I feel has a lot to do with my poetics'.[11] What is very apparent in this account is the poet's sense of her parents' marginalisation not just as Irish migrants, but as uneducated poor whose class position leaves their family 'on the edge... without any voice'. O'Sullivan's narrative of an inherited 'struggle for voice' reveals a 'sense of the ancestral self' disempowered by a history of diasporic and class-related oppression, and this legacy is at the core of a broader concern with suppressed utterances:

> 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 and the non-word in sound or language – make up much of the fabrics and structures of my own compositions.[12]

The length of O'Sullivan's list of forms of voicelessness and inarticulacy here is striking; her sense of a plurality of negated and suppressed articulations and presences suggests that

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[9] O'Sullivan, quoted by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (eds.), 'Commentary', Poems for the Millennium, 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995–98),II (1998), p. 835.

[10] O'Sullivan, 'In conversation with Andy Brown', in Binary Myths 1&2: Conversations with Poets and Poet-Editors, ed. by Andy Brown, (Exeter: Stride, 2004), pp. 155–160, p. 159.

[11] O'Sullivan, quoted in Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, 'Commentary', p. 835.

[12] O'Sullivan, Binary Myths 1&2, pp. 156, 159.

she is less interested in recovering a particular history than in investigating a multiplicity of exclusions and silenced utterances. Furthermore, here she associates this plurality of inarticulate forms with the 'non-vocal' and 'non-word', offering these negatively-defined dimensions as possible material manifestations of negated and suppressed presences. But O'Sullivan's statement frames this pursuit of 'lessness' and muteness via 'non' forms in terms of a problem which her work both raises and engages with: how are absence and lack to be 'bodied forth', given presence? How might negatively-defined poetic dimensions such as the 'non-vocal' and the 'non-word' constitute a kind of presence; in what ways might they perform or 'speak' a history of voicelessness?

This chapter investigates such questions by looking at four of O'Sullivan's works. I will begin with an in-depth analysis of a poem which most explicitly deals with Irish history: *that bread should be*. First published in 1996 by RWC as a pamphlet and then in 1997 as part of *Etruscan Reader* III, this poem constitutes a poetic treatment of the Irish famine of 1845–52. I will then move on to discuss O'Sullivan's poetics of salvaging in three other works which deal with wider questions of voicelessness, but in which the legacy of an Irish diasporic history is still palpable: *A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts* (1985), *red shifts* (2001) and a poem which is currently only available online, *murmur* (2004).[13] These latter two, more recent works extend O'Sullivan's experiments with the visual and synaesthetic dimensions of her writing practice, making extensive use of colour, texture, and collage. Whilst their connection to historical questions is less obvious than in *that bread should be*, these recent works raise pertinent questions about performance, memory, and the 'bodying forth' of negated or marginalised presences. Furthermore, in its salvaging activities O'Sullivan's poetry shares the redemptive impulse discussed in earlier chapters in relation to Cha's and Howe's work. Her pursuit of a multiplicity of 'voices' by means of a thoroughly multidimensional and highly materialist practice thus provides an occasion for a further thinking-through of the implications of a redemptory strain in such archaeological poetries, and in particular the relation of material poetry to cultural materialism.

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[13] O'Sullivan, *that bread should be*, in O'Sullivan, Barry Gascoyne and Barry MacSweeney, *Etruscan Reader III* (Buckfastleigh; Etruscan, 1997), pp. 23–42. Hereafter referenced in parentheses in the text accompanied by the abbreviation *tb*, except where I am quoting from a page depicted as an illustration. *A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts*, originally published with O'Sullivan's own Magenta Press in 1985, and reprinted in her *Body of Work* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2006), pp. 69–131; further references will be to this edition, and will be abbreviated to *NH*. *Red shifts* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2001), hereafter abbreviated to *rs*; and *murmur: tasks of mourning* <http://www.maggieosullivan.co.uk/murmur.html> [accessed June 12th 2007], hereafter abbreviated to *m*. As *red shifts* and *murmur* are unpaginated, I will not give page numbers when quoting from these works. Wherever grammar allows, I have retained O'Sullivan's use of the lower case in these titles.

That bread should be

O'Sullivan's conception of suppressed voices and of the history to which they are related is markedly different from, say, Howe's. Whereas Howe's search for voices 'from the dark side of history' is decidedly bookish and predominantly takes place in archives and libraries, O'Sullivan's pursuit of 'voices that are other-than' is far more visceral.[14] She turns not so much to libraries and historical records to furnish source material for her poems as to ritualistic remnants of the cultures of what she calls the 'Celtic fringes' of the British Isles, drawing on Celtic mythology, folk tales, symbolism, oral and material culture, and cultic ritual rather than more text-based sources.[15] Picking up on the corporeal and performative bases of such sources, O'Sullivan aspires to 'body forth' hitherto inarticulate states by means of writing which foregrounds its own materiality in a variety of ways, including unusual-looking page layouts, the manipulation of typography, the use of image, colour, collage, and gestural marks as well as the invocation of sonic properties. This poetry offers the word made flesh as a means of giving presence to that which has been suppressed and silenced as 'other-than'.[16]

The poem *that bread should be* is an appropriate place to begin an investigation into O'Sullivan's material 'bodying forth' of unacknowledged presences because in investigating the history of the Irish famine, it embodies, in very visceral terms, an especially traumatic sense of silencing that recurs throughout this poet's oeuvre. Because this poem has a more specific historical focus than any of O'Sullivan's other poems, it offers glimpses of a particular diasporic Anglo-Irish legacy that the poet brings to bear on a wider spectrum of voicelessness and powerlessness across the body of her work. The work begins, uncharacteristically for this poet, with a few introductory paragraphs which sketch out the area of its historical investigation, the Great Irish Famine of 1845–52, which killed a million people countrywide, amounting to almost an eighth of the population of Ireland at the time.[17] As its introductory section indicates, O'Sullivan's poem focuses on the famine's effects on a specific rural area, Skibbereen, with which the poet has family ties. Described by contemporary commentators Lord Dufferin and G.G. Boyle as 'the very nucleus of famine and disease', the area of Skibbereen was hardest hit by this catastrophe.[18] As the folk song

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[14] Susan Howe, *Europe of Trusts* (New York: New Directions, 2002), p. 13.

[15] Maggie O'Sullivan, 'Interview by Charles Bernstein (1993)' (sound recording) http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/OSullivan/OSullivan-Maggie_19_intrvw-by-Brnstein_Buffalo_10-27-93.mp3 [accessed 29th August, 2007].

[16] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, p. 159.

[17] Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The great Irish famine in history, economy, and memory* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 4.

[18] Lord Dufferin and Boyle, G. G., *A Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen During the Year of the Irish Famine* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847), full text available at

'Old Skibbereen' demonstrates, its name has become a symbol of the suffering of those years and the centuries-long fermenting anger against the British colonists exacerbated by this catastrophe.

The musical score of 'Old Skibbereen' and the 'oft repeated phrase' 'that bread should be so dear and human life so cheap' act as starting points and source texts for the poem's articulation of a history of terrible hardship and displacement. In the ballad 'Old Skibbereen', a father passes on to his son the tale of how he was forced to leave his beloved homeland by the extremities of the famine. Unable to pay 'rent and taxes' following the loss of crops and livestock, he is evicted from his smallholding by the 'landlord and sheriff' who then set the house on fire with 'their cursed English spleen'. His wife dies and so father and infant son depart from 'dear old Skibbereen'.[19] Although it is only alluded to by the inclusion of the musical score of the ballad rather than actually reproduced or referenced in verbal form, this story provides a historical 'frame' for O'Sullivan's poem. The folk song points towards a colonial history that entailed an appropriation of land and exploitation of resources; as Cormac Ó Gráda's historical account of the famine indicates, the land confiscations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had, by the nineteenth century, 'left most Irish land in the hands of a small elite of English origin. In the mid-nineteenth century that elite still owned the bulk of the country's fixed capital'.[20] In his 1867 *Capital*, Karl Marx remarked that 'Ireland is at present merely an agricultural district of England which happens to be divided by a wide stretch of water from the country for which it provides corn, wool, cattle and industrial and military recruits.'[21] This colonial arrangement based on an unequal distribution of power and property meant that most Irish farmers of this time owned no land themselves, but were tenants 'operating on short leases and in marginal areas.'[22] Marginalised both in the sense of the geographical locales they inhabited and in their lack of political power, the rural working classes were consigned by an oppressive colonial and class system to an impoverished and politically powerless position, with no economic resources but their own labour. This oppressed condition made them especially vulnerable to the ravages of famine.

<http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/Journey/Narrative.htmlp> [accessed 20th August, 2007], (para. 2 of 16).

[19] This song, derived of course from an oral tradition, has many different versions, many of which can be found on websites as well as in books of Irish Folk songs. See for example, 'Skibbereen', *Moving Here: Migration Histories* <http://www.movinghere.org.uk/galleries/histories/irish/origins/skibbereen_1.htm> [accessed 2nd July, 2008], from which I quote.

[20] Ó Gráda, p. 26.

[21] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976) [1897], p. 860.

[22] Ó Gráda, p. 25.

The song 'Old Skibbereen' and the saying to which the poem's title refers not only mark out a set of specific events and the power relations underlying them, they also typify O'Sullivan's sense of history as it is transmitted orally in song, stories, and everyday speech acts, rather than as history recorded or written down. This sense of cultural memory is entangled with the specific circumstances of this history and the ways in which it has been passed on to subsequent generations. The almost overwhelmingly illiterate agricultural poor families most affected by the famine such as O'Sullivan's ancestors would of course have left no written accounts of events; written records were produced by those removed from the immediate mortal dangers of this catastrophe such as the Englishmen Dufferin and Boyle, who travelled to Skibbereen to investigate the effects of the famine. For the illiterate poor, and particularly for those who were displaced, this would have been a history primarily passed down via oral and folk forms. Yet this is not to suggest that for O'Sullivan these folk forms transcend processes of suppression and silencing. For example, the ballad 'Old Skibbereen' indicates the ways in which the passing on of a cultural heritage is highly gendered; in the song, the story of the horror and injustice of the famine is relayed from father to son. Orally transmitted folk history, then, unavoidably constitutes itself along socially entrenched lines of class and gender and is thus subject to its own kinds of exclusion and silencing. For O'Sullivan this folk history is a primary source, providing a way in to a history which this poem seeks to embody, to 'body forth' materially and corporeally. But as I will later suggest, her poem also explores the limitations of such orally transmitted histories.

Becoming blighted land

What part, then, do the visual dimensions of O'Sullivan's poem play in its poetic embodiment of the history of the Irish famine? How does *that bread should be* materially 'body forth' this history? One of the most important and immediately apparent visual effects of this poem as a whole is its consistent bottom-heavy textual layout with the first lines on each page precisely aligned across the opening. This arrangement drags the reading eye immediately downwards, and iconically suggests or even constitutes a landscape; the top lines form a horizon beneath which the series of horizontal lines, long dashes, frequent underlinings, and occasional diagonal lines on each page visually describe the land to which this particular history is so closely tied (see figures 27–29). These pages present readers with what Johanna Drucker calls language as 'phenomenological,

drawing stones all day on a few ribs to the moon

my guts trail out my eyes & the mucks're

thronging wet ————————

· MAGPIE'S

black feet slap their brink on the

stems not a ground i tread –

cavity-sippling –

the blight the distemper the ————

38

whole families without a trace my ————————

dealt ————

it occurs: ————————————

the unstory

–   that bread should be –

Song's bleeding wove

(never more crow – scraping

39
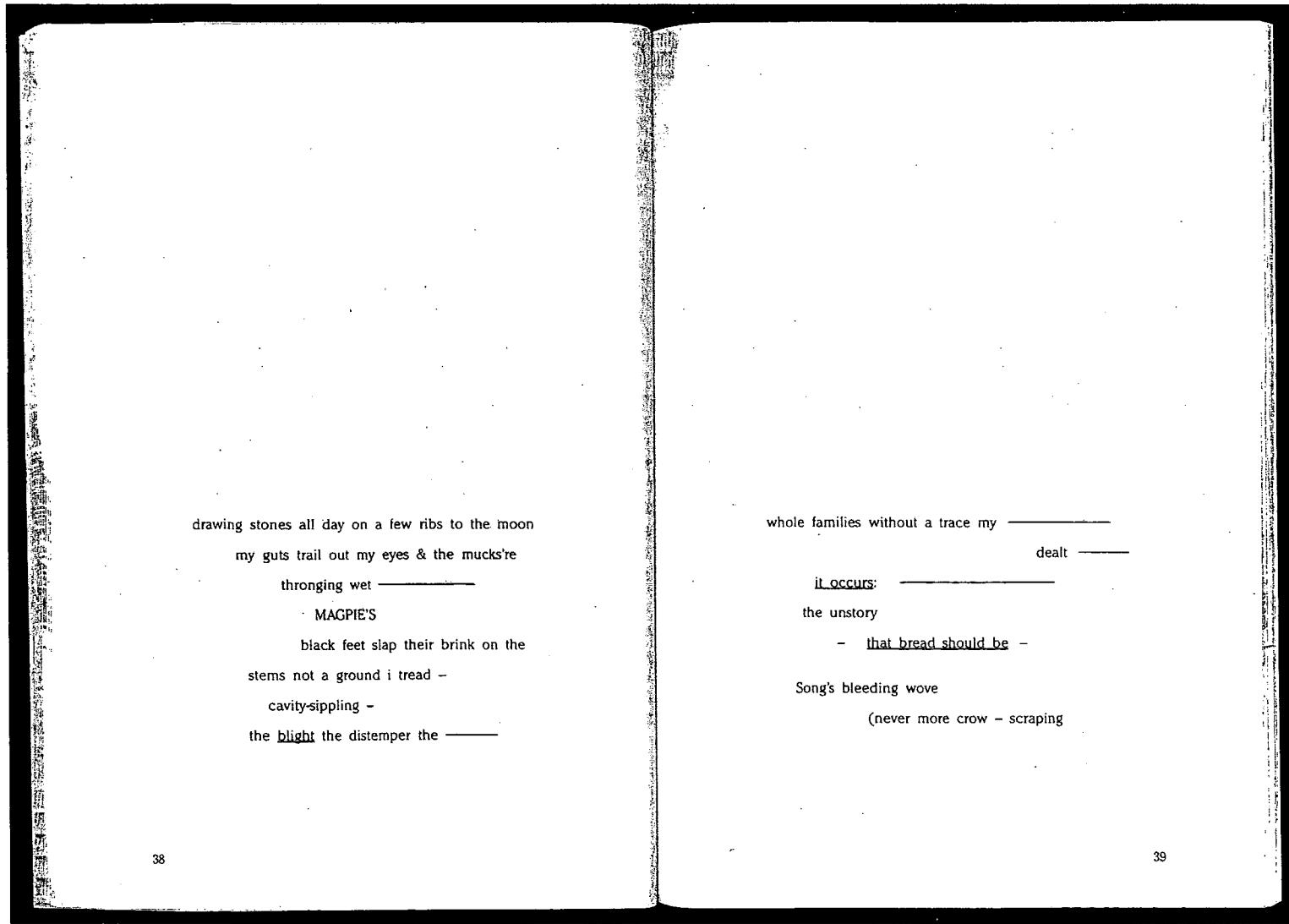
Figure 27. O'Sullivan, *that bread should be,* in *Etruscan Reader III* (Buckfastleigh; Etruscan, 1997), pp. 38–9

apprehendable, immanent substance'.[23] In other words, O'Sullivan's writing foregrounds its own status not (or not only) as a vehicle for meaning, but as material stuff whose physical dimensions are not subsumable to 'the abstract and system-defined elements' of linguistic functioning. Like the early twentieth-century modernist work Drucker examines in her study *The Visible Word*, O'Sullivan's poems insist on 'the capacity of the image, the poem, the word, or the mark to *be*, to exist in its own right on an equal stature with the tangible, dimensional objects of the real world.'[24] Her works make a claim to the status of physical '*being* rather than *representing*'.[25] O'Sullivan's poem allies its lines with the brute materiality of the land and with the terrible struggles that take place on it, for of course the landscape of this poem is no pastoral idyll.

Whilst the visual arrangement of lines on the page in *that bread should be* embodies a landscape, the verbal material of the poem expands upon the precise nature of this terrain. As the opening depicted in figure 27 indicates, this is a harsh landscape of 'stones' and of unwholesome marshes – 'the mucks're / thronging wet —————' – and above all a 'ground' infected with 'the <u>blight</u> the distemper the ———'. The multiple underlinings in this page most obviously serve to emphasise certain words or phrases, and the long dashes with which many of the lines in this opening end signal a trailing-off of speech, an inability to complete an utterance. These diacritical marks, then, are linked to the oral qualities of the poem, and as any reader who has heard O'Sullivan perform her work will realise, some of the visual elements here might well function as a score for a possible oral performance; capitalised or underlined words, for example, may be spoken loudly or even shouted. In this way the visual materiality of printed language becomes linked to another kind of materiality: sound. But O'Sullivan's poem need not be read aloud by the poet herself to perform acoustically. As Garrett Stewart's work on what he calls the 'phonotext', indicates, 'reading voices'. Meant to be understood as a propositional statement rather than as a participial phrase, this formulation proposes that the process of silent reading 'proceeds to give voice, or at least to evoke silently such voicing'.[26] Stewart's notion of how 'reading voices' proceeds from the question '[w]here do we read?' And this 'where', he suggests,

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[23] Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-23* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 43.
[24] Drucker, *Visible Word*, p. 49.
[25] Drucker, *Visible Word*, p. 10.
[26] Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 1.

is none other than the reading body. This somatic locus of soundless reception includes of course the brain but must be said to encompass as well the organs of vocal production, from diaphragm up through throat to tongue and palate. Silent reading locates itself, that is, in the conjoint cerebral activity and suppressed muscular action of a simultaneously summoned and suppressed articulation.[27]

Stewart asserts, '[w]hen we read to ourselves, our ears hear nothing. Where we read, however, we listen.'[28] This 'where' of reading is key to O'Sullivan's poetry, which aims to bring the where of the page into relation with the 'somatic locus of … reception' and its corporeal supports, including a network of acoustically-orientated organs. Indeed, in reading O'Sullivan's poem, the capitalisation of the word 'MAGPIE'S' (see figure 27), for example, encourages a process of 'listening' to the increased, visually indicated 'volume' of this signifier. Furthermore, the emphasised 'acoustic' qualities of 'MAGPIE'S' induces a subsequent attentiveness to the hard stamping staccato of the series of monosyllabic words 'black feet slap' of the following line. In O'Sullivan's poem, the graphic mark is thoroughly intertwined with the sensory dimension of sound. It is not so much that the graphic dimensions of the text function as a score for a sounded performance that takes place off the page. Rather, what Stewart calls 'the play between phonic and graphic articulations' functions in this poem to constitute 'textuality *as a performance medium*', as a performance on the page, embodied in its sensory dimensions and played out in a dialogue between graphic and phonic dimensions of textuality and between the somatic locus of the reading body and the physical, apprehendable, sensory 'body' of the text.[29]

As Drucker points out, the foregrounding of visual materiality emphasises the performative capacity of writing: 'The visual IS a performative dimension: it makes the text, makes meaning in its embodiment, as form/expression/enunciation. Ultimately it's not only that the visual/image/icon/event performs on the stage/theatre arena of the page but that it makes/is made/be's/becomes [sic] through the graphic and visual means.'[30] In the case of O'Sullivan's poetry, it is important to remember that visual aspects of the text are only part of a multimedia performance in which sound, and sometimes sound evoked negatively in its absence, plays a vital part. Upon O'Sullivan's page, the repeated non-verbal horizontal marks, for example, perform as utterances which are inarticulate or unspeakable; the long slashes and even the shorter dashes visually suggest both a struggle to vocalise and silent strata of unutterable anguish. These graphic marks perform a layering of one material

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[27] Garrett Stewart, p. 1.
[28] Garrett Stewart, p. 11.
[29] Garrett Stewart, pp. 2, 11.
[30] Drucker, 'The Interior Eye: Performing the Visual Text' in *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), pp. 103–109, p. 108.

affliction over another, embodying in graphic and negated acoustical terms the sufferings of the blighted spatio-temporal locale which the poem negotiates.

An appeal to the somatic processes of reading and the performative dimensions of the textual body are central to this work's engagement with historical events centred on the material conditions of the Irish landscape and the human lives eked out upon it. Along the 'horizon' of the opening depicted in figure 27, a human body seems to toil, 'drawing stones all day...', the poem here alluding both to the barrenness of the land and also to the programme of public works set up by the government at the time of the famine to provide work, and thus money and food, for agricultural labourers made destitute by the potato blight. Much of this work consisted of stone breaking and road building, which was incredibly demanding physical work for bodies already wracked by famine and which often did not pay enough even to feed a family on starvation rations.[31] Hence the body 'drawing stones' in O'Sullivan's poem does so 'on a few ribs to the moon', by means of a body so emaciated that it is as if a starved skeleton is bared to 'the moon', or exposed to an expanse of unconcerned sky which the large white space above this line suggests.

Thus the materiality of the text aims to make physically tangible something of the lived conditions in which 'bread should be so dear and human life so cheap'. The emaciated bodies recurrently referenced in this poem are devalued bodies, 'made cheap' by a combination of ecological disaster and unequal distribution of resources and power. In an economic situation in which bread is 'dear' and 'life so cheap', suggests the saying that frames this poem, the exchange value of the commodity 'bread' far outweighs that of the agricultural worker's 'human life' which bread is supposed to sustain. If the blight transformed the potato crop from an object of utility to an abject symbol of disease, then it also made the economically disempowered worker's only resource – labour – worthless, and the worker's body similarly abject: an unutilisable excess of the famine economy. Although Marx's remark that the Irish famine 'killed poor devils only' is perhaps not quite accurate (many who were not poverty-stricken also died of famine-related disease)[32] his analysis of the famine's economic impact argues that 'it did not do the slightest damage to the wealth of the country' because a combination of death and emigration divested the country of its 'surplus population'.[33]

The abjection of the labouring body as waste product of the famine economy is symbolised in O'Sullivan's poem by means of a process of literal disarticulation which

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[31] Mary E. Daly, 'The Operations of Famine Relief, 1845–47', in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. by Cathal Póirtéir (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995), pp. 123–134, pp. 124, 130–1. See also Ó Gráda, p. 68.
[32] Ó Gráda, p. 10.
[33] Marx, *Capital*, pp. 861–2.

renders the body disjointed and fragmented. Indeed, human presences are largely registered by means of recurrent allusions to body parts and corporeal remains. References to bones and skulls litter the poem's lines (*tb*, pp. 31, 32, 34, 36, 38) like the skeletal corpses of victims of the famine which often lay unburied, or were interred in shallow graves in back gardens or by the roadside with only 'a few scrapes of the shovel ——————'(*tb*, 36), or in the mass graves mentioned in the poem's introduction.[34] Thus disposed of in unmarked or unlocatable graves, the unmourned dead are sunk forever beneath the cruel landscape leaving only their barely-submerged bones as testament to their ever having existed; as O'Sullivan's poem puts it, 'whole families without a trace my ——————' (*tb*, 39). The placing of this long dash along the opening's visual 'horizon' visually suggests that the vestiges of these 'whole families' lie just beneath the surface, that although they have left no 'trace', their material remains persist as a palpable and yet, the dash implies, unnameable presence.

Besides these skeletal body parts, human viscera are also very much part of this poetic landscape; in the opening of figure 27 the speaker claims 'my guts trail out my eyes & the mucks're / thronging wet ——————', 'guts' here seeming to 'trail out' upon, and to become part of the 'thronging wet' of 'the mucks', the marshlands. The 'guts', of course, being the body part most immediately affected by the famine, share the land's '<u>blight</u> the distemper', and indeed, during the famine weakened bodies were not only famished but blighted by diseases such as typhus, dysentery and cholera which killed more people than did actual starvation.[35] The human 'entrails' (*tb*, 32) of the poem are thoroughly entangled and almost synonymous with the land's disease so that the line 'their own filthy rots hanging' invokes an image not only of diseased potatoes but of the diseased human body, the spectacle of its viscera 'hanging' inducing the '<u>screamsticks – white skull over bone</u> – ' (*tb*, 31), the horror of the next stage of decomposition that haunts the next line.

Dehumanised and stripped of agency, the human body of this poem is almost indistinguishable from the disease and decay of the ecological and historical disaster of the famine, tied to the blighted land by processes of production and consumption that make the Irish worker's body and the labour it produces synonymous with the potato and its disease. O'Sullivan's poem wants not only to represent something of the horror of this traumatic situation, but to make it physically tangible. By insistently confronting readers with printed and spoken language as 'phenomenological, apprehendable, immanent

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[34] Dufferin and Boyle provide one contemporary account of disposal of the dead; see their *Narrative* (paras. 4, 9, 11).

[35] Laurence M. Geary, 'Famine, Fever and the Bloody Flux' in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. by Cathal, pp. 74–85, p. 81.

substance', the poem hopes to embody and thus make present something of the 'phenomenological, apprehendable, immanent substance' of the history it negotiates. By constituting itself as an entity 'on an equal stature with the tangible, dimensional objects of the real world', by insisting on a status of *being* rather than *representing*, this work materially constitutes itself as a traumatised textual body, foregrounding its own brute materiality in ways that enable it to become physically proximate to the conditions of existence of the land, people, and animals that form the material actuality of this history.[36]

'What hacked what shatters – '

In 'bodying forth' a sense of the lived conditions of the Irish famine, O'Sullivan's poem mounts an immanent investigation of this history's particular modes of trauma and violence. The violence this poem detects in the history of the famine is not ascribable to any particular event or series of events; rather, this is a systemic violence enacted in the structures of colonialist and capitalist modes of appropriation and exploitation. Whilst this omnipresent sense of violence is implicit in the references to disarticulated body parts discussed above, it becomes most palpable in the poem's repeated references to another human corporeal element, blood. Like the viscera and bones discussed above, blood is very closely linked to, and even merges with, the land. In an early opening of the poem (figure 28) the 'gleam & misty blood dripping so many red threads' seems to both seep into the 'low ground' referenced in the line above and 'the maps', the representation of the land, in the line below which 'are become // (how'd soak) – '. As the line 'what hacked what shatters –' of this opening demonstrates, such images of blood and blood-infused land are closely linked to implied acts of violence, perhaps evinced above all by the visual aspects of the poem. Significantly, the lineation of this page echoes the verbal depiction of something 'hacked'; each indentation describes a nick in the left margin and the five increasingly shortened and indented lines followed by a longer one which reverts to a more left-aligned position visually constitute a block of text with a chunk 'hacked' out of its left side. At the same time, the shape of the left margin here echoes the arrangement of text on the opposite page, where the right margin describes a downward slope – 'downward' because the normal process of reading, from top left to bottom right, means that this slope is read in a descending direction. On this page the sense of human contact, or perhaps even community anchored by religious ritual suggested by 'my hand' and then 'his', 'rounds, Rosary', seems to offer some initial resistance to the sliding descent, as do the

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[36] Drucker, *Visible Word*, pp. 43, 49.

low ground long black crêpe rolled in the mouth's threshing

gleam & misty blood dripping so many red threads

the maps are become

(how'd soak) –

what hacked what shatters –

round round as an 0's hoop scouring vowels –

26

my hand   /

his

/

rounds, Rosary   /

B

u

c

k

l

e

d

SAYING / DECADES   Shone Blue

27
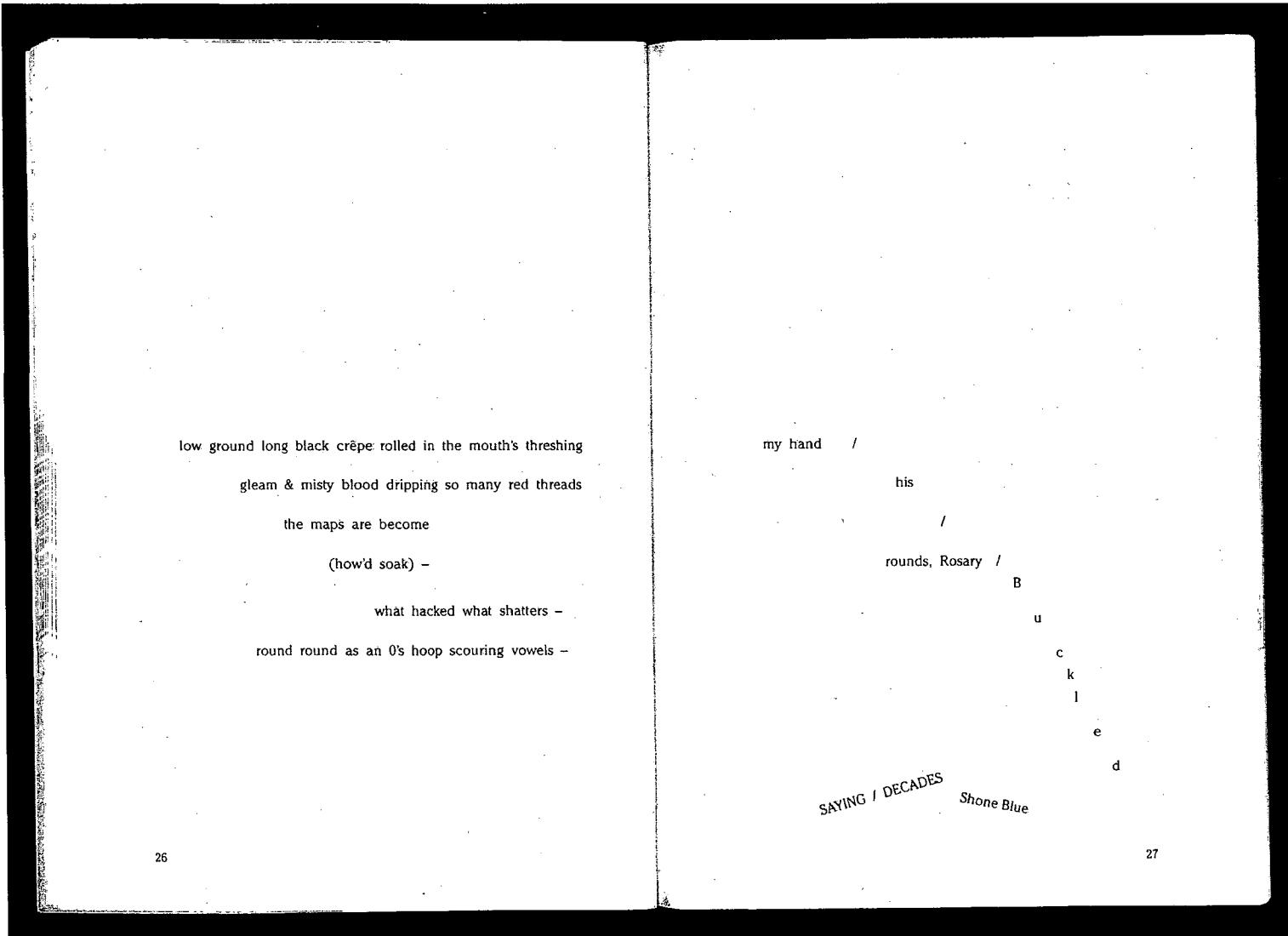
Figure 28. *that bread should be*, pp. 26–27

repeated forward slashes upon which the reading eye 'catches' and whose visual shape counters the downhill tumble. But the disaggregated letters of the word 'Buckled' rapidly give way to the downward impulse. The visual parallel between the 'hacked' left margin of the verso page and the collapse described on the recto page by the right margin and particularly the dispersed characters of 'Buckled' work to suggest that the same violent force is implicated in the 'hacked' left page, the 'Buckled' lines of the facing page and the spilling of 'misty blood'.

Repeated references to and enactments of the spilling of blood in O'Sullivan's poem point not only to a violence inflicted on the traumatised human body by the ravages of the famine and the power structures that made the labouring classes so vulnerable to its effects, but also to a severing of blood ties – of family and genealogy – and to an attack on community. *That bread should be* thus investigates the effects of the famine on the passing-down of memory, on the representation of this history for subsequent generations. As the suggestion of blood-soaked maps and the hacked and collapsing printed page indicate, various modes of representation are caught up in this historical trauma. As I mentioned in my first chapter, the effects of such horrors on the passing on of memory have been much explored by theorists interested in trauma. The notion that traumatic events resist assimilation to narrative modes of cognition, articulated in Freud's work on mourning and melancholia, for example, suggests one way in which the images and effects of O'Sullivan's poetic meditations on memory might be understood. This notion of the non-assimilability of trauma has been developed in a slightly different direction by those such as Cathy Caruth and more recently Ulrich Baer who argues that 'the phenomenon of trauma presents us with a fundamental enigma, a crisis of representational models that conceive of reference in terms of a direct, unambiguous link between event and comprehension.'[37] O'Sullivan's poem points to just such a crisis of both printed language and the referential claims of 'the maps' in the face of historical violence and trauma. In so doing, its physical disturbances of written and sounded language also embody the allied notion that, having resisted comprehension and articulation at the time of its occurrence, the effects of trauma return belatedly. As Dominick LaCapra puts it, trauma 'does not disappear; it returns in a transformed, at times disfigured and disguised manner.[38] In O'Sullivan's poem, such delayed effects are registered in printed language, at a material level. Repeated failures of articulation, signalled, for example, in the recurrent long dashes that suggest unspoken

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[37] Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA & London, England: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 10.
[38] Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 10.

utterances, or the breaking-apart of individual words, bear belated witness to traumatic events of the past. Oral representation is portrayed as especially scarred in this poem, as the line 'round round as an o's hoop scouring vowels – ' indicates; the 'round' sound of 'an o's hoop' in this line is represented not by means of the character 'O' but the visibly narrower figure for zero, implying that the 'round' vowel is here emaciated and depleted as if worn away almost to nothing by a 'scouring' force.

'No Fixed SONG/'

A persistent concern with the effects of historical trauma on orality and particularly on song forms a central thread of the treatment of memory in *that bread should be*. As the poem's opening indicates, oral culture forms the basis of the transmission of the story of the famine for those families who were most affected by it – the descendents of poor, illiterate agricultural workers. In the first lines of the opening of figure 29, an 'unbrokenSINGING' is figured as a vital connection to an ancestral homeland, 'its Acred Heart's / Umbilicus Chirruping' suggesting an umbilical connection between song and land. Once again this connection is represented as a highly physical, corporeal one: the 'Umbilicus' and the 'Heart' forming the nexus of this connection. In addition, the medium of song takes on a viscous material quality – 'unbrokenSINGING' forms a 'Knee-Deep' layer, whilst the material quality of the printed word 'unbrokenSINGING' embodies both unbrokenness and, by means of capitalisation, an increased acoustic volume of 'SINGING'. Yet this vision of primal song is offered only in a mode of wistful longing, only as something already 'S-c-a-t-t-e-r-e-d' as the dispersed characters further down the page indicate. This page above all signals a loss of community and of communal memory, 'that Shielding Ash of memory bleeding' indicating a haemorrhaging of the symbolic heart of communal life. The '*ASH*', the previous opening suggests, '<u>it is of an age with the house</u>', possibly '<u>the father's house</u>'(*tb*, 29), which would form the core of a rural Catholic community. As the poem's naming of the tree as the 'Shielding Ash' suggests, in Celtic lore the ash tree is a symbol of protection, and it was also thought to guard universal truths and form links between inner and outer worlds, past and present, the dead and the living.[39] So the 'Ash' is linked to communal memory; it is a symbol of the community's fortunes and its 'bleeding' in O'Sullivan's poem signals disaster, especially for 'memory', the ability to pass on communal history to future generations. The '(Bough Siblings', the community who might perform this task, are part of the 'bleeding' taking place; the phrase 'of No Fixed SONG/' echoes the itinerant label 'of No

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[39] Jane Gifford, *The Celtic Wisdom of Trees: Mysteries, Magic and Medicine* (London: Godsfield Press, 2006), pp. 28–31.

Knee-Deep unbrokenSINGING its Acred Heart's

Umbilicus Chirruping

that Shielding Ash of memory bleeding

Sea-Saw fearments

Eared –

Eyed –

(Bough Siblings of No Fixed SONG/

S

c

a

t

t

e

r

e

d

30

anywhere   but   I –

half-starved-half-clothed-half-eaten-by ———

half-any-speech ———

half-any

rip in the sky's Blue mantling rag for an 0 ———

dragged

out of their stares

their own filthy rots hanging   ,

screamsticks – white skull over bone –

)sewing it over –

LAPWINGS TAKE MY COLD PIPING ——————

31

Figure 29. *that bread should be*, pp. 30–31

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Fixed Abode' indicating a state of homelessness and displacement that alludes to the famine-induced waves of eviction and emigration suffered by communities like Skibbereen. The 'Shielding Ash of memory' of the poem is in the process of being bled dry, thus becoming another kind of 'Ash', a desiccated, charred residue of memory easily diffused. The broken-up word 'Scattered' at the bottom of the page both names and performs this dispersal of a community and its collective memory. Trickling across and down the page, the spread-out characters describe a descent possibly to the sea that bore emigrants away from famine-struck Ireland, or perhaps into the ground where the bodies of the dead lie buried. The arrangement of the letters of 'Scattered' here echo the downward slope formed by the characters of 'Buckled' discussed earlier, and this arrangement recurs many times throughout the poem. In each case, this visual composition signals and embodies an irreversible process, the downward slope performing a process of succumbing to an irresistible gravitational pull whose effects cannot easily be undone.

The implication of all this is that not only has pre-famine Skibbereen society been lost forever, but that the means for passing down the memory of this community, and the terrible events of the famine itself are irreparably damaged. The 'unbrokenSINGING' that links people and place, past and present becomes 'No Fixed SONG/', the itinerant song severed from its roots as the forward slash at the end of this phrase seems to indicate and enact. And yet in making the 'SONG/' chime with the absent but inferred word 'Abode' here, O'Sullivan's poem turns the song into a kind of home, a nomadic dwelling for fragments of memory. This diasporic song claims not to recuperate an 'unbrokenSINGING', but rather to become a kind of 'UNSINGING'(*tb*, 33) or 'COLD PIPING ——————', a 'half-any-speech ——————' whose very incompleteness indexically tells 'the unstory'(*tb*, 39) of this catastrophic history, embodying the belated echoes of its traumatic effects.

O'Sullivan's poem, then, presents itself as an 'UNSINGING' of 'the unstory' of the famine in Skibbereen. Its song is not one sung entirely in tune with that of the ballad singer of 'Skibbereen', whose narrative of the famine hovers in the background of this work. The song of *that bread should be* is one more akin to that of the crows, magpies, and ravens referred to throughout its pages. Like these scavenging birds, this poem aims for and situates itself among the corporeal leavings of this history, and reports on its findings not by means of a tuneful and intelligible song but via a harsh and discordant cry. The work's visual dimensions play a central role in the articulation of this 'song' – by means of particular arrangements of lines and words, capitalisation, underlining, and non-verbal marks, O'Sullivan's visual pages simultaneously constitute an iconic representation of a spatio-temporal locale, a performance of particular material conditions, a score for sound

and for a reading that 'voices', a verbal-visual register of trauma, and an indexical trace of the unsayable, of the tales 'without a trace'. *That bread should be* is an embodiment of the traumatic history of the Irish Famine; it constructs itself as a site that is all at once anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, geographical and archaeological, a physical entity upon whose graphic surfaces inarticulate 'unsinging' silences, as well as the forces which contribute to their suppression, are made physically apparent by means of the 'phenomenological, apprehendable, immanent substance' of the poetic page.[40]

Irish history and 'voices that are other-than'

The focus on a specific history in *that bread should be* informs a more diffuse thematics of systematic forms of violence, trauma, and silencing which runs through O'Sullivan's wider oeuvre. As in Howe's work, this concern with oppression and trauma buried in the past has as its core impulse a concern with violence and voicelessness in the present, although, unlike Howe, O'Sullivan does not seem to be looking for identifiable historical 'causes' for contemporary aggressivity and intolerance. Rather, for O'Sullivan the history of the Great Famine functions as a historical event embedded in the poet's sense of an 'ancestral self' which forms a vital core of her sense of cultural memory and her sensitivity to broader questions of voicelessness, disempowerment, and marginality.[41] Whilst the particulars of Irish history do not receive quite such a sustained treatment in any of her other poems, a sense of the diasporic history of her own background certainly forms part of the historical and mythological ground of O'Sullivan's poetic negotiation of wider issues. For example, in one of her earlier poems, *A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts* (first published in 1985 and reprinted in black and white facsimile in *Body of Work* in 2006), references to Ireland and Irishness make up part of this poem's writing of an 'incomplete' history. As Peter Manson's article on this poem points out, the middle section 'More Incomplete' is headed by an epigraph from Pound's Canto CXVI 'If love not be in the house there is nothing' (*NH*, 82) for which the next line, omitted by O'Sullivan's poem, is 'The voice of famine unheard'.[42] The history of the Irish famine, obliquely, silently gestured towards here, thus echoes 'unheard' through this poem.

The middle section of this work also contains poems that reference the poet's Irish heritage headed '(<u>for my mother</u>)' and '(<u>for my dad</u>)'. The section '(<u>for my mother</u>)'

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[40] Drucker, *Visible Word*, p. 43.
[41] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, p. 156.
[42] Peter Manson, 'A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts (London: Magenta Press, 1985)', *How 2*, 3.1 (Summer 2007) <http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_1/cambridge/manson.html> [accessed 1st September 2008], (para. 16 of 33).

includes a repeated line '(like noBODY at all)' and ends with the line 'The Art of Silence' (*NH*, 87–88) followed by a 'silent' line or very long dash much like the indexical markers of inarticulacy and unutterable anguish in *that bread should be*. The almost disembodied 'noBODY' of these lines is linked not so much to a sense of cultural heritage as one of 'dereliction.', a heritage of abandonment or desertion. Such markers of absence, silence and homelessness are counterpointed by references to 'kith.' and 'threepenny. Irish.' and particularly 'John. L/caraway. Cork/LOUD. F's. & BLINDING/boot–nail'(*NH*, 89) which pepper the poem '(for my dad)'. Embedded in these lines is a sense of lineage and linkage to names and places that is associated here not so much with articulacy but with a 'LOUD'–ness whose incoherent violence is signalled in 'F's. & BLINDING/boot–nail', suggesting cussing and physical aggression. The contrast between the poems dedicated to the two parents is also emphasised by different page layouts, the most obvious contrast here being the printing of the 'mother' poem according to a portrait orientation, and the landscape orientation of the 'dad' piece which places this section in a sideways relationship to its surrounding pages. Embedded in the poems '(for my mother)' and '(for my dad)' and in the differences between them is a sense of gender inequality entrenched in the Irish cultural legacy that informs O'Sullivan's poetry, and the ways in which gender relations intersect with other kinds of inequality and marginalisation to produce differently inflected forms of voicelessness or inarticulacy.

O'Sullivan inserts references to Ireland's recent, violent history into *A Natural History* a few pages after the 'mother' and 'dad' poems in two openings that juxtapose or overlay text and images and make reference to 'The Troubles' whose roots lie in Britain's long history of colonisation in Ireland. In the opening depicted in figure 30, a list of 'PEOPLE KILLED BY RUBBER AND PLASTIC BULLETS' between 1972 and 1984 printed white-on-black overlays a map of Greenham Common Airbase, site of women's peace demonstrations in the 1980s, which in turn overlays a section of poetic text. On the facing page, a high-contrast picture of a man apparently lying in a pool of his own blood is pasted over another section of O'Sullivan's text. The following page features a collage of newspaper headlines relating to violent conflict, weapons and deaths caused by police and an image of a hand holding up two sinister-looking shiny shapes, perhaps canisters of CS gas. These collaged juxtapositions of text and image reference the political turbulence and violence of the 1970s and 80s in which not only conflicts in Ireland but also the anti-war and especially anti-nuclear war protests typified by Greenham Common were a notable feature. The image of the prone torso of a man followed by the lines '& being / jobless.' also suggests another kind of violence: that of a world in which disempowered classes of human beings – perhaps

Vassal. madrigal. django reign blistering navybricolage.
Decayed Beam, ski tar pulls thigh, runs thick lesion:
scratching, dancing, mixing, aX another

The Moon's ...   /BLACK black:
Vanilla Scen...   the. The Body
wringing od...   ... fuschia lacewing:

of black's
...mming
raspy
size.

m's cold
glacis
se cry:

describe.
Thunder. Bleeding. The Sky Confessing It.
& being
jobless.

Fire, as in
the Sun.

Billow churn, jazzy curve. Bee zen. of Glovawort.
Utter Glaze. fridge roseflocking mutagenic. fridge Acanthus,
lash prim thistle twist of pure nutmace, low flambé lead
split: erosion. But child, Bead & reel, yellowed air soft
mightily, i bleed & soak & pool olive, prolonging
sund sund sundering

real rain.

Figure 30. O'Sullivan, *A Natural History in 3 Incomplete Parts* in *Body of Work* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2006), pp. 100–101

those who are 'jobless' and thus, like the agricultural workers struck by the Irish famine, an expendable waste product of the capitalist economy – might be destroyed and discarded. Manson identifies this image as a 'photograph of a striking worker, murdered in Mexico in 1934', but we need not necessarily know the identity of this man to spot the links O'Sullivan is making here between the failure or refusal to submit to a capitalist exploitation of workers and the 'Bleeding.' and violent death of the worker's body.[43] In the context of the Britain of 1984–5 in which O'Sullivan was writing, this particular image-text and its references resonate powerfully with the miners' strike and the images of clashes between striking workers and police circulating in the media which bore uncomfortable similarities to those of violent skirmishes between the RUC and IRA. In these collaged pages, then, the poem sets up links between Irish history and multifarious contemporary forms of state-sanctioned modes of violence and silencing.

O'Sullivan's sense of a legacy of trauma, violence and inequality rooted in Irish history and class-based forms of oppression, then, informs a wider critique of power relations which underpin states of voicelessness and inarticulacy. At the close of her published correspondence with Andy Brown, she quotes the words of Tom Leonard:

> It's not simply a matter of class register, but the politics of dominant narrative language as would-be encloser of the world, language as coloniser. For this the language has to be presumed 'invisible' to its referent. I like to make it visible in different ways.[44]

For O'Sullivan, as for Leonard, language plays a key role in the operations of power carried out in the name of the 'dominant narrative'. As potential 'encloser' and 'coloniser', language is part of the construction and the perpetuation of what she calls 'a restrictive culture' which marginalises, excludes and silences that which occupies a position 'other than' the dominant privileged one.[45] The notion of language as 'coloniser' of course carries additional historical freight in the context of the Irish history which informs O'Sullivan's poetic sensibilities. Like Leonard, O'Sullivan aims in her poetry to critique and counter this process by making language 'visible in different ways'. In so doing, she also hopes to give form to the states of inarticulacy of the 'other than'.

As my discussion of that bread should be and my brief consideration of A Natural History have indicated, for O'Sullivan processes of 'making visible' entail a poetics which is materialist both in the sense that it wants to make visible materially-embedded relations of

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[43] Manson, 'A Natural History', (para. 24 of 33).
[44] O'Sullivan quoting Tom Leonard, Binary Myths 1&2, p. 160.
[45] O'Sullivan, Binary Myths 1&2, p. 160, 159.

power, and in the sense that this making-visible involves a literal foregrounding of the material, visual dimensions of the printed page. This sense of the political possibilities of an attention to visual materiality is also evident in O'Sullivan's editing of the 1996 anthology *Out of Everywhere*, which opens with one of Howe's dramatically visual pages from *Eikon Basilike* discussed at length in my earlier chapter on this poet (Chapter 3, figure 18). Besides Howe's work, the collection also features strikingly visual work by Joan Retallack, Tina Darragh , Diane Ward, and Paula Claire among others. The inclusion of such conspicuously visual examples of 'linguistically innovative' poetry demonstrates the editor's sense of the important role played by visual experimentation in the shared commitment of the work in this collection to 'excavating *language* in all its multiple voices and tongues, known and unknown.'[46] In O'Sullivan's own later poetry, as we shall see in the following sections, this visually-orientated mode of 'excavating *language*' and of 'making visible' both its 'colonising' functions and its expanded potentials comes ever more to the fore.

Synaesthesia in *red shifts*

O'Sullivan's engagement with issues of voicelessness and inarticulacy in her highly material texts has in recent years involved an amplified emphasis on the visual possibilities of the poetic page. Two poems of the early 2000s, *red shifts* and *murmur*, demonstrate how the poet has begun increasingly to meld her poetic with her visual arts practice. In conversation with Dell Olsen, she remarks on how she has 'moved away from making the large colourful expressionistic assemblages/paintings' which she worked on 'side by side' with her poetry in the 1980s and 90s, and towards a practice 'where potencies, energy fields, traces of actions/activities move in an open, ongoing dissolving/deformance of the verbal/visual/sculptural into one practice of many heuristic pathings.'[47] This shift towards an integration of the formal qualities of her visual artworks and her writing practice is evident in the use of colour, texture, and visual collage in O'Sullivan's later works. But it is also implicitly suggested in the square-format pages of *red shifts* which echo the archetypal 'white cube' of the contemporary gallery space and which wittily offer the book as a layered, two-dimensional exhibition space.[48] For all its two-dimensionality, this concrete reference to the gallery space invokes the 'sculptural' quality to which the poet refers in her description of her recent practice; in so doing, it indicates a pursuit of further dimensions

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[46] O'Sullivan, 'To the Reader', in O'Sullivan (ed.), *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (London: Reality Street, 1996), p. 10.
[47] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para. 6 of 58).
[48] Indeed, Etruscan books names this object as an 'exhibition' in its back-matter (not front-matter as is more common) and on the back cover.

and extended capacities, embodying the expansive impulse which is also evident in O'Sullivan's tendency to use lengthy lists of often diverse terms when speaking about her poetic practices. In *red shifts*, then, by means of an increased integration of writing with visual arts-based elements, O'Sullivan brings a multiplicitous range of materialities to bear on her historically-informed project to 'body forth' the silenced, or inarticulate, or marginalised, or 'other-than'.[49]

As Marjorie Perloff has pointed out, the format of O'Sullivan's book-length poem *red shifts* suggests that 'her books have increasingly been conceived as artists' books rather than as collections of individual poems'.[50] Whilst the poet's description of her own work as involved in 'many heuristic pathings' suggests that even in its heterogeneity the artist's book is ultimately too narrow a category for this poem, there are indeed many artist's book-like qualities in evidence in this work.[51] In my earlier discussion of *that bread should be*, I indicated how the layout of text forms a continuous 'horizon' across facing pages; this layout suggests that both in its composition and in its reading, the opening – made up of two distinct but sutured pages – forms one of the basic working units of the poem. In *red shifts*, as the very first opening of the poem demonstrates (figure 31), facing pages are often treated as a single space. This alerts readers to the importance of reading and looking across the opening as well as down the page, even when facing pages are not so literally melded together. Indeed, in the poem's first pages, this 'instruction' for a reading strategy is given almost mimetically by means of two visual 'diagrams' – the undulating black line that meanders down the far left-hand side of the opening, imitating the movement of the reading eye, and the red zigzag which moves across the pages and leads, on the far right-hand side, to the rest of the work. In this way, the poem's first pages train its readers in how to negotiate the work as a series of spaces which require visual navigation and a multidirectional reading practice.

The first opening of *red shifts* is also instructive in that it constitutes a dialogue between verbal and visual elements which indicates something about verbal-visual relationships in this poem as a whole. The visual cues on these first pages are highly gestural marks, drawn with marker pens or with a fine brush and ink. The wavy black line and red zigzag differ from the typed dashes and slashes that form the non-verbal marks of *that bread should be*; by means of their gestural quality, they claim a more direct link with

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[49] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, p. 159.
[50] Perloff, '"The Saturated Language of Red"', p. 191.
[51] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para 6 of 58).
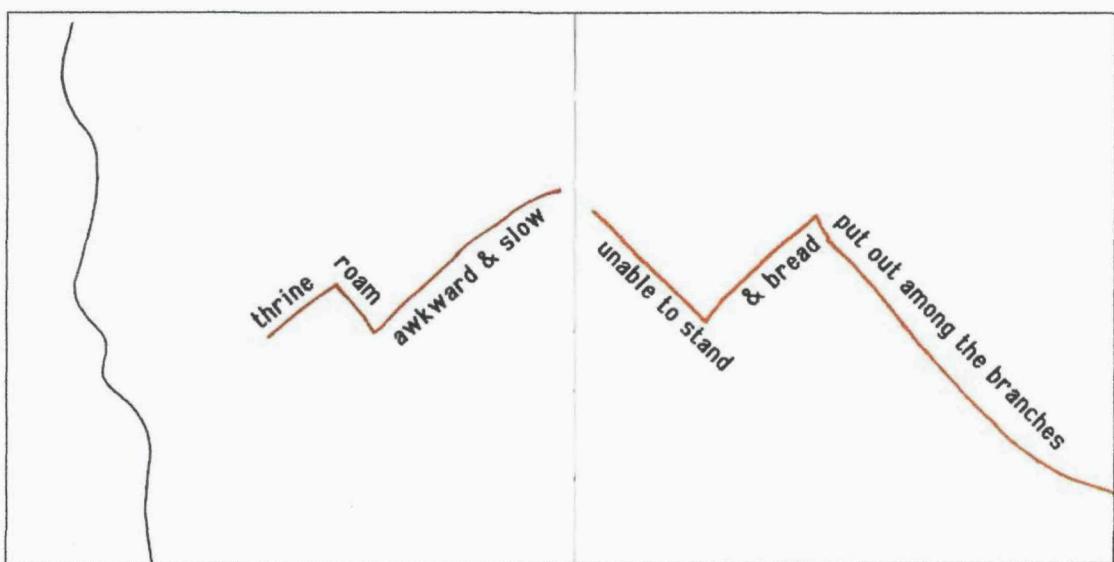
Figure 31. O'Sullivan, *red shifts* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 2001), first opening (unpaginated)

the hand and the body, a genesis in a 'body-intensive' practice.[52] In sharp contrast, the heavily pixellated, blocky appearance of the verbal material on this page points to the mediation of a machine. The starkly differing visual qualities of word and visual mark tends in some ways to suggest different modes of production for verbal and visual material in this poem and to posit a separation between the written and the drawn. Yet at the same time the placing of words along the contours of the red zigzag integrates word and image; the reading of the printed word/phrase/line must unavoidably take the movement and contours of the zigzag into account, whilst the red mark itself is not only a red mark but also a poetic line, a template around which verbal material shapes itself. Furthermore, the visible pixels of the printed words highlight the essentially visual quality of all printed words – the pixel being a unit of visual space – and bestow a textural quality upon each rough-edged individual letter. Meanwhile, the red zigzag calls to mind the rising and falling of intonation or sound, its hard edges echoing the hard consonants which litter the verbal material on the page. What this exchange between and blurring of optical, textual, oral, and textural qualities adds up to is a synaesthetic space in which, as Dell Olsen puts it, the poem is 'moving towards an interchange of senses: hearing seems to become sight and vice-versa'.[53]

Olsen's reference to a synaesthetic practice is highly appropriate to a multidimensional poem like *red shifts*; furthermore, the phenomenon of synaesthesia as it

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[52] O'Sullivan and Charles Bernstein, 'A Conversation'.
[53] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para. 26 of 58).

has been explored by neuroscientists has implications for language which are highly pertinent to O'Sullivan's poetics. Studies conducted by Vilayanur Ramachandran and Edward Hubbard suggest that synaesthesia – in which, for example, different musical notes evoke particular colours for some people, or certain tactile experiences induce a sensation of taste – are caused by a kind of cross-wiring or 'cross activation' between neighbouring areas of the brain that deal with sensory experience.[54] They go on to suggest that to some extent 'we are all closet synaesthetes', that we all have the capacity for some level of sensory interchange, and that furthermore, this capacity may well be central to the development of human thought and language.[55] In particular, they argue, '[h]umans have a built-in bias to associate certain sounds with particular visual shapes'. For example, a test conducted by psychologist Wolfgang Köhler found that when presented with two shapes, one curvy and amoeba-like and the other sharp and pointy, and asked which is a 'bouba' and which a 'kiki', 98 percent of all respondents matched the rounded shape to the name 'bouba' and the angular shape to 'kiki'. Such sensory exchange, Ramachandran and Hubbard suggest, may have been crucial to the development of language; '[t]he brain seems to possess preexisting rules for translating what we see and hear into mouth motions that reflect those inputs', providing a basis for the evolution of language involving an intertwining of sight, sound, and gesture.[56] This theory of the genesis of language seems to be starkly at odds with the Saussurian insistence on the arbitrary nature of the sign that has formed the dominant model of language for literary theory because it implies that there is some kind of inherent, physiological relation between word and thing at the basis of language. Yet whilst Ramachandran and Hubbard hardly provide a fully worked-out theory of language, their work in this area also allows for the sorts of arbitrary links between signifier, signified and referent insisted upon by Saussurian linguistics. They suggest that synaesthesia could explain a facility for metaphor whose functioning relies upon such relationships; 'just as synaesthesia involves making arbitrary links between seemingly unrelated perceptual entities such as colours and numbers, metaphor involves making links between seemingly unrelated conceptual realms.'[57] The importance of these neuroscientific theories of synaesthesia for O'Sullivan's poetics is that they suggest a model of sensory experience in which different sensory dimensions become interrelated and even fused. Furthermore, such exchanges become the basis for a conception of language in which

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[54] Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and Edward M.Hubbard, 'Hearing Colors, Tasting Shapes', *Scientific American*, 288.5 (2003), 42-49, p. 55 <http://psy.ucsd.edu/chip/pdf/SciAm_2003.pdf> [accessed 25 January, 2007].
[55] Ramachandran and Hubbard, p. 58.
[56] Ramachandran and Hubbard, p. 59.
[57] Ramachandran and Hubbard, p. 57.

sight, sound, touch, and gesture interconnect. These ideas about language are highly consonant with the use of language in O'Sullivan's poetry, which wants to stimulate or rejuvenate corporeally-rooted linkages between various sensory dimensions and between these sensory dimension and language.

The performative page and incorporated memory

The first opening of red shifts (figure 31), embodies a multidimensional conception of language which exemplifies O'Sullivan's aspiration towards a 'dissolving/deformance of the verbal/visual/sculptural', a splicing and melding of multiple sensory dimensions. Not only does this page strike up an interplay and 'dissolving' between printed word and visual mark, it also constitutes a gestural acting-out; it is a multi-medial performance as O'Sullivan's coinage 'deformance' suggests. But what is it that is being performed in this opening, beyond the fusing of textual, visual, tactile and oral dimensions of experience? In red shifts, the page, or rather the opening, is 'A place of existence, journeying. A sacred space of undiminishment. Of dream. Of ritual. Of magic.'[58] And this is evident from the verbal-visual-tactile performance of the work's first opening, which transforms the page(s) into a space of ritual, a space in which '& bread / put out among the branches' constitutes a form of offering. Furthermore, the poem begins with one of O'Sullivan's characteristic neologisms, 'thrine', which in an act of 'dissolving/deformance' suggests simultaneously the word 'thine', an archaic form for 'your' or 'yours', and 'shrine'. Additionally, the 'o' sound from 'roam' bleeds into 'thrine', making it point equally to the word 'throne'. In its proximity to 'shrine' and 'throne', 'thrine' calls to mind without actually designating a site invested with ceremonial significance, and implies that the task of performing its rites may be read as at least partly 'thine', the reader's.

By means of its sense of ritualised performance, O'Sullivan's poem enacts a form of memory comparable to that proposed by social anthropologist Paul Connerton. In his book *How Societies Remember*, Connerton argues that social or collective memory is embodied; for him, 'images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past ... are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances' from commemorative ceremonies participated in by large collectives to the shared bodily practices of individuals.[59] He points out that studies of collective memory, rooted in a hermeneutic tradition which takes language as its primary domain of enquiry, have hitherto focused on inscribed forms of memory. Connerton aims to show that memory or tradition is also 'passed on in non-textual

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[58] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para. 8 of 58).
[59] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 4.

and non-cognitive ways' by means of what he calls incorporating practices, performative modes of communication which depend upon a 'bodily substrate'.[60] By scrutinising such performative practices, he wants to show how 'memory is sedimented, or amassed, in the body'.[61] This sense of memory certainly resonates with O'Sullivan's sense of a cultural heritage silted into the 'ancestral self' by means of performative practices, such as the oral and folk traditions invoked in *that bread should be*, or those connected to a working-class life lived 'on the edge... without any voice'.[62]

Connerton's study is concerned largely with embodied social memories of the hegemonic practices of dominant cultures, but it does have implications for investigations of unofficial or marginalised versions of the past. If, as Connerton asserts, '[i]nscribing practices have always formed the privileged story, incorporating practices the neglected story, in the history of hermeneutics', then incorporating practices might also form ways of remembering those 'neglected' stories that have not been part of canonical traditions of inscription.[63] In the same way that, '[o]ral histories seek to give voice to what would otherwise remain voiceless even if not traceless', as Connerton points out, so might incorporated practices harbour hitherto 'voiceless' elements of the past.[64] Certainly, a conception of memory as bodily performance that might give shape and form to the voiceless informs O'Sullivan's poetry, and this becomes particularly visible in the ritualistic verbal-visual-textural pages of *red shifts*. Yet are not books, pages, writing, and drawing all part of an inscribing rather than an incorporating practice? Whilst Connerton's notion of embodied memory largely depends upon making a distinction between inscribed and incorporated forms of memory, he does allow for overlaps:

> it is certainly the case that many practices of inscription contain an element of incorporation, and it may indeed be that no type of inscription is at all conceivable without such an irreducible incorporating aspect. [...] It is certainly true that writing, the most obvious example of inscription, has an irreducible bodily component.[65]

Connerton wants to minimise the importance of this sort of crossover and to demonstrate that writing is predominantly an inscribing practice, and therefore ultimately categorisable as such, but it is precisely this space of intersection between the inscribed and the bodily in which O'Sullivan's 'dissolving/deformance of the verbal/visual/sculptural' performs its

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[60] Connerton, p. 102–3, 71.
[61] Connerton, p. 72.
[62] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths* 1&2, pp. 156, 159.
[63] Connerton, p. 100–1.
[64] Connerton, p. 18.
[65] Connerton, p. 76.

ritualistic work of memory.[66] By emphasising the 'irreducible bodily component' of inscription, her work wants to tap into the multidimensional 'incorporated' dimensions of writing and language practices which might hold traces of the 'neglected' stories of the voiceless and of a struggle for articulation, a sense of cultural memory 'amassed, in the body' of material language.[67]

The hand-drawn marks, patterns, spills, and washes of often blood-red ink that occur throughout the pages of *red shifts* emphasise an 'irreducible bodily component' of inscription by means of these marks' associations with the body – whether by dint of their correspondence to corporeal elements such as blood or by means of a gestural quality that claims a proximity to the writing or drawing hand. So too, verbal marks such as dashes and slashes foreground the material presence of print upon the page – writing's own 'bodily' presence – and words printed in a red font frequently link type to the corporeal qualities of the blood-like red ink used throughout the book. Furthermore, this writing recurrently invokes a corporeality of speech and sound – and of the struggle to articulate – that inheres in these inscriptions. So when in the poem's third opening the phrases 'b-r-e-a-t-h-i-n-g------in' and 'b-r-e-a-t-h-i-n-g---out – '(rs, unpaginated) are fragmented, hyphenated and printed in a diagonally rising-and-falling shape they simultaneously represent and embody a difficult process of breathing, and this embodiment consists of inseparable visual and oral components. The broken and hyphenated words visually represent ragged breathing, the hyphens serving to fragment the word and the ascending and descending printing of the word in a jagged peak suggesting a breath that not only rises and falls regularly but catches, the point of this peak inferring a sharp, uncontrolled switch between inhalation and exhalation. At the same time, the printing of these phrases demonstrates a breaking of sound, fragmenting the phonetic qualities of the word 'breathing' and making audible 'the non-word in sound or language' in the form of a faltering, uneven breath.[68] This multidimensional act of inscription is firmly rooted in a synaesthetic corporeality that gives form and substance to the poem's struggle for articulation, for as these embodied struggles for speech suggest, the ritualised performance the poem aspires to enact does not unfold smoothly. Indeed, a sense of debilitation infuses *red shifts* from its first opening, in which the lines 'awkward & slow' and 'unable to stand' point to a struggling and incapacitated body. The poem's following pages act out a recurrently thwarted corporeal endeavour to perform a speech act. A speaker's whimper **'cant hold by breath/my breath /**

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[66] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para. 6 of 58).
[67] Connerton, p. 72.
[68] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, p. 159.

sobbing'(rs), points emphatically to an undertaking hindered by grief and by a silencing violence suggested by 'savage / toungesbled' and the repetition of 'sh ---'. This physical striving for speech performs a sense of memory 'sedimented, or amassed, in the body',[69] an inherited incorporated struggle for voice that informs the poet's 'sense of the ancestral self'.[70] But the task this poem sets itself is not just to describe this struggle for speech, but to be or become this struggle; the poem constitutes itself as a corporeal striving for speech, an embodied act of memory that performs a cultural legacy of marginalisation, muting, and social inarticulacy.

O'Sullivan's poem gives shape to states of inarticulacy, 'bodying forth' an incorporated memory rooted in a history of marginalisation, displacement, and silencing. Although *red shifts* is far less explicit about the history that informs it than *that bread should be*, fragments of a diasporic Anglo-Irish history are silted into this later poem's struggle for articulation. Spellings and neologisms regularly suggest Irish pronunciation as in **'windfella'** or **'AccurrsZ'd'** or **'Whatter Ye Fukkas'**(rs), and these are often printed in enlarged and/or emboldened fonts which serve to emphasise, or, in sound terms, 'turn up the volume' of enunciations bearing traces of an Irish voice. In addition to these sound-residues, the poem contains narrative fragments of an Irish heritage; **'paddy.took.after.my.grandmother's. / people.'** (rs) invokes a story of familial legacy whose Irishness is signified by the name **'paddy'**(rs). Yet whilst this tiny fragment or beginning of a story points to a sense of generational continuity, the full stop after each word serves as a recurrent interruption, physically breaking up the statement and pointing to a fracturing of families and of links between generations, so performing the ruptures of diaspora. Meanwhile, **'bellowing the roads** used drive them the 10 or 12 miles'(rs) points to a rural way of life involving the practices of a labour revolving around 'bellowing' livestock, a mode of existence whose pastness is indicated by the word 'used', which works most powerfully here as 'used to'. This time, the line's syntactical disjointedness and its visual jump from enlarged bold type to a smaller unemboldened font provide a sense of a discontinuity, whilst the line 'break cattle' on the previous page suggests the destruction of livestock and the way of life associated with it. These references to and performances of an Irish rural heritage both indicate the roots of an 'ancestral self' and, by both linguistic means and material shifts, demonstrate a diasporic sense of severance from this familial and cultural past.

Phrases such as **'ruptures crossing'** and 'tear of the wind'(rs) suggest that a sense of violence is silted in to the **'lost'**(rs) past that informs *red shifts*. Furthermore, this

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[69] Connerton, p. 72.
[70] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, p. 156.

intimation of barely-suppressed brutality is almost always linked in some way to the act of speaking as in the lines 'hard gutteral / / ——threadened ———— threatened to kill'(rs). Here, 'hard gutteral', suggesting harsh-sounding 'guttural' speech, appears to be the subject that threatens 'to kill'. And yet there is so much more going on here that the source and the target of this murderous threat are highly ambiguous. The crossing-through of the word 'threatened' constitutes a symbolic act of violence, declaring an intention to eliminate, to 'kill' the presence of the word. So this crossing-out of 'threatened' suggests both a removal of the threat 'to kill' and that the act of killing is no longer merely threatened but actualised. Meanwhile, the word 'threadened' with which this second line begins also bears the marks of an attempted erasure, and the suggestion is that this is connected to the violence of the 'hard gutteral' and the replacing of its 'd' with a sharper-sounding 't'. In the process, meaning has also shifted; the neologism 'threadened', whose meaning(s) are unclear and potentially multiple, but which is primarily suggestive of a past act of threading and thus of a sense of continuity and succession, mutates into the word 'threatened' whose more sharply defined meaning suggests an endangerment of the multiplicity and linkages 'threadened' embodies. But the line that crosses through 'threadened' is not only a mark of erasure, but also, because it extends backwards (our usual reading habits tell us) from the beginning of the word, visually suggestive of a linking thread from some 'before' onto which the letters of 'threadened' appear to be strung. Furthermore, 'threadened' is not only crossed out/threaded, some of its letters are also underlined, emphasised; the letters 'r', 'e', and 'd' are brought to attention in this way and then seemingly engender the word 'reddened' which makes up the next line and is placed strategically below and slightly to the right of the underlined letters, suggesting a progression from the previous line. This move is simultaneously a demonstration of the generative power of even the most uncertain, ambiguous, and incomplete articulations, and at the same time it intimates a kind of 'bleeding', a 'reddened' stain issuing from the violence previously intimated.

Throughout the process of reading these intricate verbal-visual interactions, though, the status of the 'hard gutteral' remains resolutely ambiguous: is this harsh-sounding entity a violent utterance? Is this the source of a murderous threat? Or is it 'hard' in the sense of 'difficult'? And is the gutteral something that issues from the 'gutter', from the site of the abject, the expelled, the marginal? And/or is it something that 'gutters', that sputters waveringly, inarticulately? O'Sullivan's manipulations of language and of the visual resources of the page in *red shifts* generate many such open questions. Her poem recurrently weaves together suggestions and enactments of violence, displacement, physical distress and inarticulacy. Whilst these recurring elements are intimately linked to

and informed by an Irish diasporic history, O'Sullivan's poem does not trace any particular historical or social occurrence or referent. Rather, her poetic critique is levelled at language and the historically-shaped patterns of violence, silencing, and suffering, inculcated into language by history and by ideological and material configurations of power and domination. This legacy is performed as an inheritance that is 'sedimented, or amassed, in the body' of the poem.[71]

By constructing a language entity with visual, corporeal presence which performs a stuttering, struggling inarticulate speech act, O'Sullivan's *red shifts* hopes to make visible *processes of marginalisation and silencing embedded in a writing that locates itself at the intersection of inscribing and incorporating practices.* As my above analysis of the lines 'hard gutteral / / —— threadened ———— threatened to kill' suggests, this writing performs this cultural legacy by means not only of verbal structures, but also extra-linguistic markers which act out instances of violence and silencing upon and in collaboration with printed language and its semantic and sonic resonances. It also relies upon – but also undeniably encourages – a reading practice that is attentive to the poem's visually performative marks and their interplay with other, inseparably related dimensions of the verbal sign. But crucially, as well as bringing to attention forms of violence embedded in language, O'Sullivan's multidimensional writing wants to expand the capacities of language, contesting its appropriation by and complicity with structures of oppressive power, and aspiring, by putting hitherto untapped resources of written/printed/sounded language into play, to enable it to function as the bearer of an 'unofficial word', as the title of O'Sullivan's 1988 work has it.[72]

Archaeological salvaging

The back matter of the *Etruscan Reader* in which *that bread should be* appears states that 'Maggie O'Sullivan attempts excavation and retrieval of possibilities within oral, aural, visual, and sculptural properties in language, voice and assemblage. Records of search *explore dismemberment and reconstitution, divergence and multiplicity in the mattering of material.'*[73] This vocabulary of 'dismemberment and reconstitution' and of 'excavation and retrieval' recalls the kind of redemptive archaeological poetics I have discussed in previous chapters in relation to Cha's and Howe's poetry with affinities to a Benjaminian model of history. No less than the works of these practitioners, O'Sullivan's material texts 'brush

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[71] Connerton, p. 72.
[72] O'Sullivan, *Unofficial Word*, (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Galloping Dog Press, 1988). Reprinted in *Body of Work* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2006), pp. 301–326.
[73] O'Sullivan, Barry Gascoyne and Barry MacSweeney, *Etruscan Reader III*, back matter.

history against the grain'[74] in pursuit of lost or suppressed aspects of history and culture whose residues might yield hitherto untapped 'semantic potentials' or 'energies', as Jürgen Habermas puts it.[75] As I have indicated in my previous discussions in this chapter, for O'Sullivan, the history and culture – both modern and ancient – of what she refers to as the 'Celtic fringes'[76] of the British Isles provides a particularly rich terrain for an 'excavation and retrieval of possibilities'.
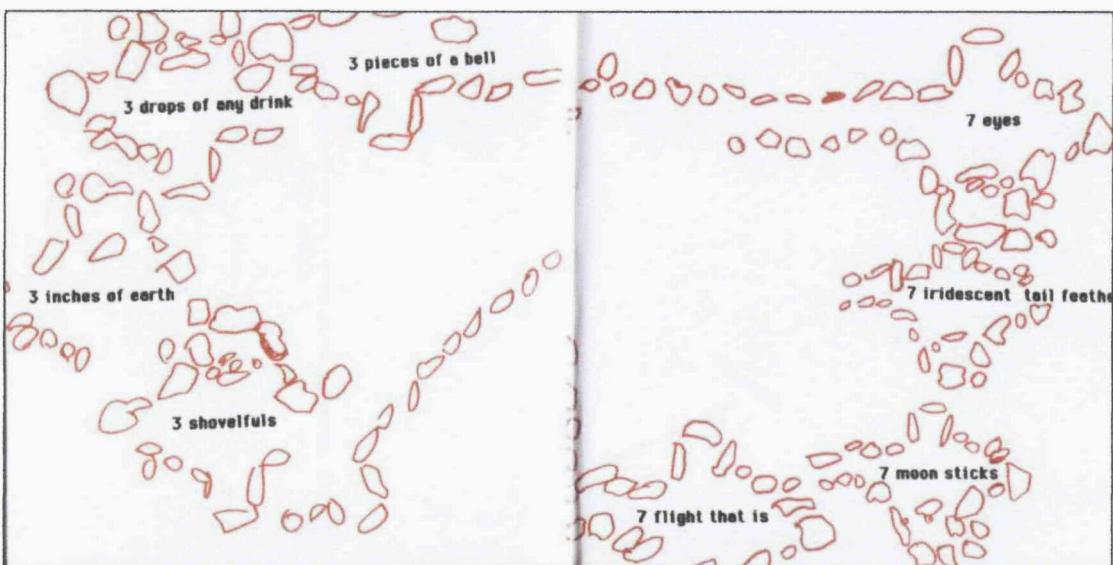

Figure 32. from *red shifts*

This poetry conducts an archaeological exhumation of folk and Celtic aspects of its author's Irish ancestry, as the wealth of archaic traces in *red shifts* demonstrates. One opening of this poem (figure 32) all at once resembles a list of ingredients for a magical spell, enacts a ritualistic performance with the route through the rite marked out by a 'pathway' of red shapes, and embodies an archaeological dig of a ceremonial site with its findings mapped out among visual representations of stone-like shapes. Elsewhere in *red shifts*, O'Sullivan borrows and redeploys motifs and symbols from Celtic art and mythology. The zigzags and spirals that recur throughout the poem, for example, are often seen in ancient Celtic art where they are invested with a wealth of symbolic significance. These designs have been found carved into stone at megalithic and palaeolithic sites such as Newgrange, Knowth and Fourknocks in Ireland. Featuring particularly in passage grave sites, these symbolic motifs are associated with the cycles of life and nature, and (spirals

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[74] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (London: Pimilico, 1999), p. 248.
[75] Jürgen Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising of Rescuing Critique', in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Gary Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1998), p. 120.
[76] Maggie O'Sullivan and Charles Bernstein, 'Interview by Charles Bernstein (1993)'.

particularly) the passage between life, death, and rebirth.[77] Archaeologist Richard Bradford proposes that these carvings might have constituted a 'prehistoric cosmology' rooted in 'a perception of space ... shaped by mythology as much as topography', a map of the stars in the night sky whose configurations and movements were interwoven with ancient peoples' ways of making sense of their world.[78] These patterns and the lost cultures they reference function in *red shifts* as traces of extinguished ways of life and modes of relating to the world whose unrealised possibilities and potentially transformative powers the poem wants to retrieve.

O'Sullivan's approach to the salvaging and redeployment of 'archaic material' owes much to the influence of Joseph Beuys and Kurt Schwitters. Reflecting upon the influences of these artists in her poem/ statement of poetics 'RIVERRUNNING (REALISATIONS', O'Sullivan writes of how she begun in the 80s to make 'assemblages or visual constructions' (see figure 26) informed by Schwitters's Merz works into which he incorporated scraps of discarded waste material from everyday life such as used tickets, food labels, and scraps of newspaper. In his 'superb use of the UN – the NON and the LESS – THE UNREGARDED, the found, the cast-offs, the dismembered materials' O'Sullivan finds a parallel for her own 'concern for the retrieval of potentials within material'.[79] Her weaving of salvaged cultural fragments into a multimedia collage, amalgamating them with other kinds of references and other kinds of forms in a poem like *red shifts*, then, similarly aims for a such a 'retrieval of potentials', embedded in abject or negatively-defined cultural 'cast-offs', whose possibilities for transformative creative practice has gone hitherto unacknowledged and untapped.

This poetics of salvaging is also much informed by her engagement with the work of Beuys with whom she shares an interest in Celtic mythologies and artefacts and a shamanistic veneration for the natural world. Indeed, she ascribes her move in 1988 from London to Yorkshire, 'from the city to the moorland impress of tongue' to the 'transformative experience' of working on a BBC *Arena* programme on Beuys a couple of years earlier.[80] O'Sullivan's 1993 work *In the House of the Shaman* uses a quotation from him as an epigraph to its second section 'Kinship with Animals': 'To stress the idea of

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[77] See for example George Nash, 'Light at the End of the Tunnel: the way megalithic art was viewed and experienced', in *Art As Metaphor*, ed. by Aron Mazel, George Nash and Clive Waddington (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), pp.123–143 & Michael J. Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, art and legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), pp. 128–185.

[78] Richard Bradley, *The Significance of Monuments: On the shaping of human experience in Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 108.

[79] O'Sullivan, 'RIVERRUNNING (REALISATIONS', p. 67.

[80] O'Sullivan, 'RIVERRUNNING (REALISATIONS', p. 67. The Arena programme was directed by Caroline Tisdall and made in 1986 just before Beuys's death. It was screened in 1987 (British Film Archive listing at <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/136912> [accessed 16th September 2008].

transformation and of substance. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about *change and development: his nature is therapeutic.'*[81] *O'Sullivan's intimation of the untapped energies of 'dismembered materials' echoes Beuys's shamanistic belief in the transformative and 'therapeutic' power of particular materials, such as the felt and lard he recurrently used in his sculptures and installations.*


i have found this red
is breathed
or reply,
water's edge, DECOMPOSITIONS
draw ing breath's
broken fanging -
Nion, the Ash, this 3rd
letter of salvages
bridle & gut
aquacity staltic -

pearlful
shoreline paler pelt
amber peep in step in in draping -
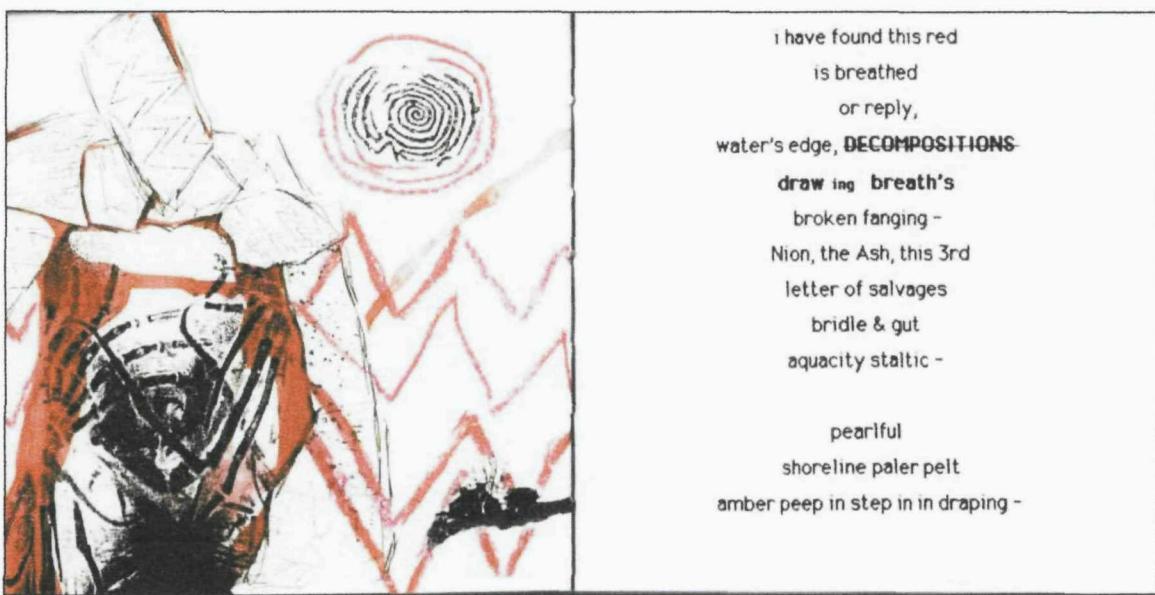
Figure 33. From *red shifts*

O'Sullivan's poetry brings methods of assemblage, an attention to unacknowledged or 'cast-off' cultural remains, and a faith in the transformative energies secreted in such materials to her poetic excavation of archaic residues gleaned from extinct or marginalised cultures of the British Isles. The opening from *red shifts* depicted in figure 33, where fragments gleaned from the remains of a lost Celtic culture are collaged together with other verbal and visual elements, exemplifies a poetic 'retrieval of possibilities' by such means. On the verso page, the zigzags and spirals of Celtic symbolism are drawn and printed in red crayon and black ink, forming part of a multimedia collage which also features an enigmatic, partly humanoid form surrounded by rivulets of blood-like ink. Simultaneously fleshy and skeletal, anthropomorphic and animal-like, this strange figure embodies a site of intersection and transition between the living and the dead, the mortal and the otherworldly alluded to by the abstract Celtic forms, as well as a fusing of the human and the animal which echoes animistic elements of ancient pagan belief systems

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[81] O'Sullivan quoting Joseph Beuys, *In the House of the Shaman* (London: Reality Street, 1993), p. 28.

and rituals. Yet the varied collage of this opening also includes verbal material; although image and text occupy separate pages here, they are placed in a dynamic dialogic relation that expands the possible meaning effects and sensory effects of this space. 'this red', for example, finds a visual 'reply', in the ink and crayon reds on the opposite page, whilst the red zigzags resonate suggestively with the lines **'draw ing breath's** / broken fanging', seeming to form a 'drawing' of ragged breathing or of jagged fang-like shapes. Meanwhile, the humanoid-skeletal form resonates with the crossed through word '~~DECOMPOSITIONS~~' which linguistically points to processes of corporeal decay intimated by the visual juxtaposition of plump fleshiness and bone-like forms. Celtic symbolism is invoked once more in the lines 'Nion, the Ash, this 3rd / letter of salvages', which refers to the '3rd / letter' of the ancient Ogham alphabet named Nion, the Celtic name for the ash tree. This reference to 'the Ash' echoes across the opening with a tiny, seemingly photographic, image of a silhouette of a house next to a large tree pasted over the red zigzags. This image-text conjunction recalls the *'ASH'*, of *that bread should be*, which the earlier poem also places next to a house by means of the line 'it is of an age with the house'(*tb*, 29), where it symbolises a lost sense of community. In this opening of *red shifts*, then, a process of interplay between various appropriated fragments and between their different materialities has the effect of invigorating each fragment's significance, sparking off their 'semantic potentials' in a series of dialogues between one reference and another, one kind of materiality and another, one mode of articulation and another.[82]

Remarking on the 'intimations of the archaic' that infuse O'Sullivan's poems, Charles Bernstein describes this work as 'a cross-sectional boring through time, whirling the sedimentary layers into knots. The archaic material pushes up to the surface.'[83] These words convey a sense not only of the 'whirling' energy of this poetry, but also of its simultaneous sense of both a depth of time, a 'boring' through 'sedimentary layers', and a spatial 'surface' to which excavated material rises. Recalling Brian McHale's discussion of archaeological poetry discussed in the introduction to this thesis, we might read this 'surface' quite literally as 'the space right here in front of us, *this* space here on the page'[84] which in O'Sullivan's work offers itself both as an artefact in itself and, as a 'surface' imprinted with the 'whirling... sedimentary layers' of concretised time. The 'surface' of this archaeological poetry, then, incorporates the sense of 'deep time' that McHale associates with modernist poetry into its material surface which, in a manner he links to postmodern

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[82] Habermas, p. 120.
[83] Charles Bernstein, 'Foreword: O'Sullivan's Medleyed Verse' in Maggie O'Sullivan, *Body of Work*, pp. 7–9, p. 9.
[84] Brian McHale, 'Archaeologies of Knowledge: Hill's Middens, Heaney's Bogs, Schwerner's Tablets', *New Literary History*, 30 (Winter 1999), 239-262, p. 256.

poetry, insists on the artefactual nature of 'its own constituents, its ink and paper, its typography and layout and the conventions of bookmaking, above all, the space of the page'.[85] In other words, the surface of the page becomes a site of intersection between time and space, a space imbued with specific, materially manifested historical residues in which 'deep time' and 'the space right here in front of us' meet and become intertwined.

O'Sullivan's poetic page performs a move akin to Benjamin's description of the activities of the historical materialist who 'grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with an earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.'[86] Benjamin's 'time of the now' is a 'constellation' or palimpsest of past and present in which 'the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.'[87] As I mentioned in chapter 1, Benjamin conceives of a meeting of past and present in terms of the 'dialectical image', which is 'a constellation saturated with tensions' that produce 'a flash' of cognition or recognition.[88] O'Sullivan's synthesis of various archaic traces and verbivocovisual materials in *red shifts* aims towards such an embodiment of 'now time' in which past and present are brought together in flashes of meaningful instantaneity. Disparate indexical fragments of cultures past and present are compressed together on the surface of the page in ways that aim to make visible the 'chips of Messianic time', the hitherto unacknowledged and undiscovered 'spark[s] of hope' rescued from the wreckage of history.[89]

As the opening depicted in figure 33 demonstrates, O'Sullivan's archaeological poetry incorporates the gleanings of its excavations into a multidimensional 'constellation' whose kaleidoscopic collisions and fusions of different materials and materialities aspire to bring about 'flashes' of cognition or re-cognition of excluded, silenced, or marginalised presences. These 'flashes' of cognition depend upon productive dialogues between different recovered fragments, different modes of representation, and different materialities. For example, the miniature image of a house and tree just discernable at the bottom right of the verso side of this opening has the feel of a scrap rescued from an old photograph album, its diminutive size and blurred indistinct outlines signal its referent's location in an irretrievable and increasingly distant past, whilst its apparently torn edges materially testify to a process of loss through fragmentation. But as something rescued and

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[85] McHale, p. 256.
[86] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 255.
[87] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 247.
[88] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 475 (N10a, 3).
[89] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 247.

redeployed by and within the poem, this scrap also evinces an activity of salvaging which resonates once again with the line 'Nion, the Ash, this 3rd/ letter of salvages' across the page. This designation of Nion as the 'letter of salvages' points to the strong associations between the ash tree and the power of the sea in Celtic lore; small pieces of ash wood were (and sometimes still are) used as charms against drowning by those going to sea.[90] Yet in O'Sullivan's poem Nion is a 'letter of salvages', not exactly a letter equated with safe passage over the sea but one that here becomes a sign of that which has been shipwrecked and rescued. And indeed, it is not only the pagan resonances of 'this 3rd / letter of salvages' that have been rescued here; this opening displays a wider collection of materials, including the tiny image of the house and tree and the spirals and zigzags, which are also 'salvages', flotsam and jetsam of lost or forgotten ways of life. As O'Sullivan's remarks on Schwitters discussed above indicate, it is important that her poem is a constellation of the discarded, because of the affinity between 'THE UNREGARDED' and the voiceless, 'cast-offs' and the expelled, 'dismembered materials' and silenced presences which share the status of the unacknowledged, the abject, the violently suppressed. The salvaged remains that make up these pages occupy and constitute a kind of borderland, a 'water's edge' or 'shoreline' between past and present, forgetting and recall, and also between 'deep time' and the space of the page. This marginal locale is a dwelling place of the silenced or inarticulate. It is 'A place of damage, savagery, pain, silence', of 'broken fanging', of 'DECOMPOSITIONS', of loss and threatened oblivion, but it is 'also a place of salvage, retrieval and recovery', where unrealised potential for transformative meaning might be glimpsed in the ebb and flow between savagery and recuperation, between the lost and found, or between the skeletal and the fleshly, the jagged and the rounded, the verbal and the visual, the past world of the fragment and the present moment of the poem.[91]

The activity of reading is central to the recovery and awakening of the potentials of O'Sullivan's poetic constellation, and in the back and forth of reading between the visual and verbal sides of this space, or between a skeletal and a fleshy form, or between the photographic and the hand drawn, meanings multiply and also contradict one another. The poem invites its readers to become part of its performance, to participate in its rituals of mourning and of recovery, to share the synaesthetic corporeality of its 'existence, journeying' and to follow its 'many heuristic pathings'.[92] As I have suggested before, O'Sullivan's poems undertake a process of training, or retraining, their readers in the

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[90] Gifford, pp. 9, 29.
[91] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para. 8 of 58).
[92] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (paras. 9 & 7 of 58).

practice of negotiating the various materialities of the page, and this is part of their task of bringing to attention and redeploying the hitherto unfulfilled possibilities of their materials.[93] The clearest example of this is in the poem's multiple incarnations of the colour red.

A highly symbolic colour, often abstractly associated with anger, with violence, or with danger and alarm, for example, the possible meanings of red become ever more complex in O'Sullivan's poem. Embodied in different ways throughout the poem, red carries different connotations according to its material form and the wider context of the page. In the opening depicted in figure 33, for example, the red of the ink spills form a visual network around the fleshy-skeletal bodily form, suggesting orderly flows of fluids around the body (and the watery verbal image on the facing page strengthens this inference). But the crayon red on this page signifies in different ways – the expressive strokes echoing Celtic designs claim a primal and vital link with past cultures, their gestural quality pointing to a genesis in the drawing hand, and the 'ancestral self' of the artist. The word 'red' printed in black ink on the facing page differs again; it is a 'red' that is 'found' by an 'i' which rarely makes an appearance in O'Sullivan's poetry, a 'red' that is 'breathed', thus constituting itself as a medium or meditative space in which breathing becomes far less difficult than it is elsewhere in the poem, and in which an articulation of selfhood becomes a possibility. And yet the different materialities of these reds are never deterministic; these same spilled, drawn and printed reds might well be read differently, as the homonymic overlap between 'red' and 'read' suggests. The red zigzags could well be read as an angry scrawl, or as representative of a violent and rough set of waves. Numerous materially different reds are manifest throughout the poem, and each time 'red' might be read differently and in multiple ways. The important thing to note is that this is a red that, as the title puts it, 'shifts', its semantic possibilities multiplying, but also sometimes conflicting and contradicting one another, with each incarnation in a different physical form.

Such indeterminacy gestures towards the teeming possibilities held within the materials of O'Sullivan's pages; the poem's shifting red alerts readers to the multiplicity of latent 'semantic potentials' embedded in the poem's material strata, and instructs us in the art of detecting possibly transformative energies, many of which are gleaned from past cultures or lost ways of life, embedded in the poem's various materialities. Indeed, O'Sullivan's work brings to attention and seeks to address the ways in which an engagement with materiality is a 'lost' or unacknowledged element of reading practices

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[93] The 'training' O'Sullivan's poems give readers stands in contrast to Cha's and Howe's work, which leaves readers more 'at sea'. This does not necessarily mean O'Sullivan's poems are 'easier' to read, however.

more generally. Inextricably bound up with the 'retrieval of possibilities' in her poetry is a 'mattering of material'.[94] This 'mattering' entails the foregrounding of a physical dimension of the poetic work that 'matters' in the sense that it bears the kind of 'sensuous meaningfulness' that J. M. Bernstein argues is denigrated in the rationalised forms of contemporary everyday life.[95]

Rescuing plurality, redeeming materialism?

In previous chapters, of this thesis, I have placed the redemptory activities of Cha's and Howe's work in relation to a line of argument pursued by Vincent Pecora concerning some of the problematic aspects of contemporary 'postmodern' projects which participate in a Benjaminian brushing of 'history against the grain'. We might recall that for him the danger of rescuing fragments of lost pasts for an 'otherwise "desolate present"', is that such attempts often run the 'risk of a certain exclusive particularism'.[96] Benjamin's 'now time', Pecora points out, 'is not simply a correspondence between the present and any number of lost opportunities for transformation rescued from the past', it 'is itself irreducibly plural and contradictory, and so is its messianic promise.'[97] Contemporary cultural projects which aim to rescue forgotten or suppressed dimensions of the past, he worries, tend to fasten on very particular 'special histories'. Thus whilst such rescue missions by their very existence depend on a plural notion of history, at the same time by privileging a particular suppressed version of the past, they almost inevitably fail to embrace the 'irreducibly plural and contradictory' character of Benjamin's 'now time'. I do not think that the charge of 'exclusive particularism' can be levelled at O'Sullivan's poetry, however, simply because this work is so centrally concerned with a retrieval of multiplicity, an aspiration embedded in the question, 'how can I body forth or configure such sounds, such tongues, such languages, such muteness, such multivocality, such error --' whose mode of listing in itself is an embrace of a thoroughly plural sense of silenced presences.[98] As my reading of the various material manifestations of signifiers for 'red' begins to indicate, a poem like *red shifts* embodies a kind of Benjaminian 'now time' which is, as Pecora puts it, is 'irreducibly plural and contradictory'. At the heart of the poem's every impulse and formal move, in other words, is an attempt to make manifest the very principle of plurality. Although, as I have shown, O'Sullivan's practice has its roots in a specific historical legacy of marginalisation,

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[94] *Etruscan Reader III*, back matter.
[95] J.M Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 47.
[96] Pecora, p. 94.
[97] Pecora, p. 96.
[98] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, p. 159.

her poetry turns to this history not so much to demand memorial justice for lost aspects of her cultural past, but rather precisely in order to rediscover concrete manifestations of a truly plural sense of history and its multiple silenced or unacknowledged dimensions whose traces are embedded in language.

In order to investigate further the redemptory aspects of O'Sullivan's poetics of salvaging, it is helpful to draw on some examples from another of her recent works, *murmur: tasks of mourning*. Like *red shifts*, this work remains implicitly shaped by a sense of an Anglo-Irish diasporic history; *murmur*'s title identifies it as a work which constitutes '*tasks of mourning*', and the poem's mode of lament is certainly informed by the historical legacies inscribed upon the poet's sense of 'ancestral self'.[99] Traces of this history are evident in references to a 'familial diasporic'(m, unpaginated) at various points in the poem or in the suggestion of Irish pronunciation in the word 'traipsin''(m). The fragment of lace which appears on the front and back 'covers' of the work can also be read as an allusion to and a remnant of the Irish cottage industry of lace making, as Victoria Sheppard's reading of this poem suggests.[100] Irish lace making has its roots in the Great Famine, when training centres were set up by the Churches (both Protestant and Catholic) and by philanthropic individuals to teach the craft to women to enable them to earn enough to keep starvation at bay.[101] Elsewhere in the poem the repeated line 'incising / usurping/ irrecoverable bui of bearers – '(m) carries a residue of an all-but lost language in the word 'bui'. Often used in Irish place names, this word is an abbreviation and phonetic spelling of the Gaelic 'buidhe', meaning yellow, but also signifying gratefulness.[102] The word 'bui' is also an allusion to a mythological figure of Irish folklore and legend called the *Cailleach Bhéarra*, who often appears under the name *Bui* in medieval materials. This female witch figure takes on a multiplicity of roles in Gaelic myth, among them 'mother-goddess', 'Divine Hag', and 'divine ancestress with numerous progeny of tribes and people'.[103] The word 'bui', then, embodies a plurality of meanings and alludes to a mythological character whose very nature is multiplicitous. Whilst a diasporic Anglo-Irish history of loss and displacement continues to inform a poem like *murmur*, then, what is being mourned here is less a specific

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[99] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, p. 156.

[100] Victoria Sheppard, 'Contesting Voices: Authenticity, Performance and Identity in Contemporary British Poetry' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southampton, 2006), p. 183.

[101] See, for example, Elaine Freedgood, '"Fine Fingers": Victorian Handmade Lace and Utopian Consumption', *Victorian Studies*, 45. 4 (2003), 625-647 p. 644, n. 2. and 'History of Irish Lace', http://www.irishdemocrat.co.uk/book-reviews/irish-lace/ [accessed 29th August 2007]

[102] See Malcolm MacLennan, *A pronouncing and Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (Aberdeen: Acair & Aberdeen University Press, 1979), p. 59 and MacAlpine, Neil, *A pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Stirling & Kenney, 1833), p. 55 for multiple definitions of buidhe.

[103] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-woman Healer* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), pp. 83–86.

'irrecoverable' past than a more widespread loss of multiplicitous potential in language and in culture. The use of the Gaelic word 'bui' in relation to a sense of the 'irrecoverable' and in association with the 'bearers' that evoke a funeral cortege, for example, functions not so much to enact a process of mourning the loss of any one language or culture as to indicate the loss of a plurality of languages, a plurality of cultures, and thus a plurality within language and culture. The historical resonances of the word 'bui', for instance, function as a gesture towards a coexistence and intertwining of different languages, cultures, and histories. Thus this cultural remnant is deployed not in the formation of a sense of cultural specificity that 'almost by necessity' 'insist[s] upon an exclusive rather than inclusive vision' in the way that Pecora indicates, but as a way of opening out onto a plural sense of history embedded in the language of the poem.[104]

O'Sullivan's excavation of a specific historical legacy is centrally concerned, then, with attempting to bring multiplicity into her practice, and it is precisely to this end that her work wants to retrieve the unfulfilled potentials of historical and archaic materials. Furthermore, her works' emphasis on and excavation of the multidimensional properties of language, and of poetry and the poetic page constitute a formal embodiment of this quest for multiplicity. Comprising a series of highly visual and tactile language and image arrangements, *murmur* continues O'Sullivan's development of a synaesthetic practice of 'many heuristic pathings' pursued in *red shifts*.[105] In its current form as an online poem, *murmur* – seemingly paradoxically – evinces a hand-made, collage aesthetic that foregrounds above all the visual and textural qualities of its multimedial compositions as the bearers of fecund meaning potentials. Although the electronic medium is generally thought of as a disembodied space, and the screen does not have the literal materiality of the page of a book, the process of scanning in high-quality images of the poem's hand-made pages enables the work to retain and reproduce minute physical particulars. Things like the different qualities and textures of paper used, the creasing caused by gluing collage materials on unstretched paper (see figure 34), or the impasto surface of acrylic paint (figure 35) are retained by the process of scanning, and they are reproduced with rich vibrancy on the computer screen. These details would almost certainly be lost if the work were printed as a book, if only because of the cost of reproducing such high-quality images. Such 'sensuous particulars', to borrow J.M. Bernstein's terminology, are crucial to the work's formal embodiment of multidimensionality. O'Sullivan's poem wants to redeem the potentials of 'sensuous meaningfulness, the kind of nondiscursive meaning that material

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[104] Pecora, p. 97.
[105] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para. 6 of 58).

things have, material meaning', to recover some of the lost or disavowed multiplicitous meaning potential of language and inscription.[106]
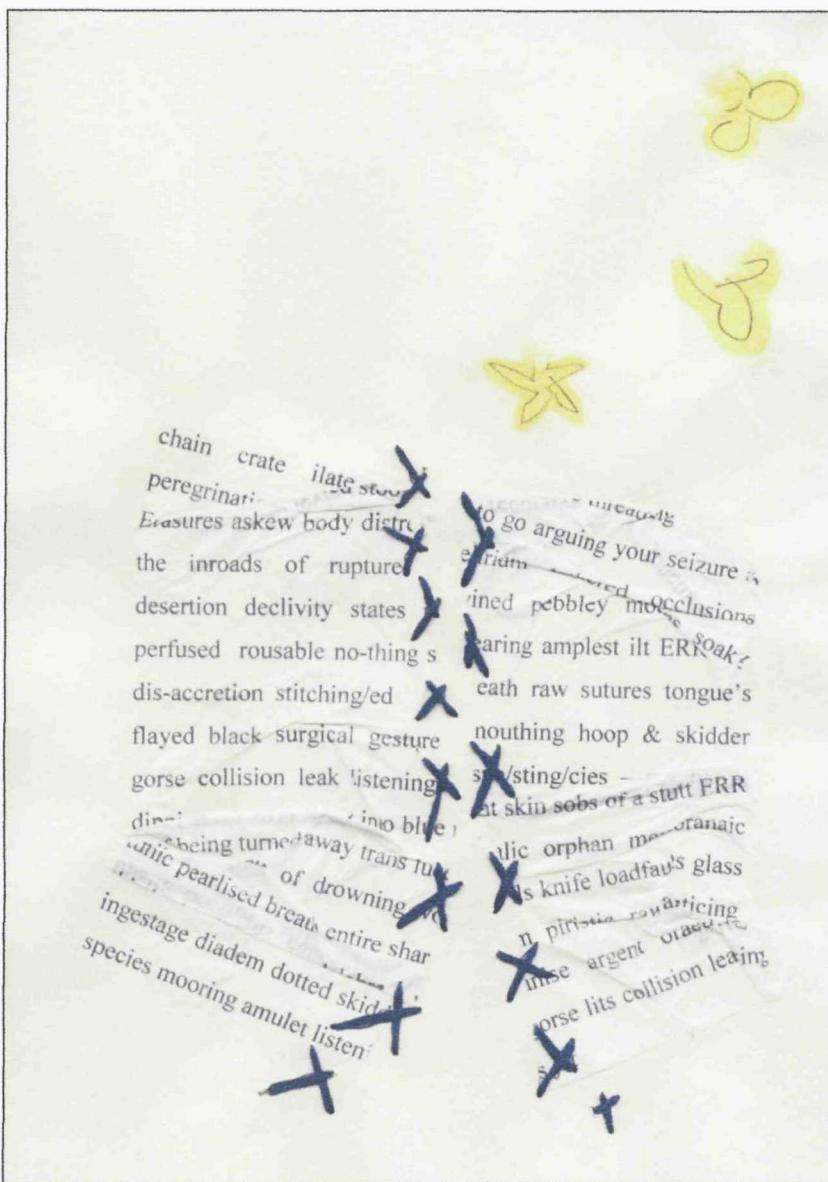

Figure 34. O'Sullivan, from *murmur* (unpaginated)

The page depicted in figure 34 constitutes an embodiment of and a reflection on precisely this process. The literalness and materiality of the components of this collaged page both body forth 'sensuous meaningfulness' and evince signs of its disavowal as a legitimate form of cognition. The delicate tissue paper of this page eloquently signals a

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[106] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 47.

sense of fragility, but this flimsiness, when brought into relation with the realm of linguistic cognition in the form of printed words, suggests the inability of this materiality to act as a bearer of linguistically-based meaning. Creased, wrinkled, and torn, this writing surface's materiality results in 'Erasures' and 'rupture'(m) of linguistic meaning. Two lines of hand-stitched crosses echo this process of erasure or crossing out. These cross-stitches also visually highlight the 'rupture' that this page embodies, even as they suture the torn pieces of tissue-text; their largeness and the thickness of their thread emphasise a 'bruty fissuring'(m), as the very last line of this poem has it. The corset-like form of the resulting sutured text, meanwhile, suggests a sense of restriction which is explicitly gendered feminine, but which also points to a wider sense of constricted corporeality. The 'Erasures', restrictions and 'rupture' both referenced linguistically and carried out materially by means of the torn tissue-text on this page might be read in the light of a split between discourse-based cognition and sensuous materiality which 'silences' the meaning potentials of materials. This rift, as J.M. Bernstein indicates, can be traced to Kant's account of judging in his *Critique of Pure Reason* in which 'what belongs to the domain of the *intelligible* stands opposed to what belongs to the domain of the *sensible*.'[107] According to this schema, sensory, intuitive experience can only be meaningful insofar as it is subsumable to rational concepts; thus, according to J.M. Bernstein, sensuous meaningfulness has been delegitimated in modernity as a form of knowing or thinking. Furthermore, he argues,

> [i]t is not too much of a stretch to see the abstraction from particularity and sensory givenness as the abstractive device of modern forms of social reproduction: the subsuming of the use values of particular goods beneath the exchange value of monetary worth, or the domination of intersubjective practices by norms of instrumental reason that yield the rationalization or bureaucratization of our dominant institutions.[108]

The 'rupture' between the meaningfulness of materials and discourse-based cognition which O'Sullivan's poem testifies to and embodies, then, constitutes a reflection on the 'restrictive culture' of the poet's social world and on its processes of abstracting, instrumentalisation, and enclosure.[109] The torn and stitched corset-like text stands as a critique of such processes. Yet at the same time, the flower-like shapes that emerge from the brutalised and sutured corporeal text articulate an aspiration towards recovery and

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[107] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 5.
[108] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 23.
[109] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths 1&2*, pp. 160, 159.

healing, towards a 'salvaging'(*m*) of delegitimated materiality, even as the torn edges of these shapes carry the enduring physical traces of a process of 'savaging'(*m*).

Like Benjamin's messianic project to bring semantic sparks gleaned from cultural tradition to bear on the concerns of the present, O'Sullivan's poetic salvaging of historical fragments and of material meaningfulness aims both to critique and counter the 'restrictive culture' of the present. Says the poet in an interview with Charles Bernstein, 'we're living in such a profoundly materialistic world, that [the] magic and beauty, and joy and power that is in language is not appreciated, or not known'.[110] Here, she makes a direct, causal connection between the 'materialistic world' of late twentieth-century consumer capitalism and a diminishment of the capacities of language. In this respect, she echoes a line of thought central to 'Language writing' which aligns language use under capitalism – especially in the language arts – with the logic of commodity fetishism. Ron Silliman's key essay 'Disappearance of the Word/ Appearance of the World' argues that '[w]hat happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities'.[111] Words, Silliman avers, have become part of a transactional process under capitalism. Stripped of their 'perceived tangibility', they are made transparent, instrumentalised, and valued only for their referentiality, for the ways in which they can be exchanged for an image of 'the World'. As is well known, writers associated with 'Language' poetics want to resist this logic of instrumentalisation and commodification; as Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews put it, '[i]t is our sense that the project of poetry does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production.'[112] For O'Sullivan too, transactional uses of language, and a sense of restriction and loss of potential embody and echo an empty materialism of contemporary existence. Her poetry wants to counter 'materialistic' contemporary culture with another kind of materialism: one that acknowledges and employs the physical, visually and acoustically embodied dimensions of language in a 'production' of meaning that critiques the logic of instrumentality and consumption.

However, O'Sullivan's particular form of materialism is not only concerned with forming a critique of the commodity forms of contemporary culture; it is also imbued with a

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[110] O'Sullivan and Charles Bernstein, 'Interview by Charles Bernstein (1993)'.
[111] Ron Silliman, 'Disappearance of the Word/ Appearance of the World', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), pp. 121–132, p. 125.
[112] Andrews and Charles Bernstein, 'Repossessing the Word', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp. ix–xi, p. x.

shamanistic sense of the unacknowledged 'magic and beauty, and joy and power' embedded in the sensuousness of language. In her interview with Charles Bernstein, she declares a belief 'in the transformative, alchemical forces that are inherent in languages' naming not only Beuys but also Jerome Rothenberg as influences on her conception of language's transformative potentials. Rothenberg's work with 'primal poetries', she says, provides ample examples of 'language constructions designed to bring about change', such as healing chants, for example, which demonstrate 'the magic in language, the potency, transformative potential in language'.[113] This numinous sense of multidimensional language does not quite cohere with the materialist politics which O'Sullivan shares with 'Language' poetics. As Hank Lazer points out, such a 'spiritual' sensibility sits uncomfortably with the politics of 'Language' poetics:

> While it is common to valorize the importance of such writers as Robert Duncan and Jerome Rothenberg, a closer examination of their poetry and poetics immediately places us within writing traditions that are openly mystical, romantic, and, in the case of Rothenberg, shamanic and magical—all qualities that are disturbing to most innovative contemporary poets, many of whom have developed a poetics more obviously reliant on tenets of cultural materialism and an anti-romantic metaphysics.[114]

Indeed, the 'shamanic and magical' dimensions of poetries such as Duncan's, Rothenberg's and O'Sullivan's are on a fundamental level antithetical to the materialist basis of contemporary experimental poetries such as 'Language' writing. This is because the materialist approach of 'Language' poetics is essentially a mode of disenchantment that seeks above all to wrest language from the enchantments of the logic of commodity fetishism which, in hiding the materiality of the word and its processes of meaning-making, enables language to appear to transparently offer access to an easily consumable 'reality' beyond the word. However, an attribution of 'magical' dimensions and powers to language, no matter how materially embodied, is effectively a re-enchantment of language, albeit a re-enchantment that wants to offer alternatives to the commodity fetishism of consumer capitalism.

O'Sullivan's melding of a mystical sense of the 'magical' properties of multidimensional language with a materialist understanding not only of contemporary culture but also of the exchange economies of signification in many ways parallels Benjamin's rather fraught combining of messianism and materialism. We might recall from

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[113] O'Sullivan and Charles Bernstein 'Interview by Charles Bernstein (1993)'.
[114] Hank Lazer, 'The People's Poetry', *The Boston Review*, (2004) <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR29.2/lazer.html> [accessed 18th September 2008] (para. 19 of 70).

my discussion of Benjamin's relation to Marxism in chapter 1 that one of the basic contradictions of his historical materialist project is its attempt to fuse an antievolutionary messianic view of history with a materialism that rests on a notion of progress towards political emancipation rooted in a social struggle for the means of production. Yet his messianic materialism is also characterised by a conflict between disenchantment and re-enchantment. Benjamin the historical materialist wants to critique the fetish character of the commodity – or 'phantasmagoria' in his vocabulary – which he sees as constituting the 'ruins' of bourgeois culture. [115] But at the same time, it is also within these very 'ruins' that he detects the *shekhinah*-like 'spark[s] of hope in the past' to which he ascribes an almost magical – and certainly mystically-inflected – power to redeem.[116]

As Habermas indicates, such contradictions need not necessarily negate the value of Benjamin's 'semantic materialism' for contemporary materialist criticism.[117] Benjamin's messianism implicitly forms a critique of the possibility of 'empty progress', pointing to a '*further* moment' of materialist critique: 'besides hunger and oppression, failure; besides prosperity and liberty, happiness.'[118] Habermas's term 'semantic materialism' indicates how for him Benjamin's messianism is an insistence on the making-meaningful of the materialist quest for prosperity and liberty. O'Sullivan's re-enchantment of language might be read as performing a comparable move: besides a critique of language's instrumentalisation and commodification, her poetry wants to articulate 'anger'.[119] And besides a repossession of the sign 'through close attention to, and active participation in, its production'[120] her work hopes to rescue its 'magic and beauty, and joy'.[121] For her, these potentials are embedded in language's materiality and they are a part of this materiality that must be embraced rather than disavowed or passed silently over, because these 'alchemical' properties of language have the capacity to affect material change. Above all, O'Sullivan's materialism, by combining materialist critique with a mystical sense of language's redemptory potential wants to produce a '*further* moment' of poetic politics by articulating a gnosis of the *unfulfilled and possibly transformative potentials of language's sensory dimensions, of its material meaningfulness*. For O'Sullivan, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the material, corporeal dimensions of language and signification form a large part of that which is normally 'not appreciated, not known' in language. In pursuit of a sense of plurality

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[115] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 7, for example.
[116] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 247.
[117] Habermas, p. 123.
[118] Habermas, pp. 122, 121.
[119] O'Sullivan and Charles Bernstein, 'Interview by Charles Bernstein (1993)'.
[120] Andrews and Charles Bernstein, 'Repossessing the Word', pp. ix–xi, p. x.
[121] O'Sullivan Charles Bernstein, 'Interview by Charles Bernstein (1993)'.

embedded in language's materiality, her work aspires to expand upon the usual modes of writing, saying and reading, to extend the senses used to read with and thus to bring about an active engagement not only with the processes of making meaning, but also with numinous, potentially transformative properties of language.[122]

Such an activity is evident in O'Sullivan's extensive use in *murmur* of gestural marks which strongly resemble language but are not recognisable or legible as such. In the page shown in figure 35, for example, a number of roughly hand-drawn boxes filled in with pink crayoned letter-like marks and red impasto paint fill the top two thirds of the page. These boxes recall processes of form filling: processes that epitomise a bureaucratised social world. But whereas the straight, mechanical lines and restrictive options and enclosures of official forms interpellate the writing subject into a process of cross-examination, of self naming, labelling, self-justification and restrictive categorisation, the hand-drawn quality of O'Sullivan's boxes and the non-linguistic nature of the marks that fill them signal a resistance to such imperatives. These gestural 'signs' certainly contest the notion of 'turning language into a commodity for consumption'; their very illegibility refuses instrumentalisation or translation into any kind of easily-consumed meaning.[123] But as well as critiquing processes of interpellation and the commodity forms of language, *murmur's* unofficial boxes and marks also gesture towards alternative domains and modes of knowledge and meaning making. O'Sullivan's visual-language structures raise the possibility of an 'unofficial world we make by inhabiting' her poetry, to borrow the words of Charles Bernstein.[124] This 'unofficial world' is embodied most especially by marks like the glyphs of this page from *murmur* whose very illegibility and gestural power hint at hitherto unplumbed dimensions of material writing.

Johanna Drucker, commenting upon the use of 'somatic traces' by visual artists such as Mira Shor and Pierre Alechinsky says that 'The [gestural] trace makes itself in the dynamic pleasure of material making and as such, remains a sign which has not yet reached the threshold of meaning'.[125] Indeed, O'Sullivan's marks evince just such a 'pleasure of material making', a 'pleasure' of the materials of making and marking which induces these illegible signs to ecstatically spill outside of the hand-drawn boxes. And yet this physical spilling-over both suggests that these signs have 'not yet reached the threshold of meaning' and at the same time that they exceed it. O'Sullivan's somatic traces, although

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[122] O'Sullivan Charles Bernstein, 'Interview by Charles Bernstein (1993)'.
[123] Andrews and Charles Bernstein 'Repossessing the Word', pp. ix–xi, p. x.
[124] Charles Bernstein, 'Forward: O'Sullivan's Medleyed Verse', p. 8.
[125] Drucker, 'The Art of the Written Image', *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), pp. 57 – 75, p. 65.
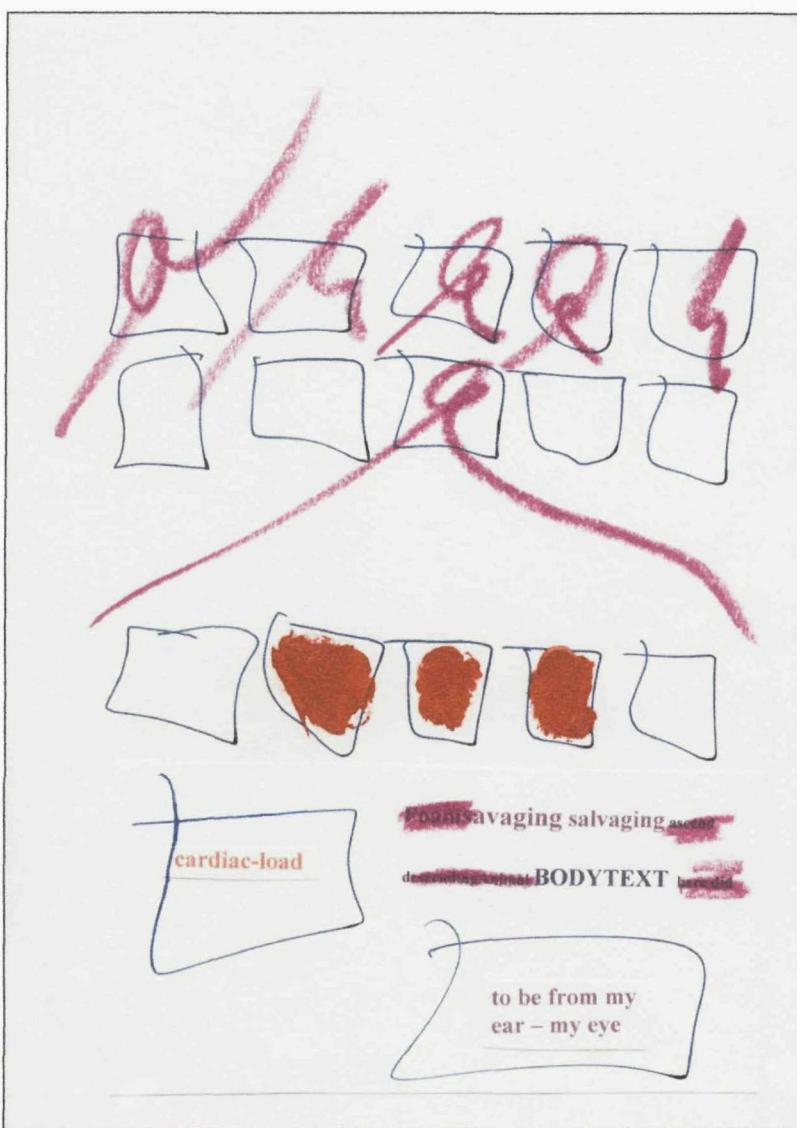
Figure 35. From *murmur*

illegible, are so much like letters that they seem to belong to a secret language or unfamiliar script. The repetition of certain marks not only upon this page but across others where these gestural formations occur strengthens this suggestion. In this respect, they function as glyphs, which differ from gestural traces in that they implicitly claim to belong to some sort of mysterious symbolic system. Drucker remarks that such signs 'have meaning not accounted for in linguistic substitution … the power of the glyph – whether alchemical, magical, esoteric, or exotic is precisely this resistance to recuperation within the closed system of mere meaning.'[126] O'Sullivan's glyphs describe a physical resistance to any notion of a 'closed system of mere meaning'; they embody a dynamic and ongoing process of mark

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[126] Drucker, 'Art of the Written Image', p. 69.

making and deciphering whose forms seemingly participate in an esoteric symbolic activity but which are never resolvable into closed, graspable 'meaning'. As Drucker's phraseology helps to emphasise, the resistance to 'mere meaning' embodied in O'Sullivan's somatic marks points to the inadequacy of an equating of legible language with meaning and an aspiration to move beyond linguistically or discursively-tied processes of meaning making into a 'multidimensional, kinaesthetic, sentient terrain or environment for the body to enter and move through'.[127] This terrain, hopes the poet, might be imbued with the lost 'magic and beauty, and joy and power that is in language'. O'Sullivan's gestural glyphs suggest that such 'magic and beauty, and joy and power' might lie precisely in the sensuousness of the material dimensions of language, in a kind of meaningfulness that contributes in unacknowledged ways to processes of meaning making at the same time as it resists subsumption to discursively based forms of cognition. In so doing, poetic forms such as these call for a re-cognition of multidimensional modes of meaningfulness and the traces of 'other-than or invisible or dimmed or marginalised or excluded' aspects of language, history and culture.[128]

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Maggie O'Sullivan's poetics of salvaging constitutes an unabashedly redemptive rescue mission directed at presences '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'.[129] As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, this work of recuperation is conducted by means of a multidimensional poetic practice that incorporates a wide range of hybrid verbivocovisual forms. This poetry's investigation of voicelessness and pursuit of traces of the silenced and excluded is informed by the poet's own Anglo-Irish heritage, and in particular by a materialist sense of history and culture which locates processes of marginalisation and experiences of suffering in relation to exploitative economic and colonial power relations. Yet as I have stressed, O'Sullivan is not so much interested in recovering the residues of a particular cultural legacy as she is in 'excavating *language* in all its multiple voices and tongues, known and unknown.'[130] Whilst this 'excavation' is informed by the Anglo-Irish history and culture that shapes her own sense of an 'ancestral self', the exhumation of elements of this history is part of a quest to redeem language, to rescue its unfulfilled potentials, by bringing multiplicity back

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[127] O'Sullivan and Olsen, (para 52 of 58)
[128] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths* 1&2, p. 159.
[129] O'Sullivan, *Binary Myths* 1&2, p. 159.
[130] O'Sullivan, 'To the Reader', p. 10.

into forms of enunciation which for her have been 'colonised' and impoverished by 'a restrictive culture'. For O'Sullivan, this salvaging of multiplicity involves a multidimensional practice which seeks to redeem the material meaningfulness of language and inscribing practices, embodied in the visual, acoustic, tactile, and sensuous properties of the poetic page. It also proposes a gnosis of the transformative dimensions of language, an almost mystical sense of language's power which has been disavowed by a disenchanted modernity. In her work, is it precisely the sensuous dimensions of language and intuitive modes of experiencing and re-cognising, which are the voiceless aspects of language and of culture, the domain of that which is marginalised and excluded. O'Sullivan's excavations of the material page seek to give tangible and meaningful form to 'Unofficial' dimensions of the word and the world with which it is intertwined.

Conclusions

This thesis began by invoking Brian McHale's notion of 'material' poetry in which the literal, physical components of the poetic page, comprising elements like ink and paper, layout and typographical design, and 'above all, the space of the page', constitute a site of embodied historical or archaeological enquiry.[1] My study very quickly began to suggest, though, that whilst the notion of material poetry as a designation for a particular kind of poetic-historical endeavour is a very useful one, such work poses two key critical problems which have perhaps not even been fully recognised, let alone extensively addressed by critics: firstly, how do we negotiate and interpret the material, visually apprehensible dimensions of such work and its complex relations with verbal material, and secondly, what role do these works' hybrid forms play in their historical investigations? As I indicated in my first chapter, the relationships between material poetries' material dimensions and their linguistic functioning are not very well understood, at least partly because of a highly engrained conceptual separation between visual and language-based arts with its roots in a wider division between sensuous materiality and discursive modes of meaning making and cognition. Whilst my thesis has aimed itself at this critical blind spot, it has not tried to offer an umbrella solution to the problem of verbal-visual relations. Rather, by way of my engagement with theoretical questions and with individual material poetries, I have suggested some strategies for negotiating relationships between the visual and the verbal, materiality and language-based semantics, sensuousness and discursive cognition that retain the problem of these relations as a problem, albeit one that can be incredibly productive. The second central issue this thesis has sought to address is the role of material poetries' composite forms in their historical, archaeological activities. Where criticism on such work does endeavour to address this issue, an essentially mimetic relation between image or visual materiality and historical trauma is often assumed.[2] My thesis has aimed to complicate this assumption and demonstrate that the composite forms of these poetries relate to their historical themes in a varied range of ways: not just mimetically but indexically, allegorically, analogically and performatively, for example.

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[1] Brian McHale, 'Archaeologies of Knowledge: Hill's Middens, Heaney's Bogs, Schwerner's Tablets', New Literary History, 30 (1999), 239-262, p. 256.

[2] See for example readings of visual effects in the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Susan Howe in Thy Phu, 'Decapitated Forms: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Visual Text and the Politics of Visibility', Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, 38. 1 (2005), 17–36, Rachel Tzvia Back, Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), and Craig Dworkin, Reading the Illegible (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

In the course of my theoretically-based discussions in chapter 1 and my engagement with the works of Cha, Howe, and O'Sullivan in subsequent chapters, I have traced a range of visual materialities and verbal-visual relations and interactions, from disjunctive image/text non-relations or cleavages, to verbal-visual conflicts and dialogues, to intermedial syntheses. As my close readings have indicated, each of the material poetries I have examined embodies more than one kind of relation between visual materiality and language-based processes of meaning making. This thesis consistently argues that these various kinds of material foregrounding and verbal-visual interplay are not just formalist gestures in the works I look at, but constitute radical ways of engaging with intricate and often urgent cultural, political, historical and ethical issues. In other words, the minute formal particulars of these works respond and relate in complex ways to the specificities of their histories and embody distinct historical sensibilities.

Of the works examined in this thesis, Cha's *DICTEE* is perhaps the most closely tied to a particular set of historical events and experiences. My reading of this work in chapter 2 suggested that this filmically-influenced montage or collage image/text embodies a disjunctive relation to historical and experiential events which echoes the fractures and dislocations that characterise this particular history of colonialism, partition, war, and diaspora. So too, the uneven articulations and degraded materialities of some of *DICTEE*'s individual montaged verbal-visual fragments physically testify to a history of quite literal silencing under the Japanese colonial regime and experiences of loss induced by a series of oppressions and ruptures including war, migration and exile. I argued that this text operates in a mode of bearing witness, as a 'testimonial object' that carries the scars both of a specific history and those of its processes of transmission. In so doing, it embodies and proposes a mode of relating to this particularly traumatic history not as an epistemological pursuit of its lost and suppressed elements but rather as an ethical form of encountering the *thisness* or specificity of this history's concrete traces without assimilating them to already-established frameworks of knowing, narrating, cognising, and understanding. To do so, *DICTEE* indicates, would amount to a non-acknowledgement of the particular nature of this history's multiple suppressions and, in effect, repeat them.

The third chapter of this thesis traced Howe's rather more wide-ranging pursuit of a range of silences and gaps in texts relating to American history. This chapter offered readings of three of her poems from the late 1980s and early 90s with various but related historical foci, investigating *Eikon Basilike*'s engagement with the textual history of King Charles I's execution, a preoccupation in 'Scattering as Behaviour Toward Risk' with significant, stuttering fragments of Melville's *Billy Budd*, and a sustained enquiry in 'Thorow'

into a history of European encounters of the American 'wilderness'. Howe seeks to make visible common threads that run across these cultural histories, but also points of conflict, ambivalence and uncertainty. In my discussions of this poet's work I emphasised the textually-embedded nature of both her historical project and her visual poetics which unsettle, and sometimes even explode, the conventions of the printed page. In so doing, her material poetry sets up a series of tensions and dialogues between the verbal and visual dimensions of the printed text which seek to destabilise authorised versions of the past and to materially propose ways of reading history for its fractures and silenced presences. Whilst this poet's range of characteristic typographic manipulations may be relatively small, the effects her visual pages achieve are actually quite varied, as my readings of her poetry suggested. To read Howe's visual pages as mimetic re-enactments of historical violence is to ascribe too simplistic a role for these flashpoints or moments of high visual drama in her texts; rather, each of these verbal-visual disturbances relates in a range of quite nuanced ways to the poem's specific source texts and wider historical themes both in their overall effects and in their minute concrete particulars. These pages often embody the central tensions and ambivalences of both Howe's source texts and her own historical investigations, such as the conflict between an iconoclastic impulse and a conviction in the power of the iconic image or a simultaneous desire and inability to transcend the strictures of the 'grid' of the page that symbolise the legacy of a tradition of European rational thought and that structures American imaginings of the 'wilderness'. There has not been the space in this work to consider the different visual effects of Howe's facsimile pages in her more recent works such as *Pierce Arrow* and *The Midnight*: these works contain instances of a different but no less radical form of visual materiality which takes Howe's interest in the indexical properties of the written and printed word in a slightly different direction. These facsimile pages constitute a visual poetics that could perhaps bear comparison to the indexicality of Cha's testimonial fragments, and therefore they suggest a possible avenue of further enquiry into Howe's visual experimentation.

My fourth chapter focused on O'Sullivan's 'body intensive' practice as a form of incorporated or corporeally-based memory.[3] Like Cha and Howe, this poet is interested in issues of voicelessness and marginalisation. Her poetic pursuit of inarticulate and suppressed presences, I argued, is informed by her 'sense of the ancestral self' characterised by a legacy of silencing and disempowerment with its roots in a history of

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[3] Maggie O'Sullivan and Charles Bernstein, 'A conversation with Maggie O'Sullivan', (sound recording of an interview), Penn Sound Centre for Programs in Contemporary Writing <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/OSullivan.html> [accessed 30th June, 2008].

Anglo-Irish colonial relations, poverty and diaspora.[4] However, whilst her poem *that bread should be* focuses on the specific history of the Irish famine, in her other works the legacies of her Irish diasporic background are more a shaping force than an overriding concern. As well as being rather less focused on a particular history, this poet's sense of a cultural past and the ways it informs the present is far less textual than either Cha's or Howe's. Her sense of language is of a medium sounded, corporeally performed and physically inscribed. O'Sullivan's truly multidimensional works are a corporeal, visceral embodiment of a historically and culturally-informed struggle to find ways of articulating voiceless presences and states of inarticulacy and disarticulation. This material poetry, I suggested, verbivocovisually performs on the page, fusing multiple dimensions of spoken and written language and the inscribed mark and creating a space in which distinctions between verbal and visual, oral and tactile are blurred. This synthesised practice aims to transform language, to expand its capacities to admit the excluded, to give form to silence and inarticulacy by tapping into the unacknowledged and unfulfilled potentials of its sensory dimensions. As with Howe's work, there has not been the space in this study to consider the broader range of O'Sullivan's poetry, most particularly her earlier work. An enquiry into the relations between this poet's intermedial practice and her interest in voicelessness might be extended by considering the varied use of typesetting, layout and coloured inks throughout her oeuvre as well as the visual multilingual collages in *The Handbook of That & Furriery* (1986), or the entirely visual filmic work *POINT.BLANK.RANGE* (1984), or the use of photocopy and ink drawings in *States of Emergency* (1987).

Whilst the work of each of the practitioners discussed in this thesis offers a different range of visual materialities and embodies a distinct historical sensibility informed by quite specific cultural legacies, there are nevertheless common threads running through my discussions of each of these material poetries. These are worth highlighting here because they point to some of the wider implications of my project and indicate some avenues of further enquiry. In their different ways, each of the works I have examined in this thesis foregrounds the indexical properties of written and printed material, suggesting that unacknowledged, inarticulate, effaced, or silenced aspects of signification, culture and history adhere to the physical constituents of the word, the written line, the printed image, the inscribed mark or the space of the page. These works all make a claim for the capacities of the physical dimensions of the page to embody what J. M. Bernstein refers to as 'sensuous meaningfulness, the kind of nondiscursive meaning that material things have,

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[4] Maggie O'Sullivan in conversation with Andy Brown, in *Binary Myths 1&2: Conversations with Poets and Poet-Editors*, ed. by Andy Brown, (Exeter: Stride, 2004), pp. 155–160, p. 159.

material meaning'.[5] This form of material meaningfulness, suggest the works of Cha, Howe and O'Sullivan, might carry the traces of those elements of culture, history and experience which have been expelled or consigned to 'cognitive or rational oblivion' by modernity's dominant discourses.[6] By engaging with historical material by means of the sensuous dimensions of the printed page, the poetries I have looked at in this thesis claim to make visible or tangible some aspect of unacknowledged, suppressed, or silenced histories. Embedded in material forms of meaningfulness, these hitherto inarticulate cultural or historical particulars cannot – and, these works suggest, perhaps should not – quite be subsumed or translated into discursive modes of articulation and recognition; rather, they inhere in the materiality of these poetries in the form of a palpable but not entirely articulate 'reminder or promise'.[7] This notion of material meaningfulness could be usefully pursued in relation to a range of other material texts – not only poetries such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite's 'video-style' or typographic experimentation by 'language writers' such as Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, or Hannah Weiner, but also works such as Tom Phillips's artist's book *A Humument* or the increasing array of fictions that foreground visual materiality like Mark Z. Danielewski's popular novel *House of Leaves*, his more recent *Only Revolutions*, and Graham Rawle's *Woman's World*, for example.

The material mode of engaging with cultural and historical material traced in this thesis raises complex questions about processes of historical anamnesis, and the poetries I have looked at constitute embodied modes of thinking through the multiple possibilities and difficulties of recovering lost elements of history and culture. These works physically testify to structures of power and trauma which preclude the unproblematic rescue of suppressed historical perspectives or recovery of or from traumatic events. And yet as I have suggested in each chapter, in their rescue of material particulars and sensory modes of meaning, these poetries participate in an activities that are essentially, if complicatedly and often contradictorily, redemptive. Their insistence on the unfulfilled potentials of historically-linked forms of sensuously bodied forth meaningfulness, I have suggested, means that the material poetries I discuss are involved in more or less redemptory projects which they work through and reflect upon in different ways. As such, these poetries constitute occasions for thinking through the redemptory aspects of aesthetic investigations of history. Using a model of redemptive historicism suggested by Walter Benjamin's messianic materialism, my thesis has considered some of the pitfalls of

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[5] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 47.
[6] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 7.
[7] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 7.

redemptive historical or archaeological projects and also some of the possibilities for countering or guarding against such dangers. As I hope I have shown, then, the hybrid forms of these poetries engage complex and wide-ranging cultural, political and ethical questions that have implications for a broad spectrum of literary engagements with history.

Besides the wider implications of the core concerns of my thesis, many of its subsidiary strands suggest further avenues of investigation. All of the writers focused upon in this work have had formative experiences in the visual arts, and my discussions have often drawn on the links between Cha's, Howe's, and O'Sullivan's material poetics and different kinds of visual arts practices relevant to each practitioner. Cha's background in film provides a particularly useful set of contexts and vocabularies for talking about the hybrid form of DICTEE. By engaging with some of her other works and preparation materials held in the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha collection at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, I was able to show how techniques such as montage and cutting, blank frames, dissolves, and video snow, for example, cast light on some of the various kinds of materiality and image-text relationships in the work. By referring to Howe's early career as a visual artist, and by drawing on relevant materials held in the archive at the UCSD Mandeville Collection, I was able to trace a visual sensitivity to the printed page which is linked to the poet's early arts practice and her involvement with minimalism. By means of this research, I demonstrated some of the ways in which Howe's persistent interest in the visual capacities of words informs her negotiation of verbal-visual tensions and dialogues in works such as *Eikon Basilike*. My discussion of Maggie O'Sullivan drew on the ways in which her work is influenced by Joseph Beuys and Kurt Schwitters, and most especially their interest in the unfulfilled and potentially transformative possibilities of materials. These discussions around some of the ways in which these poets' visual poetics are informed by visual arts contexts open out new potential avenues of research. Whilst I discussed *DICTEE* in relation to Cha's work in film, for example, her artists' books and performance works might provide further insights into her most well-known text. Meanwhile, the shaping influence of minimalist and conceptual art on Howe's poetics, and the influence of figures such as Beuys and Schwitters on O'Sullivan could be expanded upon. Whilst I have not had space to explore the relation of O'Sullivan's work to that of Doris Salcedo and Eve Hesse with whom she also has much in common and who she cites as influences on her more recent work, these affinities are worth pursuing. Lines of enquiry such as these might well prove fruitful not only for further investigation of the work of these poets, but also as a

wider recommendation for the fecundity of critical dialogue between specific visual arts practices and the material dimensions of writing practices.[8]

In my chapter on O'Sullivan's poetry, I emphasised the performative dimension of the visual page, and I have intimated that in their own ways Cha's and Howe's works are also engaged in verbal-visual performances. As a performance artist as well as a filmmaker, Cha also brought a highly performative dimension to DICTEE; for example the visually perforated text with which her text opens (chapter 2, figure 10) might be read as enacting – both verbally and visually – the difficulties of negotiating the gaps between languages and cultures. So too the DISEUSE figure of DICTEE takes part in a highly corporeal performance of a struggle to speak that resonates not only with some of Cha's own performance works, but also with O'Sullivan's 'body intensive' performances on the visual page.[9] So too, Howe's poems take part in highly theatrical verbal-visual performances; as I intimated in my discussions of the 'Chair' page of Eikon Basilike and the penultimate page of 'Scattering As Behavior Toward Risk' (chapter 3, figures 18 & 22), many of this poet's disruptions of the printed page stage carefully worked-out verbal-visual dramas. As Johanna Drucker has indicated, '[t]he visual IS a performative dimension: it makes the text, makes meaning in its embodiment'.[10] Such performative dimensions of the visual page could be investigated further, and might productively draw on theoretical frameworks such as J. L. Austin's notion of performatives and Judith Butler's development of theories of identity and performativity.

Furthermore, in my chapter on O'Sullivan I pointed towards the possibilities of the visual page as a score for performance; the question of relations between the visual page and the orally performed poem is worthy of much closer scrutiny, particularly in relation to the poetries of those such as Bob Cobbing, Jackson MacLow, John Cage, Nathanial Mackey and Charles Olson for whom, in differing ways, the space of the page acts as a score for voice or oral performance. It seems to me that many of the issues pertaining to verbal-visual relationships that I have grappled with in this thesis might be relevant here. In addition, the issue of the orally performed poem leads to questions about other kinds of materiality than the visual. My study of material poetries has largely confined itself to discussions of the materiality of the printed page; but of course in any investigation of

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[8] Redell Olsen has made a notable contribution in this area in her PhD thesis 'Scriptovisualities: Contemporary Women's Writing and the Visual Arts' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Royal Holloway, 2003).

[9] See in particular Cha's performance work Aveugle Voix (1975), an account of which is given in the exhibition catalogue for her 2001 retrospective at Berkeley Art Museum, Constance M. Lewallen, (ed.), The Dream of the Audience (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[10] Johanna Drucker, 'The interior Eye: Performing the Visual Text' in Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics (New York: Granary Books, 1998), pp. 103 – 109, p. 108.

poetries off the page, such as orally performed or sound poetries, other kinds of materiality come into play. My discussions of relationships between sensuous materiality and discursively-based semantic functioning or cognition might be pertinent to questions about the relations of sound to meaning in sound poetries, for example.

My brief discussion of O'Sullivan's online poem *murmur* in chapter 4 alludes to another direction in which studies of the materialities of poetries off the page might move. Practice and critical interest in digital poetries has burgeoned in recent years, and although the seeming immateriality of cyberspace might suggest a redundancy of any notion of materiality, as I suggested in my discussion of *murmur*, the poem displayed on the screen has its own kind of physically-apprehendable constituents. Indeed, Katherine N. Hayles has argued for an approach to electronic textuality that takes materiality into account, because for her all texts are embodied, and meaning and materiality are thoroughly intertwined. In her discussion of Talan Memmot's digital work *Lexia to Perplexia*, she suggests that such a work brings about new kinds of material interface such as those 'between screen and eye, cursor and hand, computer coding and natural language, space in front of the screen and behind it.'[11] Whilst I am a little wary of the sometimes too-easy fit between materiality and semantics that characterises Hayles's discussion of what she calls 'inscription technologies', her book *Writing Machines* signals some of the ways in which investigations of materiality are highly relevant to digital works.[12] Digital forms of inscription might involve all sorts of intertwined materialities: visual, sonic, and kinetic, for example, as well as the physical interactions Hayles points to. My discussions in this thesis around the tensions and conflicts as well as dialogues and overlaps between sensuous materiality and language-based meaning have implications for the materialities of digital writing, and especially, I hope, for indicating ways in which these dimensions of such works might be intertwined with political, cultural, and ethical issues pertinent to an increasingly globalised world in which cyberspace plays no immaterial part.

As these areas of possible further research indicate, the poetries of Cha, Howe and O'Sullivan demonstrate that in presenting us with a range of critical problems, this formally hybrid work also offers multiple opportunities for new kinds of engagement with issues around aesthetics, ethics, politics and culture. There is still much to be elicited from writing that works through the material remains of repressed, forgotten and unacknowledged histories.

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[11] N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 63.
[12] Hayles, p. 24.

Appendix

Henry David Thoreau to Daniel Ricketson.

—am glad to see that you have studied out the history of the ponds, got the Indian names straightened—which means made more crooked—&c., &c.

Daniel Ricketson to Henry David Thoreau.

My dear old Northman, sitting by the sea,
Whose azure tint is seen, reflected in thy e'e,
Leave your sharks and your dolphins, and eke the sporting
    whale,
And for a little while on milder scenes regale:
My heart is beating strongly to see your face once more,
So leave the land of *Thor,* and *row* along our shore!

Mrs. Daniel Chester French, *Memories Of A Sculptor's Wife.*

Thoreau I was never fortunate enough to see. . . . I loved to hear the farmers talk about him. One of them used to say:

'Henry D. Thoreau—Henry D. Thoreau,' jerking out the words with withering contempt. 'His name ain't no Henry D. Thoreau than my name is Henry D. Thoreau. And everybody knows it, and he knows it. His name's *Da-a-*vid Henry and it ain't been nothing but *Da-a-*vid Henry. And he knows that!'

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Susan Howe, quotations on Thoreau from 'Thorow', *Singularities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. 42

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