

THE COMBINATIVE MUSE: A POET'S INTENTIONAL
CULTIVATION OF INFLUENCE

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Humanities
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Art

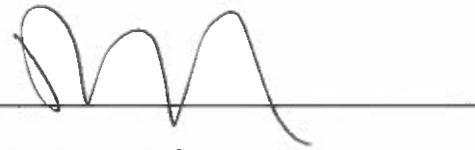
June 2015

An Abstract of the Thesis of

**Eva Bertoglio for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Humanities to be taken June 2015**

Title: The Combinative Muse: A Poet's Intentional Cultivation of Influence

Approved: _____

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a trailing line, positioned above a horizontal line.

Dr. Forest Pyle

This thesis explores creativity as a combinative process and intends to document the intentional development of my poetic work through research, analytical essays, a portfolio of poems, and a personal reflection. There are three analytical essays on the poetics of three subjects: the formal poetic techniques in contemporary rap, the dynamic between the first person “I” and the second person “you” in love and erotic poetry, and the conversation between visual art and poetry through ekphrasis. Each essay is followed by original poetry directly and indirectly inspired by the research. The project concludes with my “Future Eva Manifesto” which responds to the research process and its impact on the development of my creative work and thinking.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professors Pyle, Marlan, and Mossberg for their invaluable support to me throughout the development of this thesis. I am honored to have had the opportunity to discuss and defend this project with scholars I respect and admire. I would like to thank my family for their enduring role in the combinative process of my life and my wonderful, diverting friends, you know who you are. I have had the opportunity to learn from incredible faculty members and graduate students whom have all played important roles in the development of my thinking about this project and the development of myself so I would also like to thank Professors Vallega, Calhoon, Johnson, O'Neal, and Hatfield, as well as graduate students Fulden Ibrahimhakkioğlu, Samantha Urso, and Phil Mayo. I consider myself lucky to have had the chance to surround myself with the minds I have mentioned as well as many other amazing members of the academic community and I am grateful to everyone at the University of Oregon and the honors college whom have positively impacted my life.

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Combinative	1
Part 1: This Thing That We Call Rap, This Thing That We Call Hip Hop	11
Part 2: How Can I Love You?	32
Part 3: Beyond Ekphrasis	58
Part 4: The Future Eva Manifesto	91
Bibliography	108

Introduction: The Combinative

“Whenever I wanted to say something, I said it the way I believed I should. Different themes inevitably require different methods of expression. This does not imply either evolution or progress; it is a matter of following the idea one wants to express and the way in which one wants to express it.”

—Pablo Picasso

“...[C]reativity is a combinatorial force: it’s our ability to tap into our mental pool of resources — knowledge, insight, information, inspiration, and all the fragments populating our minds — that we’ve accumulated over the years just by being present and alive and awake to the world, and to combine them in extraordinary new ways. In order for us to truly create and contribute to the world, we have to be able to connect countless dots, to cross-pollinate ideas from a wealth of disciplines, to combine and recombine these pieces and build new ideas.”¹

¹ Maria Popova

Tending or able to combine

Resulting from combination²

This thesis is about creativity: it's sources, processes, and manifestations. The guiding philosophy of this project can be summed up with Kirby Ferguson's argument (and the title of his video series) "Everything is a remix,"³ or, all creativity is based around the alteration, subversion, and/or recombination of previous ideas. Thermodynamics tells us that energy cannot be created nor destroyed but can be transformed from one form to another. I argue that creative energy is no different, in opposition to the classical idea of creativity as divine inspiration as Socrates describes in Plato's *Ion* "...the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed."⁴ I believe that creative energy is something we tap into from within ourselves, consciously and unconsciously, constantly, because of the nature of our minds and the stimuli of our world interacting with our embodied minds.

Deriving from my understanding of combinative creativity I outlined this project as one which would aid me in becoming a more effective, efficient, and disciplined creative individual. First, I selected poetic topics I find fascinating and inspiring to research, then I developed arguments about my topics in three discrete essays, and finally I synthesized what I have learned about my personal creative process and artistic identity into my artist's manifesto, *The Future Eva Manifesto*. Throughout

² Merriam-Webster definition of combinative

³ Kirby Ferguson "Everything is a Remix"

⁴ Plato's *Ion*

this process, from the early gestation period nine months ago to the recent past I have written poetry inspired directly and indirectly from my research. My subjects are: the poetics of contemporary hip hop, the dynamics between the first person speaker “I” and the speaker’s second person beloved “You”, in love and erotic poetry, and the dialogues poets have with the visual arts. To many, these subjects have little to do with one another, yet I knew immediately that my focus was not going to be any singular idea, but rather the connections and interrelationships between ideas as sources of combinative creativity.

I am passionate about visual art, hip hop, and the dynamics of love and sexuality; these interests have persisted throughout my undergraduate career, and throughout this project I have been able to not only learn more about what obsesses me and why, but also see the intersections which have become visible to me through the course of my academic research and creative writing. I wanted to learn how to actively cultivate my influences as opposed to passively taking in information and seeing it manifest in my work with bewilderment or detachment because, as Austin Kleon writes in *Steal Like an Artist*, “We can pick our teachers and we can pick our friends and we can pick the books we read and the music we listen to and the movies we see, etcetera. You are a mashup of what you let into your life.”⁵ I admire Kendrick Lamar’s command and athleticism of contemporary English, as I admire Frank O’Hara’s linguistic engagement with the visual arts, as I admire Mark Wunderlich’s rendering of the complex dynamic between his speaker’s’ consciousness and their romantic partners’; these artists speak to each other in my curation and reflection. Ideas about art, sex, and

⁵ Austin Kleon “Steal Like an Artist”

musicality are not discrete components within the separate works I have examined or written, there is conversation across times, spaces, and genres, and it is through my specific combinative investigation that I have been able to derive conceptual cohesion, united within my *Future Eva Manifesto*.

Proof of the efficacy of this thesis as a tool for increasing creative athleticism through connectivity is demonstrated in my manifesto which has been significantly affected in its theory and impetus by four important classes I have taken this school year: Decolonizing Research, Latin American Philosophy, Gender and Sex in Antiquity, and Philosophy of Language. Throughout this investigation I have found connections between all of these classes and my goals of better and more intentionally understanding and articulating myself as an artist. In Decolonizing Research I learned about the history of the confederated tribes of Warm Springs, Oregon and specifically the Paiute people, during this course I had the opportunity to conduct research at Warm Springs and collaborate with tribal members on my project about gendered coercion in America's Indian Boarding schools. This course, in combination with my thesis work, made me rethink my ideas about what knowledge and truth are, and subsequently rethink how a poem can uncover truth. Learning about indigenous history and philosophy in conjunction with poetry brought me to many delightful associations between indigenous thought and a poet's craft because in both I find an emphasis on one's connection to the landscape of home, nature, and the power of saying with the power of not saying.

Then, in the winter, Latin American philosophy built upon my newfound education and further expanded my understanding of the centuries old legacy of coloniality of power and knowledge, showing me that while the canon does not lack in virtuosity, it is barren of global perspective, context, and attribution. This is pertinent to my poetry writing and my research because it instilled upon me that the combinative not only nurtures creativity, but that the history of Western creative thought has often been an erasing of non-western sources. Combinative thinking has always existed in the West, but the culture of domination prevents acknowledgement of these necessary creative collaborations, and in concurrence with the cult of originality leads to broken chains of theory.

I found my intentionality over the course of this class because I began to see how the ideas about creativity I was collecting were connected to issues of historiography, ethics, and social justice. It also solidified the interrelatedness of poetry and philosophy, as my excellent graduate teaching fellow told me once, “Philosophers are usually poor poets but poets are great philosophers.”

In *Gender and Sex in Antiquity* I traced the roots of Western philosophy and literature, focusing on sexual dynamics and gender identity. This course in combination with my others helped me to trace the threads of Greek influence on my contemporary American existence, like Theseus navigating through the Minotaur’s maze, but unlike Theseus, the maze of contemporaneity and antiquity is without an exit, and the end of the string is cut. While I was concurrently developing my consciousness of non-Western thought I was also following the path of Western thought. By the end of the term, ideas I had about the past were undone, and I was left to remake them with

interdisciplinary understanding, Hesiod and Homer now lesser, Hesiod and Homer now greater. I believe my relationship with poetry has become more complex as I have more actively sought to understand the poetic legacies I follow and subsequently recognized which ones I choose to reject.

Finally, Philosophy of Language has reinforced to me the force of words and their bodily, elemental importance to our being. Language communicates physical, evolutionary, psychological, historical, philosophical, and ethical ideas even when it does so through mundane phrases and sentence constructions, even when these ideas are only recognized unconsciously, perhaps especially when they are only recognized unconsciously. This course has ignited my thesis work and increased my interdisciplinary thirst as my professor Mark Johnson shows how philosophy, cognitive science, and creative writing all intersect in their search for and discovery of meaning. My combinative project is not just about my own personal, creative growth, but about the process of learning to communicate across disciplines and aesthetics as a means to better connect to other people. I have always made art for myself, but now I am interested in making art from myself and for others.

This scholarly process I have undertaken over the last year and the process of conceiving and writing (and rewriting) poetry have made me more expansive, technically skilled, and confident as an artist and human being. I now know⁶ *what* I am, though blissfully unaware of *who*: I am an interdisciplinary thinker and remixologist determined to crack open creativity and help others to peel away the barriers to their own.

⁶ I knew this once before at the age of fourteen after reading “Sophie’s World: A novel about the history of philosophy” but soon abandoned it for identity-formation, that terrible assertion of “I”

I hope that in the following essays and the poetry accompanying them that the numinous power of the combinative is visible; I wish for moments wherein my words can transcend me and light up clusters of neurons in your brain like firecrackers, forging new connections in dissipating colored showers, giving way to others.

This Thing That We Call Rap, This Thing That We Call Hip Hop

“To listen...is to learn something about the bodily nature of poetry,”

-Robert Pinsky, Singing School

The Rapper Poet

There are rappers and there are poets; all rappers are poets but not all poets are rappers and some rappers, similarly to conventional poets, write better poetry than others. Some rappers use language like an expressionist painter uses a chromatic scale, taking fundamental components of propositional sentence structure and conventions of rhyme, and then recombining sounds to accommodate polysemy; the finished product almost unrecognizable from its original components, stormy cerulean where there was before only blue, black and grey. This essay will examine three performers who exemplify the model of the Rapper Poet: Kendrick Lamar, Isaiah Rashad, and Ab-Soul. Through a song from each of these three rapper poets I will then explore their uses of formal poetic technique and examine how their songs elevate their source materials of domestic abuse, drug abuse, and the pursuit of wealth into poignant lyrics which render the Rapper Poet as a distinct kind of artist.

Rap occupies a distinct space from both contemporary lyric music and written poetry because it generally pays great attention to syllabics, diction, and wordplay in conjunction with rhythm rather than melody or the conventions of free verse. It is often viewed as most similar to spoken word poetry, but as Adam Bradley explains, this is a false corollary:

Though rap may be new school music, it is old school poetry. Rather than resembling the dominant contemporary form of free verse--or even the free-form

structure of its hip hop cousin, spoken word, or slam poetry--rap bears a stronger affinity to some of poetry's oldest forms, such as the strong-stress meter of Beowulf and the ballad stanzas of the bardic past.⁷

While rap has improvisational origins and is usually considered an auditory-dependent medium, rap on the page is where the performative is translated into the poetic:

Every rap song is a poem waiting to be performed. Written or freestyled, rap has a poetic structure that can be reproduced, a deliberate form an MC creates for each rhyme that differentiates it, if only in small ways, from every other rhyme conceived. Like all poetry, rap is defined by the art of the line⁸

When Rapper Poets compose their rhymes the breaks of the lines are not always regulated by the time signature of the music, the breath of the performer, or after even end stop rhymes (although most MC's do break so that their rhymes are the ending words, but within an individual song there may be many unrhymed, slant-rhymed, or internally-rhymed verses that are not broken based on end-stop convention). This means that for most rappers, and all Rapper Poets, the choice of where to start another line is of the same potency as a conventional poet, and that the visual structure of raps on the page provide further layers of meaning which extend beyond a solely auditory experience. This essay focuses on three songs: Kendrick Lamar's "Opposites Attract," Isaiah Rashad's "Heavenly Father," and Ab-Soul's "God's Reign" and demonstrates how they function as poetry through revealing the complex poetic techniques which each song relies on to achieve lyrical potency.

⁷ Adam Bradley "Rap Poetry 101" *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* 37

⁸ Adam Bradley "Rap Poetry 101" *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* 36

Kendrick Lamar and Persona

In “Opposites Attract” Kendrick Lamar uses inverse personas to imbue a narrative about domestic violence with attentive empathy through the use of persona. A persona poem is a poem which uses a dramatic character who is different from the poet as the speaker of the poem, “Opposites Attract” fulfills the requirements of the persona poem as Lamar employs the third person to transition from his utterance (the chorus “We hurt people that love us, love people that hurt us /Hurt people that love us, love people /I’m inspired, so get inspired) into the personas of a man and woman in an abusive relationship through the device of “And so he said” and “And so she said,” respectively.

And so he said "Why you gotta be so kind hearted?
Why you couldn't be a con artist? Why you couldn't?
Why you couldn't be mischievous or just a lil devious
The moment that we first started?"⁹

The repetition of “Why you couldn’t” predicates the turn at the end of the male character’s section which culminates with “These are exactly the reasons why I cheat on you.”¹⁰ Lamar’s use of negation allows him to reveal the male speaker’s anger towards his partner as stemming from his perceived inability to love through the repetition of rhetorical questions directed at the woman. Lamar knows, if his male speaker does not, that the man’s behavior would not be any better if his partner did not express love to him, but the fact that she does despite his poor treatment of her results in his guilt, and therefore his need to question her motivations.

⁹ Kendrick Lamar “Opposites Attract”

¹⁰ Kendrick Lamar “Opposites Attract”

The woman does not fulfill the male speaker's expectations of women which is shown as almost worse than if she was deceitful or demanding "Why you never ask for nothing just a lil time? /Why you let me use yours cus I don't got mine?"¹¹ These expectations are then reversed in the woman's section:

Why you slip and say her name when we having sex?
Why you always assuming that I still love my ex?
Everytime we get into it, I'm the one that's feeling stupid
You don't need me, you gon' leave me, that's ya favorite threat
Why you never know how it feel to be lonely?
Why I feel I'm the last option after ya homies?¹²

Unlike her male counterpart, the female speaker is dissatisfied with her partner because he mistreats her and unlike her partner her questioning is situated as genuine confusion. The female persona does not understand why her partner throws his infidelity in her face, "Why you slip and say her name when we having sex?" but her section is characterized by a desire to not understand the realities of the relationship, and this is shown through Lamar's constructions of the two people's questions.

The first perspective revealed to us is intentionally misplacing their self-hatred onto their partner through their repetition of rhetorics. The second perspective, however, is reflexive, the woman feels she is "the last option after ya homies" but does not phrase this as "Why am I the last option after ya homies?" She leaves room for doubt, for her own misunderstanding of the situation, while her male partner is agonized by her acceptance of him "Why you making promises that you'll forever do? /Whatever just to make me happy, wanting us to have a family, /These are exactly the reasons why I cheat

¹¹ Kendrick Lamar "Opposites Attract"

¹² Kendrick Lamar "Opposites Attract"

on you.”¹³ This turn is devastatingly contrasted by the end of the woman’s section which pleads, “Why you always gotta know that I will never let you go /Even tho you get violent and put your hands on me?”¹⁴ Her love for her male partner intensifies his violence, in his perspective, because, as the outro by Lamont Carey concludes the song, “She says she loves me, and I don’t know about love.”¹⁵ This song uses techniques of the persona poem to elevate and humanize a dual-perspective song about an abuser and their victim by demonstrating with voices different from the Rapper Poet Kendrick Lamar, how these characters are in a mutual cycle of self-destruction.

Isaiah Rashad and Imagery

“Heavenly Father” recounts Isaiah Rashad’s childhood traumas, culminating in his father’s abandonment at a young age with the narrative propelled by Rashad’s use of imagery. The song relies on a sequence of images which permit the tonal modulations throughout the narrative. The repeated line of the chorus “Heavenly father why you so far away?” refers to both Rashad’s father and his longing for connection as well as heavenly father as a substitute for God. Both meanings of the title/chorus infuse Rashad’s lyrics with an emotional disconnection which is undercut by the sample of 70s Gospel group The Crowns of Glory that is underlaid to provide the beat for Rashad’s lyrics. As Adam Bradley points out, “The beat and the MC’s flow, or rhythm cadence, work together to satisfy the audience’s musical and poetic expectations--most notably, that rap establish and maintain rhythmic patterns while creatively disrupting those

¹³ Kendrick Lamar “Opposites Attract”

¹⁴ Kendrick Lamar “Opposites Attract”

¹⁵ Kendrick Lamar “Opposites Attract”

patterns, through syncopation and other pleasing forms of rhythmic surprise”¹⁶

Rashad’s delivery of the lines is characterized by his percussive, Atlanta drawl which imbues “Heavenly Father” with a relaxation that contradicts the despair and anxiety of the piece. “Heavenly Father” vacillates between higher and lower registers to render the narrative of Rashad’s development from abandoned child to struggling rapper as the opening lines demonstrate:

Now, everybody tellin’ me a lie
Lordy, give me something for my soul
See, I don’t wanna think of suicide
So please don’t take the lock key off my door
See, I’ve been tired of fucking all these girls
And I’ve been tired of spending all my dough¹⁷

Rashad uses the image of the lock key to accomplish two things, firstly to introduce the theme of suicide which reoccurs all through the song, and secondly to insist that he is not at risk of actually committing suicide but rather that it is an ideation he has experienced since childhood. Then, following this heavy image, he immediately places the reader back into the context of the Rapper Poet by engaging in the trope of the rapper’s dilemma being exhausted by sex and money. Rashad slightly subverts this trope by saying he’s “tired” of performing this role, and the song is both a rejection of the young rapper’s lifestyle as well as an embrace of it as a means to cope with his psychological turmoil.

¹⁶ Adam Bradley “Rap Poetry 101” *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* 37

¹⁷ Isaiah Rashad “Heavenly Father”

The next image shows this tension between undermining and strengthening the rapper image as Rashad seemingly addresses himself as well as rap in general:

See you can't handle pressure on your own
So why you carry boulder by yourself?
The story's storyteller tell it wrong
And glorify the horror and the wealth.¹⁸

In this image, Rashad is Atlas, holding the celestial spheres on his back alone, and implores himself to share the burden with others through the telling of his story. He then addresses rap as a whole, condemning the “story’s storytellers” who “tell it wrong” by glorifying violence and wealth. This imagistic movement situates the utterance of “Heavenly Father” as memoir as opposed to parody because Rashad is telling the listener that his descriptions of sex, drugs, and self-harm are not intended as glorifications, but rather documentations of an authentic reality.

Rashad renders himself as carrying the great burden of his struggles alone, while the outside world is ignorant as to his inner life, through an image which depends on the uncomfortable combination of violent and childlike references “And they don’t know my issues as a child /Cause I was busy cutting on myself /And hanging from the playground wasn’t wrong /Until you got a rope around your neck.”¹⁹ This image is placing judgement on those who want to fit him to a particular persona or stereotype of a hard-drinking, smoking rapper while acknowledging that he did was not concerned with sharing his struggles with others because he was immersed in his own suffering. The use of “hanging” in the verse allows us to see the image of a child hanging from

¹⁸ Isaiah Rashad “Heavenly Father”

¹⁹ Isaiah Rashad “Heavenly Father”

monkey bars or a play structure, and then resee it as the speaker hanging from a noose and Rashad carefully directs our eye in this way to control the reflection. This song functions because of the images it employs, without them the utterance would be contained within Rashad's circular mindset, and would be inaccessible. But through the poetic eye, which focuses on specific, metaphorically potent images, Rashad is able to accomplish a subtle and carefully wrought reflection of his persona as a Rapper Poet.

Ab-Soul and Sonic Play

Ab-Soul also uses imagery in "God's Reign" to transition into reflection, but his accumulation of images is emotionally affecting through his use of sonic structures and the interplay of homonym, homophone, and homograph. "God's Reign," as demonstrated by its hook sung by soul singer Sza, is another song documenting the internal conflict of the Rapper Poet as Ab-Soul's real-life success is augmented by the suicide of his girlfriend Alori Joh in 2012:

Guess that's how it is these days
You even lose when you win These Days
These Days...God's reign
Scared to live, scared to live these days.²⁰

Similarly to Rashad, Ab-Soul juxtaposes subjects of sexuality, money, and, in this case specifically gang violence, with themes of grief and disenfranchisement. The repetitive phrase "These Days" can be viewed as Ab-Soul's judgement on the social and political realities of his daily life (most seen in the altered verse in the last repetition of the hook which changes "Guess that's how it is these days" to "These days, in chains" which can be read as a reference to the legacy of slavery and its relationship to current

²⁰ Ab-Soul "God's Reign"

inequities in minority communities like Ab-Soul's) while simultaneously referring to the days without Alori Joh, or Ab-Soul's temporal reality that has resulted in him feeling "Scared to live." "God's Reign"

When Ab-Soul raps in the first section:

ABC everything every M you end up with is owed

And that's simple math

I had to balance the good and bad

No master's but a mastermind²¹

Soul is presenting the reader with a code, understood to be representing "Ab-Soul sees everything, every million you end up with is owed," the meaning of this rhyme relies on the sonic structure, and the play between the written verse and the use of homonyms and homophones. Autobiographically, Ab-Soul, after having financial success with his first albums, acquired debt and this verse tells us that every million he earns is then owed to someone else, but then he reassures us that he is balancing his debts, as well as his successes and failures because although he does not have a master's degree he is a "mastermind." These verses have multiple layers of meaning depending on their auditory or written reading, for example the written line "no master's but a mastermind" can be heard with the homophones "master's" "masters", and "mastermind" "master mind" which amend the lyrics into a declaration of defiance: "No masters but a master mind". Soul employs masters/master in part because of the auditory word play but also because of the associations with the history of slavery which thematically pulses beneath the utterance. The wordplay in this verse also operates visually as the the line on the page strengthens the alphabetic play: "ABC everything every M you eNd up with is O'd." This attention to the visual in Ab-Soul's

²¹ Ab-Soul "God's Reign"

work shows how rap can function on the page and that to truly absorb the intention, content, and nuances of “God’s Reign” and rap broadly is to read the work as written poetry as well as performed utterances. Ab-Soul in four lines his primacy as a Rapper Poet and his specific attention to poetic technique in the construction of his raps.

Conclusion

Kendrick Lamar, Isaiah Rashad, and Ab-Soul refute the dichotomy Adam Bradley describes the public understanding of rap as possessing:

Rap is poetry, but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such. After all, rap is for good times; we play it in our cars, hear it at parties and clubs. By contrast, most people associate poetry with hard work; it is something to be studied in school or puzzled over for hidden insights.²²

These songs are not “rap [for] good times,” they are carefully drawn character studies (in the case of “Opposites Attract”), confessionalist exposes (in the case of “Heavenly Father”), and social and political indictments (in the case of “God’s Reign”). While I do not disagree with the assertion that rap’s success is rooted in its unidentified poetics, I think that the lack of recognition of rap’s poetics outside of academic spaces and in the public and commercial domains deny the Rapper Poet their acknowledgement as poets working within particular modalities. In my opinion, these Rapper Poets are not only some of the best rappers writing today but some of the best poets writing today because of their complex interweaving of poetic techniques with autobiography and social contexts. I leave this exploration of the Rapper Poet with words which exemplify the primacy of the rapper as poet:

²² Adam Bradley “Rap Poetry 101” *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* 36

Rappers at their best make the familiar unfamiliar through rhythm, rhyme, and wordplay. They refresh the language by fashioning patterned and heightened variation of everyday speech. They expand our understanding of human experience by telling stories we otherwise might not hear...We ignore them at our own expense.”²³

Poems Inspired by the Research:

I wrote “No Tomorrow” combining memories of parties I went to where Kendrick Lamar’s “Swimming Pools(Drank)” played after deep listening to all of his albums to select which one I wanted to closely read. I wanted to write a poem that captured the feeling I experienced whenever I listened to drunk college students dancing to the song as if it was a party anthem. Many casual listeners misinterpret this deeply hollow and melancholic piece because of Lamar’s deceptive technique of pairing a chorus containing, “I’mma show you how to turn it up a notch/ first you get a swimming pool full of liquor and you dive in” with verses that reveal the speaker’s conscious reflection on their experience with alcohol abuse, “Now I done grew up ‘round some people livin’ their life in bottles/ Granddaddy had the golden flask, backstroke every day in Chicago /Some people like the way it feels, some people wanna kill their sorrows /Some people wanna fit in with the popular, that was my problem /I was in a dark room, loud tunes, looking to make a vow soon /That I’mma get fucked up, fillin’ up my cup..”²⁴ While working on this essay I discovered not only how rich my rap-poetry materials were but how devastatingly and commonly misread they are by members of their audience so I wanted to write a poem that was mimetic of a lot of the rap I was studying: employing a topic that was on the surface-level vulgar and

²³ Adam Bradley “Rap Poetry 101” *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* 36

²⁴ Kendrick Lamar “Swimming Pools (Drank)”

unimportant and using subtle narrative movements to arrive at a reflection which extended beyond its initial subject.

“This is the Right Place to Be” came about when I read Jon Pineda’s poetry aloud to musician friends improvising after reading about MC’s books of rhymes and Adam Bradley’s declaration that rhyme books were where “rap becomes poetry.”²⁵ A recurring subject in freestyle and written rap is the MC’s self-referential rhyming/writing process and I wanted my poem to be a very deliberate lyric while communicating a sense of free-flowing improvisation. I usually try to avoid writing about writing because it is so often redundant and unimaginative but in this poem I tried to have the speaker’s attention be on the music and the physical space to render a tone which could allow a gentle metatextual turn. I chose the second person to avoid the assertive “I” and to distance myself from the self-consciousness of the reflection.

“Mis Ancestors, My Filosofia” is a Spanglish poem that was initially sparked by Ab-Soul’s album “God’s Reign” and the song “Tree of Life” which opens with a woman’s faded voice saying “Quiero vivir como los árboles” (“I want to live like the trees”). That song, the imagery conjured up from the album as a whole and a reading from Latin American philosophy, Gloria Anzaldúa’s essay “Mestiza Consciousness,” led me to writing a poem using code switching to achieve its goals. I was inspired by Ab-Soul’s sonic-sense and tried to balance the Spanish and the English not only based on content but on syllabics, choosing the language based on the best arrangement of sounds within the mishmash.

²⁵ Adam Bradley “Rap Poetry 101” *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* 36

No Tomorrow

They look beautiful
in their stumble and stagger,
gyrating in sweaty black
spandex and pastel crop tops,
cheeks flushed from wines named
“sweet red”
“rose blend”
“honeysuckle white.”
Inside, the apartment,
glazed with translucent
layers of fluorescent purple
and bright cobalt, blurs and then focuses
from the intermittent strobe light which beats
against the skins of all the twenty something’s,
the bony girls who writhe against monolithic
subwoofers, hollow cheeked with pupils
like black marbles, and white powder
that sticks inside brittle nail beds.
This music is an incoherent mass
of fat gold strings,
thumping basses,
and lyrics about fucking,

and dancing,
and who cares we're all dying.
I walk outside to cool down
and rest my weight against
the balcony, my flesh cast
in absinthe light from a hot green
bulb in a white shell.
All around me revelers
shout-whisper their secrets
that gossip which is not to be repeated.
Time slows in this artificial
respite from dulling sound,
humid sweat, as I bob
above my body, looking
down at all us kids,
whom I know are all lonely,
and woozy like my pale form,
picking at the sides
of a squirrel-eaten sofa,
waiting to feel something,
hoping that we won't.
Inside,
the percussion roars

back into my ears,
and within this din
I know that tonight
is rice paper,
taut and fragile
to the touch,
tomorrow it will
disintegrate, soak
with the weight of rain,
never again to unroll prone,
but I know that this is how
it should be.
For these nights,
there are no tomorrows.

This is the Right Place to Be

How light moves through fogged
glass in winter
in grey strands of condensation,
harsh but softening to those
who play jazz
in an ivory room
faces backlit blurs

while the shadows of potted
plants print the corners.
And the girl writes
about how she writes
while two men switch
back and forth
from bass to keyboard
to trumpet and back again.
The raconteur singer
is like the twin of someone
you once knew
whose eyes like vortexes
spun while his voice
flowed with thirst,
but he is as far from you
as his double is near,
and this tranquility
is of a different, dual
soul, and the trumpeter
plays everything handed
to him, hits the plastic keys
like he wants the false-ivory
to be smashed into permanent notes.

This is the right place
to be when your future
moves like a globe of light
beyond the edge of your vision,
laying on a serape,
red, orange, blue, green,
while musicians become absorbed
and cease their utterances
but never communication,
bass chords unspooling
piano keys chiming
and looping notes
through notes
this ink is blue
these pages are bright.

Mis Ancestors, My Filosofia

Mi bisabuela Cleotilde

nació en Chihuahua

I never met her

but *la mujer* exists

tangibly in the silver statue

de la virgen Guadalupe

y pienso en cómo ella nunca

habló español para mi abuelito

who chased after chickens

in their West Covina *jardin*.

Papí Bernardo y Mama Tilly

called after him *en ingles*,

después de su muerte,

él aprendió español,

la escuela nocturna enseñado.

I cannot say *que se sentía*

latinoamericano.

Estoy en una clase de filosofía

latinoamericana, my Chilean-

Italian *profe* sifts silver stars

over my Mexican-Italian-

estadounidense dyed-

pelirroja crown, *habla de los lugares*

donde los ríos, montañas, selvas,

desiertos, glaciares collide

in fantastic cacophony,

or maybe that is the imaginary

of Europeans who thought

the world was the mediterranean,

rolls of emerald hill, wheat trembling

near tranquil groves.

And they could not fathom

un mundo sin un centro

a center that did not contain

sus cuerpos dorados.

Some of these stars are patinaed,

otras estrellas están cubiertas

de sangre como las estrellas

en las manos de los esclavos

stars which say, your blood is worth

menos que a drop of scarlet

from a porcelain wrist.

Estrellas que se dicen:

“la sangre va a crecer nuestra comida,

la sangre no importa,

no hay sangre en el cielo.”

Yo canto la canción de la mestiza,

soy una borderland, Marquez

cuts stars from sheets of gold

en mis sueños, melts them down,

begins again,

nosotros volvemos siempre

Part 2:
How Can I Love You:
The Speaker/Subject Relationship
in Erotic and Love Poetry

“A person who wishes to be loved wishes to be the object

of a love containing both elements.”- Bertrand Russell, What I Believe

..the lyric poet’s images are nothing but the poet himself, and only different objectifications of himself, which is why, as the moving centre of that world, he is able to say “I”: this self is not that of the waking, empirically real man, however, but rather the sole, truly existing and eternal self that dwells at the base of being, through whose depictions the lyric genius sees right through to the very basis of being.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy”

The “I” in love and erotic poetry is rife with the potential for myopy and narcissism, particularly when addressing the object of their love as the “You.” It can be argued that these problems are always associated with the first person speaker and that the reflection of the “I” is inherently exclusive, but the distinction between the functionality of the “I” when reflecting on themselves or others and the “I” in love or lust is that love and sex are inclusive experiences. Before there are lovers there are two separate entities but as soon as the two are in love or making love, now there is one, not only in the metaphorical sense, but in how the lovers perceive themselves and their conception of their love. This is supported by behavioral psychology which has demonstrated that similarity is a major component in lasting love and attraction and dissimilarity negatively correlated to enduring love.²⁶ Poetry repeatedly proves its potency with enduring truths; star crossed love is often tragic and doomed and birds of a feather do flock together. However, this essay is not about similarity or dissimilarity in lovers rendered in poems but rather investigating how the “I” subsumes the “You” in the pursuit of self reflection and how poets as different as Ho Huan Xuang, Mark Wunderlich, and Ravi Shankar achieve nuanced understandings of their speakers through their employment of this dynamic.

“The Jackfruit” and Address

In Ho Xuan Huong’s poem “The Jackfruit” with only four lines in the original Vietnamese,²⁷ is able to make the “You” an object for the “I” to imperatively assert their sexuality upon:

²⁶ Aaron Ben-Zeév, Ph.D, Psychology Today

²⁷ The translation I am analyzing is five lines long but the original was a Chinese quatrain written in Nôm, a fusion of Chinese and Vietnamese

I am like a jackfruit on the tree.
To taste you must plug me quick, while fresh:
the skin rough, the pulp thick, yes
but oh, I warn you against touching—
the rich juice will gush and stain your hands

The “You” functions as both any lover and a particular lover because the sensuality is placed in a particular time as shown by the emphasis on the speaker’s freshness, which implies youth or sexual availability, “You must plug me quick, while fresh²⁸.” The speaker is declaring they are “like” the jackfruit, not metaphorically a jackfruit, so that the address to the “You” is characterized by an insistence of the “You” viewing them through this perspective. The “You” in the poem is not depicted as actually performing any action, but the speaker is delineating for the “You” the actions they “must” perform in order to have sex with the “I.” Yet the speaker suggests that this sexual encounter is fraught because the sexuality of the speaker has potential consequences for the “You.”

The staining Huong describes is rendered as a warning to the second person, “but oh, I warn you against touching-- /the rich juice will gush and stain your hands.” Jackfruit juice cannot literally stain hands, no matter its richness, but a sexual encounter with the speaker may have the effect of staining the “You’s” reputation or that a sexual encounter with the speaker could lead to a psychological staining. And Huong does not propose this staining as a possibility but as an inevitability: “the rich juice *will* [emphasis added] gush and stain your hands” which makes the poem a strange dance between beckoning and deterring the “You.” The poem is realized through its play between addresser and addressee and the reader’s interpretation of whether the character

²⁸ Ho Xuan Huong “The Jackfruit”

of “You” has a choice in regards to erotically loving the speaker. The insistence of the speaker could also suggest that this relationship is already in motion and that the “You” will “taste” whether or not the outcome is a stain. Huong’s speaker has power because of their imperative address, and the inclusion of the reader within the second person “You” allows the poem in a short space to accommodate the complexity of the speaker’s desires.

Wunderlich and Autonomy

Wunderlich approaches the “You” and handles the “I” very differently than uong, and this is indicated from the first five lines:

Look at me in your pitiless distance, look
as I give myself to the feral sea
where I hang between atmosphere
and the hidden sands below, your fool in this
plaything of a boat, which may no longer save nor salvage²⁹

The first indication of speaker/subject dynamic is rendered by “Look at me” which, in its imperative nature, could be read as a command, but Wunderlich’s speaker does not command the “You” in this poem, they request, implore or beg the “You” because they are “your fool in this.” The relationship between the speaker and the subject is presupposed by Wunderlich’s choice of diction in his initial grounding of the setting: the “You’s” “pitiless distance” the water rendered as “the feral sea.” The poem insists that the speaker is beneath the “You” and the speaker uses commanding language to declare their lowered position in the relationship dynamic:

²⁹ Mark Wunderlich “Heaven Letter”

See me here, face in my hands
wet with spray and sweat, sick with knowledge
of my unworthiness³⁰

Although the speaker is “sick with knowledge” of their “unworthiness” these assertions are being made without the “You’s” imposition on the speaker. The “You” does not speak in the poem, but because of the nature of the speaker’s utterance they do not have to—the speaker, in their self-effacement demonstrates the “You’s” power.

Wunderlich inverts aspects of the second person address through his technique of having the speaker beg the “You” to act upon them:

I beg you, push up my chin with your thumb
and press your bearded cheek to mine. Settle me
with the dark soil of your eyes, you who made us
and all the other pieces of the damaged world.³¹

The speaker is not autonomous, they desire to be subsumed by the “You” entirely, and this is rendered through the speaker begging the “You” to “push up my chin” and “Settle me /with the dark soil of your eyes” as opposed to the “I” wanting to press their own cheek onto the subject’s. Throughout the poem Wunderlich is negotiating the power dynamic between the “I” and the “You” as the details provided about the “You” are entrenched within the psyche of the “I” who elevates the “You” to the extent of making them a creator figure “you who made us /and all the other pieces of the damaged world.” This gives the subject a great amount of power in the world of the poem, but it is power that the “I” is applying to them, not power that the “You” is autonomously demonstrating within the confines of the poem.

³⁰ Mark Wunderlich “Heaven Letter”

³¹ Mark Wunderlich “Heaven Letter”

Yet, the subject is also shown to be a destructor:

I am your little ram,
burying his muzzle in thick grass of your pasture
[...]

The day will come for you to draw
the bright sickle of the moon
across my wooly throat.

Do it with love, without regret³²

Now Wunderlich has brought into question who is subsuming whom. The speaker clearly desires to be used and seen by the “You” as lower through their self-characterization as a plaything, a louse, and a ram. Yet the “You” is not shown desiring to destroy or absorb the speaker within themselves, but rather the speaker presents it to us as inevitable “The day will come.” This poem functions because of the indirect characterization of the “You” through the lens of the “I” and Wunderlich’s techniques in the poem make the final imperative “Do it with love, without regret” imbued with an ambiguity which relies on the subversion of the “I/You” address.

Shankar and subsumption

The poem immediately introduces its speaker and the subsumption of the titular Lucia, through the first two lines “My hair, voluminous from sleeping in/six different positions, redolent with your scent.” We begin at “My hair” and not the hair of Lucia and this is the first indication that the poem is not about the “You,” Lucia, but the “I,” the speaker. The powerful scent of Lucia is what spurs the speaker’s memory of the previous night and “helps me recall that last night was indeed real”³³ but the speaker, with or without Lucia, (the poem only suggests that the speaker was recently sleeping at

³² Mark Wunderlich “Heaven Letter”

³³ Ravi Shankar “Lucia”

the start of the poem but does not specify if they are lying in bed or if they are alone) is not spurred by the image of her face or body. Rather, the first part of the poem and the description of the scent triggers the memory and allows the speaker's relief "that I didn't just dream you into being³⁴," which further characterizes Lucia as being an idea of a woman rather than a woman with a separate consciousness. In the first two stanzas Lucia is like a watermark of an individual and is completely subsumed under the consciousness of the speaker. But then the "I" renders her through bodily description "You fit like a fig in the thick of my tongue, /give my hands their one true purpose, /find in my shoulder a groove for your head" and now Lucia has truly become the beloved, an object, but an object of divinity.

The speaker, while still not giving Lucia specific physical characteristics or dialogue to realize her, is asserting their emotional subsumption to Lucia. Although the poem is actually about the speaker's understanding of their powerful connection and infatuation with someone they met "a few days" ago, the speaker is insistent on Lucia's primacy. Shankar uses the description of the "I" and the "You's" lovemaking to develop the tone of the relationship between the speaker and subject:

In a clinch, you're clenched and I'm pinched,
we're spooned, forked, wrenched, lynched
in a chestnut by a mob of our own making,
only to be resurrected to stage several revivals³⁵

It is at this point in the poem when Lucia begins to be indirectly realized as if her personality in the poem was a print from a carved stamp and the physicality of the

³⁴ Ravi Shankar "Lucia"

³⁵ Ravi Shankar "Lucia"

imagery suggests her full form. The catalogue of verbs brings specific aspects to the relationship of the partners and addresses the mutuality of the connection.

While Lucia does not speak and the poem is grounded in the speaker's amor for her, when the speaker describes their union the "I" is transformed into the "we" as in "we're spooned, forked, wrenched, lynched." Whereas before, there was a clear distinction between the "I" and the "You," the lover and the beloved, Shankar's choice of the "we" is one of inclusion. Which then makes the return to the "I" different than its initial assertion:

[...] from slightest touch to thwart
deep sleep with necessities I never knew
I knew until meeting you a few days
or many distant, voluptuous lifetimes ago³⁶

if the speaker had declared this idea of loving Lucia in a past life or metaphysical space at the beginning of the poem it would have been unclear as to the speaker's authenticity. Yet, because Lucia has been bodily realized to us, although her perspective is inaccessible to us in this poem, the speaker has the ability to explore their vulnerability and believably convince us that they have been changed by this experience and learned something that "I never knew /I knew³⁷."

³⁶ Ravi Shankar "Lucia"

³⁷ Ravi Shankar "Lucia"

Conclusion

The “I/You” dynamic in erotic and love poetry allows for reflections that are unachievable through any other point of view. The effect of a speaker’s consciousness conversing with another is that the apparent subject of the poem, the other, is always subsumed within the actual subject, the speaker. This effect can result in objectifying the other to suit the desires of the speaker, but because the nature of the “You” is imperative, poets have the opportunity to represent their speaker through an inverted mirror. There is what the “I” says and what the “You” does, and both are in question in the above poems of Huong, Wunderlich, and Shankar. These poets use their addresses to reveal the emotional and psychological states of their speakers, while simultaneously obscuring them because the dynamic inherently questions authenticity of the utterance.

As readers we do not know if what the speakers are saying about the subjects is true, or if they are presenting us with a warped image of the subjects. Ultimately, they are always warped through their presentation by their speakers because the other is always being presented to us through the lens of the speaker, no matter the point of view. Yet through the “I/You” dynamic poets are make this distortion obvious and can use it as a tool to provide indirect understanding of the speaker through their address to another. When it comes to love and sex this dynamic especially allows poets to explore the murky waters of romance between a “You” an an “I” while understanding that the bridge, whether they use it or not, is the movement towards “we.”

Poems Inspired by the Research:

“Unraveling” ended up in the category of love poem but I was originally setting out to examine vulnerability and intimacy through an ambiguous “I/You” duo. Because I have inundated myself with first person/second person love poems I rendered the dynamic such that it invites romantic association. This poem intentionally sublimates the “You” under the “I.” I discovered through my research that I read the “I/You” as a particularly potent tool for the “I” because the unnamed second person gives the “I” someone to address and reflect themselves upon. The “You” gives the “I” directionality.

“Clairvoyance” is ruled by the “You/I” interrelationship. This time, the “You” is the speaker, and the “I” included within the persona narrating the poem. The “He” in this case has characterization and descriptive physical imagery, but they are not heard in the poem. I made this choice because I wanted the rendering of the “You” to be under the tight control of the “I” because even though the poem avoids the “I”, the speaker’s consciousness dominates the poem. This poem diverges from the strict “I/You” form but I am pleased with this trajectory because it is applying principles of the speaker/subject relationships I have been analyzing without relying on the “I” to show psychological reflection.

“Phreatomagmatic Eruption” was a self-imposed challenge to write a metaphorical poem describing sex between a “You” and an “I.” I chose to have the speaker be the lava and their lover the volcano to build an erotic narrative. This poem demonstrates many of the ideas I have been finding in “You/I” romantic poetry as the

lover is very present in the poem, but the lover is static, unmoving whereas the speaker is dynamic and changing throughout the course of the poem.

Unraveling

I knit a massive canopy
around my body
from cerulean yarn,
mint moss and brittle brush.

I can see through
triangular slivers, the slow
bloom of winter sun
which scatters light

like oceanic constellations.

You stare. Touch the coiled
and dyed strands.

I place my hand over

the brightest slice
at the seam,
the heat of your skin
caresses me

through the weave,
your fingers begin
to curl inbetween mine,
I break our clasp—scalded,

to be cocooned
is to be most alone.
I chose this,
I curl into a shell,

smooth at the center
of a blue fabric sea.
You crook your finger
to hook a loose thread,

pull and zig-zag
away the blue, the tangle
spreads as web,
I keep my eyes tight

but the spiraling pool
brushes against my ankles
and scalp. When I let

light flood my dilating

pupils you are standing
above me, palms face up,
imploring.

I wish I could wrap

myself in this cotton
floss and unribbon.

You are too close.

You are enveloping.

You say:

Come with me now
to the crystal lake, sip
the balm of water
rushing, drink the sun
with your eyes split bright—

We can be alone

together.

Aubade after a Party

I

I am weightless

lying supine

on a slanted roof,

wrung out

as the darkness ebbs

above the ropes

of power lines

which slice the sky

into bluish grasses

and lavender light,

while the clouds

like egg yolks

drip down.

II

I remember the roof

just beyond my parent's

enormous island of a bed

where I dreamed

next to my snoring father
cocooned in plaid blankets,
so he could not know
when I crawled out the window

to rest below twilight,
feeling so small and grand
looking down at our gardens,
the white zinfandel grapes

draped around the house
like a lace shawl beaded
with translucent fruit.

I remember knowing how
to be alone without feeling
lonely, when the moon
was only the moon

fresh as a slice of pear
from our pomaceous

tree, and the pull

of gravity

did not loop

round my throat

--thick from yearning.

III

I always wanted to be

the kind of girl

who was easily

beautiful in a man's flannel,

loose hair, kohl dark

in the teardrop corners

of my bloodshot eyes.

I hold a mug of French press

as the steam permeates

my pores. I'm still

a chalky white, the rouge

long since sweated off

sometime while I writhed

in a room too small
full from too many bodies

smoke coiling in and out
of my lush mouth.

And it is here where
your absence drowns,
my lover in the forest,
sleeping with the evergreens,
you cannot smooth my wild hair
or thread your fingers around

my neck to feel my pulse pound
so loudly in the gradient lightning
of daybreak, yet I feel you
my love

palpable as planetary force.

Clairvoyance

Past

This is the
moment

that flickers in the darks
beneath your pupils, sepia,

degraded, where every instant
of your mundane youth

becomes ripe with meaning,
a jackfruit

ringed with milk-sweet seeds.
Time is syrupy, dripping down

your kiss-stung lips,
as you recline in the passenger

seat of your lover's car,
the briny wind tangled

into your sun-streaked hair,
bare feet on the dash,

driving closer to the salt-
stung waters and scalding

sands you seek in the south.

You are silent,

staring at his bare chest,

the angle of his jaw,

thinking how the bone

cuts his face into a dangerous

silhouette and how his eyes

are hidden by mirrored

silver sunglasses, unreachable.

All you can see is yourself,

a set of twins,

unraveling.

As if you know what is to come

but it is like a dream

that shivers through every layer

of your body but melts from your mind.

Present

You have not seen him in years,

this man built from a boy

you once loved,

and bitterness floods

your tongue like copper coins.

He looks past you as if you are far

beyond the blistering orange

horizon, and the waves

that reflect blinding light

from the glaring summer sun.

His whispered apologies

can't be heard above the roaring

of the ocean, the swelling in your skull.

You turn hard, metal toothed,

tell him that even when
you were underneath

him, he was beneath
you.

The words are silken,
they wrap around you

and cool the heat,
which throbs just below your skin,

as his hazel eyes open and close,
looking through you,

like you have become unrecognizable.

You drive away without glancing

into your mirrors,
not wanting to see him haloed

by the last ribbons of dusk light,
as you race towards nothing

but the crackling storm-clouds

building above your head

and you do not regret anything.

Future

You will drive home

from the coroner's office

alone. Your husband will believe

your cousin has died

and say nothing as you swallow

three white pills with a mouthful

of jackfruit juice and walk wordlessly

through your slick glass house

to lay in the sand as tension is stolen

from your muscles and you sink

deeper to keep from shivering.

Burrowing in the beach

you will wish this was your sarcophagus

and that the supple oblivion

coating your skin will be balm

to the memories that sear,

and you can forget

that you are no longer young,

and what has been said

can never be unsaid,

but remember the boy whom you loved

who will drown

in the embrace of the January sea.

Phreatomagmatic Eruption

I churn surrounded by rock,

magma white embers coated

in a layer of thin red skin,

I beat like an organ.

You refuse to melt, withstand
my temperatures,
absorb my heat
into your igneous body.

No basin nor crater
can hold me
and not disintegrate
yet you draw me from under

your crust, give me the sky
through a jagged fissure,

and I want it—

that view

of matter

transformed:

violet sunsets

condensing

into amber

daybroken dew,
that scent
of sand bolting
into glass.

You murmur a stone shiver
I boil from the sensation
bubbling higher and higher
the smell of perspiration

mixing with the steam
that peels off of me
like silk slips.

I can barely stand

this combination
of water and fire
and thermal contractions
begin to overtake me.

I expand and stretch,
cascade crimson arroyos,
as you percolate and taste

my swelter through your skin,

I seethe and pour

pour

down

you

in titian tributaries

I flow as tephra and ash,

subsume all air into dark

particles. The heat abates,

the trails I have scorched

cool. I am covered

in black veins, I pulse

and crackle into crystal,

a sated onyx slather.

I become solid

while you become empty.

We will reunite

as earth begotten earth.

Part 3

Beyond Ekphrasis

“Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown’d/With his last hand, and pour’d the ocean round” Homer, the Iliad book XVIII



“Frank O’Hara” Grace Hartigan 1966

“In art, one idea is as good as another. If one takes the idea of trembling, for instance, all of a sudden most of art starts to tremble. Michelangelo starts to tremble. El Greco starts to tremble. All the Impressionists start to tremble. The Egyptians are trembling invisibly and so do Vermeer and Giacometti and all of a sudden, for the time being, Raphael is languid and nasty; Cézanne was always trembling but very precisely”³⁸

³⁸ DeKooning

Homer and Auden

Homer's detailed description of Achilles' shield in the Iliad is one of the oldest examples of ekphrasis, or a poetic response to a piece of art.³⁹ Ekphrasis predominantly held its form through concrete and accurate description of the artwork of its focus for centuries and it has only been in the last few centuries that poetry has begun to engage in dialogue with art through conceptual investigation. Modern poets like W. H. Auden began to change this stylistic pattern: "[M]odern ekphrastic poems have generally shrugged off antiquity's obsession with elaborate description, and instead have tried to interpret, inhabit, confront, and speak to their subjects."⁴⁰ Frank O'Hara directly addressed the question of poetry's relationship with painting in his iconic poem "Why I Am Not a Painter," which also documents the inception of artist Mike Goldberg's painting "Sardines." James A.W. Hefferman defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation"⁴¹ but what does this representation of representation accomplish in poetics? This essay is a brief investigation of this question and looks towards poetry which has fully embraced visual art as a subject of confrontation and examines the philosophical reflections of poets like Donald Justice, Robert Hass, and Liu Xia as examples of poetry that does its work through its conversation with visual art.

In Homer's ekphrasis the god Hephaestus renders an ornate shield that is so well-crafted and detailed it looks like the carved people, cities and oceans are moving;

³⁹ In ancient Greece ekphrasis was a vivid description of a thing, not only a work of art

⁴⁰ poets.org

⁴¹ Museum of Words: The poetics of ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery

Homer's fantastic shield includes a wedding, a murder trial, and an advancing army as well as scenes of ploughman, vineyards, and dancing children:

He wrought the earth, the heavens, and the sea; the moon also at her full and the untiring sun, with all the signs that glorify the face of heaven...He wrought also two cities, fair to see and busy with the hum of men. In one were weddings and wedding-feasts, and they were going about the city with brides whom they were escorting by torchlight from their chambers. Loud rose the cry of Hymen, and the youths danced to the music of flute and lyre, while the women stood each at her house door to see them.⁴²

Although the descriptions are vivid they are describing a necessarily fictional work of art. There is motion, sound, and scent in Homer's shield because the shield is mythic and intended to be beyond what a mere mortal's potential metalwork could ever be. Homer's sensory engagement with the shield can be viewed as evidence for the limitations of poetry in representing a work of art besides description as it relies on a catalogue of narrative details. Homer populates the shield with human figures and gives them actions and motivations as the reader's eye is directed towards different scenes in the ekphrastic sequence but does not address the relationship of the artist, Hephaestus, to the work itself⁴³.

In part, this omission is historically relative as Greek notions of art and the role of the artist greatly differed from those of contemporary art. Mimesis was central to Greek artmaking as sculptors, painters, and poets sought to outdo predecessors and contemporaries by approaching the same subjects or myths and then execute their work to surpass others' works. Homer was a major figure of mimesis and that historical

⁴² Iliad Book 18

⁴³ Although he is referred to as an artist "Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown'd/With his last hand, and pour'd the ocean round" Homer, the Iliad book XVIII

context in conjunction with the dubious nature of Homer's existence⁴⁴ leads to a description of the making of this complex, and incredible shield absent of the presence of the consciousness of the creator. While Hephaestus makes potent symbolic choices in his working of the shield as demonstrated by Homer's rendering, Hephaestus is not portrayed creating the work as an artistic expression. Hephaestus, like many Greek figures of artists, including Homer, creates art because of divine inspiration from the Muses, and is not shown to be consciously constructing a personal statement in his creation of the shield. While Auden does not pursue the question of the artist directly in his response to Homer in "The Shield of Achilles," he depicts Hephaestus as having more agency than in Homer's version as Auden's Hephaestus does not include scenes of peace or happiness on Achilles' shield:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third, /Were axioms to him, who'd never heard /Of any world where promises were kept, /Or one could weep because another wept. /The thin-lipped armorer, /Hephaestos, hobbled away, Thetis of the shining breasts/Cried out in dismay/At what the god had wrought/To please her son, the strong/Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles/Who would not live long.

Auden's Hephaestus does not work the shield as a visual representation of war containing both life and death, but rather Auden's Hephaestus renders the object meant to protect Achilles' body from injury and death as a literal image of the horrors of war. Through reimagining this famous example of ekphrasis, Auden is able to use the original image of the shield as a foil to his interpretation of the shield. Auden uses the refrain "She looked over his shoulder" ("She" being Thetis) as a technique to

⁴⁴ Scholars disagree about whether or not Homer was a historical figure or if he is a conglomeration of different authors

acknowledge the scenes which the reader as well as Thetis expects to be present in the shield, but in Auden's version, are not:

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.⁴⁵

The absence of Homer's pleasant scenes in Auden's version make the poem's thematic objectives oppose the original's and condemn the same violence which *The Iliad* glorifies. Auden's depiction of Hephaestus as making shield to "please" Achilles creates a strange tension in the poem because the shield ultimately foretells Achilles' death to his nereid mother Thetis, whom is also described in myth as a kind of foster mother towards Hephaestus in other myths as Thetis aided him after Hera threw him from Mount Olympus down to Earth. Auden's poem opens up the ancient myth in part through the poet's interpretation of their source material, but also through the hints of instrumentality by Hephaestus, who in Auden's recreation, is ambiguously in control of the image. This poem gains its potency from its subversive relationship to the ekphrastic tradition it gains its content from, but maintains conventions of ekphrasis, while Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" furthers the poet's imposition as mediator between their visual reference and their verbal commentary.

⁴⁵ WH Auden "The Shield of Achilles"

Auden and Brueghel



Auden augments Pieter Brueghel's painting "Landscape After the Fall of Icarus" through his negotiation with the painting as a painting in "Musee de Beaux Arts", and the visual art is changed by his verbalizing of the tensions it depicts. Brueghel's painting operates using similar principles as Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" in that the painting relies on the myth of Icarus to intensify the imagery of a calm oceanside landscape. The body of Icarus, having descended from the sky after his wax-wings melted from the heat of sun, is only know in Brueghel's painting by a splash of water in the background, while the other figures are depicted going about their days, indifferent to the mythical event occurring in their own landscape. Auden's poem is mimetic of the pathos the painting explores through the casual ignorance of humanity towards others' tragedy, opening the poem with the lines, "About tragedy they were never wrong, /The

Old Masters: how well they understood its human position: how it takes place /While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...”⁴⁶ The poem exists within the context of the speaker viewing art within a museum setting and first reflects on a universal tendency of painting of the Old Masters, and then focuses specifically on Breughel’s painting:

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
[...]
and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Auden’s poem exemplifies what WJT Mitchell defines as ekphrastic fear:
“[Ekphrastic fear] is the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and the visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually.”⁴⁷ In Auden’s interpretation of Brueghel’s version of the myth, Icarus’ death is only momentous to the reader in its non-momentousness to the figures in the painting. The painting and poem exist within the framework of Greek mythology and the viewer/reader understands that the painting is depicting a deeply symbolic moment, but within the world of the painting, the myth is not necessarily known, and suggests that

⁴⁶ Auden musee de beaux arts

⁴⁷ W.J.T Mitchell “Picture Theory”

within Brueghel's painting, the death of Icarus is insignificant to everyone except for the viewer. Auden's poem is reliant on the agitation Brueghel's visualization of Icarus creates and this allows the poet to expose the viewer as a viewer, the poet himself gazing upon Brueghel's ploughman who looks away from Icarus and his unimportant failure.

Frank O'Hara on Painting



Mike Goldberg "Sardines"

In "Why I Am Not A Painter" Frank O'Hara explodes the viewer/reader relationship and directly examines what poetry and painting are distinctly capable of by

recounting his friend Mike Goldberg's working on his painting "Sardines." This poem diverges from traditional ekphrasis even more than Auden as the poem describes the dynamism of the painting's creation without providing concrete description of what the painting actually looks at. The descriptions O'Hara does provide are deceptive, his speaker's only description of the painting's content is the use of language with the all-capitalized "SARDINES" in the composition. The poem's utterance eventually becomes an insistence of poetry's ability to function in dialogue with visual art without being subsumed by visual art, but begins questioning this:

I am not a painter, I am a poet.
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not. Well,
for instance, Mike Goldberg
is starting a painting. I drop in.⁴⁸

The poem starts with our speaker, O'Hara, asserting their desire to be a visual artist, and he makes this assertion through the use of the poetic line, the self-consciousness of which precludes the poem's eventual turn. O'Hara uses the repetition of "I go" and "I drop in" to be mimetic of the creative process and his own dissatisfaction with his role as poet as Mike's painting proceeds while he questions his place as poet "[...] I go and the days go by /and I drop in again. The painting /is going on, and /I go, and the days /go by. I drop in."⁴⁹

The poem is constantly aware that it is a poem, and O'Hara focuses on Goldberg's choice of the word "SARDINES" in the painting to reflect upon but does

⁴⁸ O'Hara "Why I Am Not A Painter"

⁴⁹ O'Hara "Why I Am Not A Painter"

not describe any colors, forms, or textures in the painting. Although the painting inspiring this ekphrasis is a real work of art and not fictional, O'Hara uses the painting as a metaphorical introduction into his meditation on the nature of art and language, and the painting functions as a concept in the poem's treatment rather than a physical object. O'Hara uses "SARDINES" to traverse the blurry lines of language and visual representation, "[...] The painting is /finished. "Where's SARDINES?" /All that's left is just /letters, "It was too much," Mike says,"⁵⁰ O'Hara never describes Goldberg's painting as depicting images of sardines, only the word sardines, but by accentuating "All that's left is just/ letters"⁵¹ he is reporting on the conceptual status of the work, rather than the visual status, as the word "SARDINES" is still present in the finished painting, but is blurred by the overlays of color and brushstrokes between letters. The word "SARDINES" is still the word "SARDINES" despite its less-clear lettering, but for O'Hara, the less legible word occupies a different space in the painting than a more legible one because the word's primariness has been removed and replaced by the primariness of visual elements like line and color. "SARDINES" has become a disrupted image of the word "SARDINES" and is therefore not a word at all, but O'Hara then flips this idea as he begins to reflect on the color orange:

[...] But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.

⁵⁰ O'Hara "Why I Am Not A Painter"

⁵¹ O'Hara "Why I Am Not A Painter"

Then another page.⁵²

This is where the poem reveals itself as a poem ultimately not asking why O'Hara is not a painter, but declaring why he is a poet. As time has progressed and the visuals of Goldberg's painting have overpowered the linguistic meaning of "SARDINES" O'Hara then proceeds to declare the relevance of words in describing emotional experience, "There should be

so much more, not of orange, of /words, of how terrible orange is /and life. Days go by."⁵³ The poem has arrived at its ultimate terminus: poetry, not painting as O'Hara leaves behind the visual of orange in exchange for the idea of orange, the linguistic associations that the word orange provides. Conversely, Goldberg as rendered by O'Hara, highlights the visual over the linguistic by titling his expressionist painting "SARDINES," which in its very naming is acknowledging the tension between the visual presentation of the letters within the context of the overall painting that also includes the palimpsest-like image of the word "EXIT" in the upper righthand corner.

[..] My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.

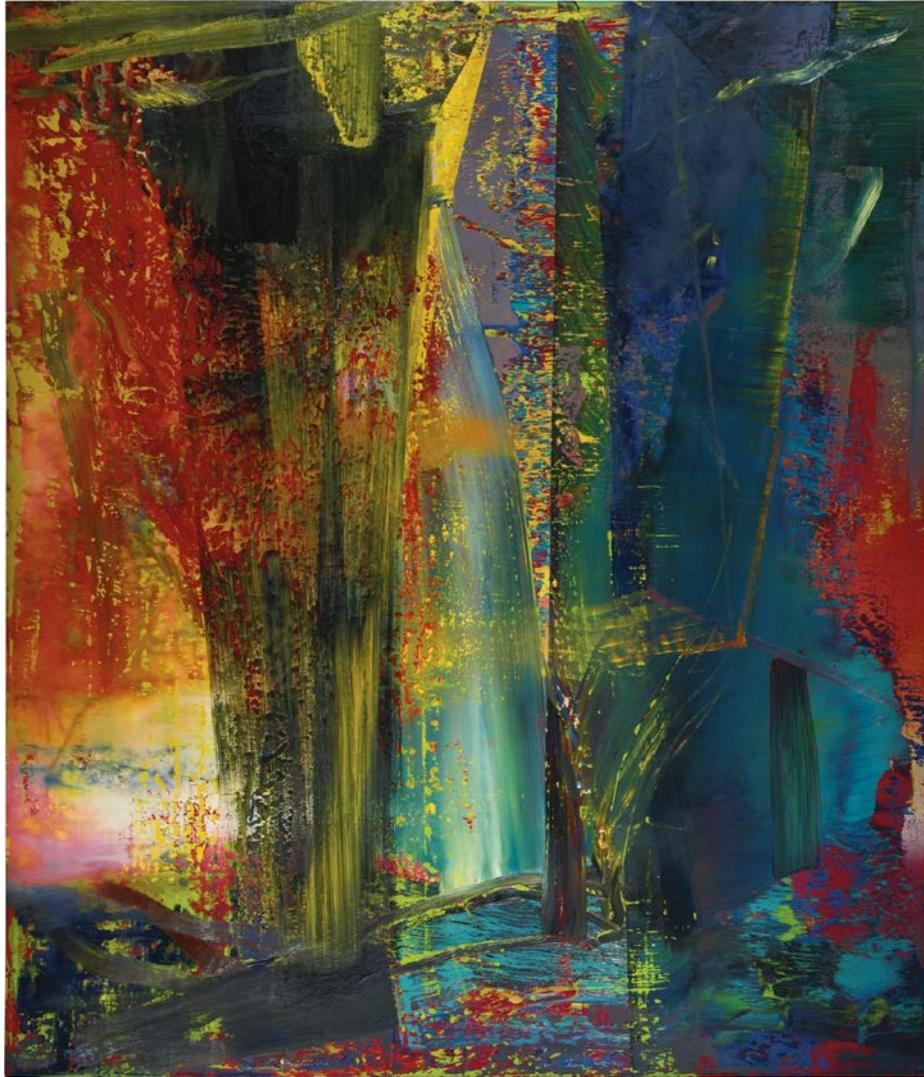
O'Hara's concluding lines show how the color orange has meaning beyond its visual expression and simultaneously how the painting "SARDINES" has meaning beyond the capacities of the word "Sardines" or "Exit." Neither the painter nor the poet

⁵² O'Hara "Why I Am Not A Painter"

⁵³ O'Hara "Why I Am Not A Painter"

is placed above, but rather, they are enveloped within each other in this descent from traditional ekphrasis.

Robert Hass on Material



Gerhard Richter "Abstraktes Bild"

Robert Hass follows O'Hara with his poem "TIME AND MATERIALS" which is an ekphrasis of Gerhard Richter's "Abstraktes Bild" or, in English, "Abstract Painting." Richter painted many multimedia paintings "Abstraktes Bild" and Hass's poem does not identify a specific painting which is the focus of ekphrasis. Immediately,

Hass begins to play with the source material by making the subtitle of the poem “Gerhard Richter: Abstrakte Bilder” which both makes the painting's title plural (“Abstract paintings” to indicate the poem’s discussion of Richter’s work broadly and not a singular piece) but also, within the frame of English, the addition of the -er ending suggests the nouning of the verb, so “Abstract painting” becomes “Abstract Painter.” This choice is significant because the poem becomes more of an ekphrasis on the style and process of the painter, rather than on an individual work of art, which pushes the poem away from traditional ekphrasis even more.

The composition of the poem is mimetic of the process it recreates as Hass uses the typographic deconstruction of the language in the poem as a standin for the visual construction of Richter’s paintings:

The object of this poem is not to annihila

To not annih

The object of this poem is to report a theft,

In progress, of everything

That is not these words

And their disposition on the page.

The object o f this poem is to report a theft,

In progre ss of everything that exists

That is not th ese words

And their disposition on the page.

The object of his poem is to report a theft

In progress of everything that exists

This is not these words

And their disposition on the page

[.]

Hass translates Richter's painting techniques into the typographic, where Richter pulls a squeegee across colors, blurring them together, Hass removes letters, blurring the refrain. Like an abstract painting which takes an image existing reality and then removes its representational cues (one way abstraction functions in painting, some abstractions are intentionally devoid of any representational subject), Hass takes the refrain of the poem "The object of this poem is to report a theft, /in progress of everything, /that is not these words /And their disposition on the page," and first inserts spaces into the words to disrupt them visually, and then removes letters to disrupt them sonically. The poem is on one level about the process and invention of Richter, and the painter more generally, but it is also about the process and invention of poetry, as Hass uses the basic components of poetry: letters, punctuation, white space, and words and knowingly deconstructs them. The reader does not need "annihilate" to understand "annihilate" and further, the word is itself a contradiction of the meaning of the line as the word annihilate is visually annihilated across the page despite the assertion of the speaker that the object of the poem is theft and not annihilation. Therefore the poem

argues that the intentional inclusion of absence in the language is not annihilation but a visual/verbal representation of process.

The action of painting of the action of writing have been collapsed; Hass' interpretation of Richter exemplifies Mitchell's ekphrastic fear as not only poetry and painting, but all art are reduced to time and materiality:

To score, to scar, to smear, to streak,
To smudge, to blur, to gouge, to scrape.⁵⁴

Hass' use of infinitives allows these actions to both literally describe aspects of Richter's multimedia process of painting but also extend to include Hass' metaphorically smearing and gouging of poetic language. Hass takes the history of the ekphrastic poem, and particularly O'Hara's treatment of ekphrasis, and works his poem into a conceptual ekphrasis, or instead of a response to *a* work of art a response to *the* work of art. The emphasis is on the locomotive qualities of artmaking, the ideas of artmaking, rather than the static piece in of itself. Hass, in describing the process of painting, creates a blueprint for the process of poetry, using painting as a substitution for languaging, "Action painting," i.e., /The painter gets to behave like time," and for Hass, the poet in conceptual ekphrasis gets to behave like the painter and in doing so, is permitted to behave like time as well.

⁵⁴ Hass

Liu Xia on Conception



In Liu Xia's 2014 poem "Empty Chairs" traditional ekphrasis, artistic process, and intermedia dialogue all come together in a poem ostensibly about a work of art, but actually about the conversation artists have with each other across time and space. The poem begins with repetition of the word "empty:"

Empty, empty, empty
so many empty chairs
everywhere. They look
charming in van Gogh's paintings.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Liu Xia "Empty Chairs"

The poem constructs itself like an ekphrastic poem through referring to van Gogh's paintings of chairs, but then uses van Gogh's chairs as a vehicle for the speaker's reflexive reflection on their own relationship to art. The emptiness refers to the lack of a figure occupying the chairs in van Gogh's paintings and in the diction of "empty"⁵⁶ Xiu renders an implication of intended presence, an expectation that the painting does not fulfill. The emptiness is extended to include all the unoccupied chairs which reside "everywhere" and the speaker wants to populate them with her body but cannot because "they are frozen /by what's breathing inside them." The chairs are occupied metaphorically by van Gogh's consciousness and the speaker's knowledge of his biography, "Van Gogh waves his paintbrush — /leave leave leave /there's no funeral tonight." The painting "Van Gogh's Chair" functions less as an object in the poem but as a metaphysical landscape for the speaker to occupy and communicate with van Gogh.

This framing device of van Gogh's chairs allows Xia to bridge the time and space between her and the painter, allowing the speaker and van Gogh to interact, and then allowing different mediums of art to interact:

He looks straight through me,
and I sit down
in the flames of his sunflower
like a piece of clay to be fired.

Xia's choice to render her speaker's successful occupation of van Gogh's chair through referencing a different painting, his iconic "Sunflowers" further breaches the conventions of ekphrasis as neither painting is given as much attention as van Gogh's

⁵⁶ Or, rather, the choices of translators Ming Di and Jennifer Stern

consciousness, which dominates the speaker's reflection. When the speaker does sit in the chair, and achieves the metaphysical connection to van Gogh which predicates much of the emotional vigor of the poem, she does so through a simile of ceramics rather than painting. The poem ends on the precipice, the chairs have already been rendered, but the poet's conversation with the painter has only just begun.

Conclusion

Ekphrasis, in its very ontology, is a limited form of poetic expression because it asks us to listen to a report of a work of art, a careful testimony of what a fictional or real piece of art was at the time of its poetic encounter. This leaves the traditional ekphrastic poem in a historical stasis, a documentation of an object being viewed by a poet. Modern poets brought linguistic interrogation and conception into their poetic accounts of art such as Auden's psychological interrogation of Brueghel's "The Fall of Icarus," and Frank O'Hara's decidedly self-aware "Why I Am Not A Painter." Auden and O'Hara planted seeds which have been germinating for decades, and whose blooms can be seen in the much later poems of Robert Hass and Liu Xia who have transformed ekphrasis into a conversation with art that defies the conventions of the genre. I believe this rich poetic legacy will continue to transform language and visual arts as the arts continue to look at one another and describe their tangled roots. Whether these poetic engagements continue to be called ekphrastic or something entirely different is unknown, but that they continue to occur is of deep importance.

Poems Inspired by the Research:

I wrote "Six Canons of Art" while researching poetry about art and seeking conceptual engagements with works of art. I discovered 6th century Chinese critic and historian Hsieh Ho's "Six Canons of Painting" from a partial quote in a collection of quotes about art I was browsing at the library. I knew that Ho's philosophy of what art is would not work in my essay because my topic had grown and changed during the course of initial, broad-based searching, but after reading different translations of his guide to reviewing painting I was inspired to write a poem using his

ideas as a conceptual framework for me to resist against. I did this by writing the poem in a sequence using the six principles as section titles and then chose moments from my experiences of artmaking which corresponded to the titles, but not in the ways Hsieh Ho was contextually describing. My poem subverts Ho's principles of art by reinventing them: I use "suitability of coloring" to discuss color choice as an expressive mode in a figure painting and reflect about how I think I more successfully render it with non-natural colors when Ho's explication on the principle specifically advocates for natural coloring. In that section I am playing with how Ho interprets "suitability" versus how I interpret suitability. Throughout the writing and editing of this poem I was influenced by the materials I was reading and digesting for the essay, and that is why I think that the poem is as complex as it is. It is the longest poem I have written in college and an example of my attempt to build a multilayered metonymic chain which connects the body, nature, and creative philosophy through a slow and deliberate sequence of scenes taken from my memories.

"Oranges" was directly and indirectly derived from O'Hara's "Why I Am Not A Painter." Although the poem is not discussing art as its subject but rather using the image of the actual fruit to go into memory and a reflection about a first person speaker "I" and a second person "You" I classify it as following O'Hara because I had steeped myself in his rumination about the color orange and the word orange for weeks. Then one day, walking home from work, I was listening to a meditation and trying to think about nothing besides the present moment and my breathing. But on the sidewalk was a shredded orange rind and as I made the turn towards my apartment I could not help but turn my head back to look at the orange again, my mind suddenly

brimming with the image of the orange and the visualization of the word “orange.” I was compelled to write about the image of the orange and the memories that follow the image grew organically from not only the literal encounter with an orange but from a deep desire to render the word “orange” in a poem and to attempt to use it effectively because O’Hara has already said so much about orange already. This project by its very nature has blurred the origins of some of my poems, and I am glad for that because I have had the satisfaction of identifying different roads of inspiration from my research that did manifest from unconscious processing and connecting of ideas.

Six Canons of Art

“The painters of old painted the idea and not merely the shape.”

-Hsieh Ho

I

Rhythmic vitality

Pats of paint fill

the oval grooves

of the plastic

skeleton palette,

islands of hue

bound by a grid

of whiteness.

I take a small brush,

dip, and consider

the grain of canvas

stretched.

These colors are spiritless,

professionally mixed,

finely ground hemimorphite

heated with selenium

to produce the pigments

inside this tube

of cadmium red.

I press my thumb

up from the creased

end and see a poppy

bloom from my palm.

Then my clean brushes
wait while my hand streaks

across the whiteness,
and it is the beginning

of color's transmutation,
my own resonance.

II

Anatomical Structure

My eyelids flick closed
and then open,

all I see is the body
of a man collapsed,

his lean limbs
arranged into angles

from his frozen
pose on a wooden platform.

My left hand possesses
a shade of muted green

from chalks named
“Assorted Sauce.”

my teacher instructs
me to work from the bones

out, to build layers
of tendon and skin

from the man
whose structure

I can only see when my eyes
bore down on his

chiaroscuro torso,
his equine thighs,

and his faceted jaw,
a profile like Achilles.

And my hand moves

autonomously,

understanding this method

of bone begetting sinew.

III

Conformity with Nature

I lay beneath an oak

tree, its lime leaves trembling

in the winds' exhalation.

I try to forget the symbols

of trees—a child's scallop-edged

bush, emerald, full with huge

red apples lobbed

inside its body—

that object corresponds

to an empty image.

See the tree instead
for what it is,

a balanced contortion
of limbs branching into limbs,

the grooves of bark
ancient whorls

like fingerpads, or spiraled
roots reaching down

to drink and nourish the small
buds, the bright pods of seed.

IV

Suitably of Coloring

A woman named Connie
reclines on a wooden

stool, her plump body
illuminated by fat

lamps, her breasts
draped down her chest,

a blissful expression
permanent on her face.

The outline of her body
is violet first, outlined with

ripples of watered-
down saffron,

but then come layers
of aqua and cherry strokes,

buttery highlights gleaming
coral. The sheet unrolled

behind her is a vibrant orange
on my canvas.

I have never made a body
as alive

in shades of unripe peaches

or shelled chestnuts.

V

Artistic Composition

I find four pieces

of scrap wood

cut into two halves

like a temple with a curved

tower, belled and sloping

into long rectangles.

Each segment becomes

an independent portion

of a desert scene,

a skyline dusky purple,

the dunes

a violent crimson.

I use real sand
to make the landscape tactile,

break chunks of plaster,
let them sink

into acrylic glue.
I want to construct ruins

of an imagined empire,
The split temple

requires I paint a minaret
topped with vortex coiling toward

a slivered moon.
Division of space

was done before me,
I listen to the shape

and hear the plan
it had for itself

since it was first severed,

despite its abandonment

with the scraps and their dead

dusts, thick like pollen.

VI

Artistic Finish

I scour through a metal chest

burdened with zippers,

baby teeth, cameos, false pearls, campaign buttons,

broken pieces of an espresso machine,

and dozens of glass beads,

feel their indentations

under my touch

like brail.

I rip out glossy pages

from candied children's books

and magazines found
in boxes on the street,

browse the pages
of eighty year old

National Geographics.

I try to find the senses

in senselessness,
fresh cream paint

seals my piece whole,
while rules, training

and technique
fall away.

These ideas have reunited
with their final shapes.

Oranges

The sun was sinking, layers of leaves braided
orange strands of light into translucent
orange lace while I strolled, breathing with each step,
watching the opalescent shimmer of sun-glared street signs.

I saw the pieces of a bombed fruit scattered across the pavement,
an orange wedge full, illuminated, its vesicles transparent with bright juice.
Then, I was back in Irving park and that distant December when
you and I were bleary and in love, waiting for the setting of another sun,
our bicycle wheels whirred while the sky dip-dyed indigo.

We were poised to ride back, our hands knotted together,
our wheels ripe to spin, when down the grassy slope
we watched as small shapes moved, silhouetted by the flickering
lights they held. And the shapes scuttled closer, children in coats,
shadowed by their tall parents who suspended lanterns
above their hooded heads. The flames gyrated in the breeze

and all we could do was watch rapt while sets of tiny legs
bounded across the lawn to launch globes into the dark
like glowing tangerines, buoyant orbs growing fuller
and then shrinking up above both our heads. Then,

there was only exhilaration as we watched the sway

of swollen planets drifting from our world, together,

but now what our loves conjures is not the sight of whole

fruit, rinds intact, but those lantern which burned

from the inside out.

Part 4
The Future Eva Manifesto

V

Jóvenes

Escriban lo que quieran

En el estilo que les parezca mejor

Ha pasado demasiada sangre bajo los puentes

Para seguir creyendo - creo yo

Que sólo se puede seguir un camino:

En poesía se permite todo.”⁵⁷

V

Young poets

Say whatever you want

Pick your own style

Too much blood has gone under the bridge

To still believe -I believe-

That there's only one way to cross the road:

You can do anything in poetry.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Excerpt from “Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla” Nicanor Parra

⁵⁸ Excerpt from “Letters from a Poet Who Sleeps in a Chair” Nicanor Parra translated by David Unger

I am Eva Bertoglio and I am an artist and I do not believe anything is original, not even my selves. Cognitive science has demonstrated the falsity of our illusion of the self as one⁵⁹ integrated, coherent whole, and shown that our “self” is a narrative we have constructed to make sense of our jumbles of emotions, traits, contexts, and experiences. This does not render the self unimportant but rather indicates the extreme importance of stories to our conscious existences. Observing this, I choose to construct myself as not Eva, but rather Evas. Let me explain:

Almost every language in the world describe the present as being located where we physically are, the past unspooled behind our bodies, and the future stretching ahead. In Mandarin and Aymara, however, the past is in front of our eyes because we can see it in its entirety whereas the future is at our backs because we cannot see it, and will never be able to see it, as is the nature of the future. Since I was a child I have been obsessed with my own temporal existence and have created a kind of identity motivator in the form of who I call Future Eva. I am Present Eva, as I am perpetually, and Present Eva is the only Eva I have power over. Past Eva is immutable, fixed, sometimes a model to Present Eva, other times a cautionary tale, but always finished. Future Eva is an elusive paragon, I have been in conversation with her across time and space for years, knowing that I can only become her and never meet her, but Future Eva, unlike me, Present Eva, is infinite, and while I cannot listen to her and absorb her always greater self-knowledge, I can leave her thoughts which she can collect like the chunks of agate we hunted for when we were Past Little Eva on our family’s Willamette valley acre. Past Little Eva did not know our mother took our pilfered stones and scattered

⁵⁹ As described in Bruce Hood’s “The Self-Illusion”

them back across the gravel for us to refind anew each day, and we are glad she was never illuminated as to this. When I talk to myself(selves) I am addressing the “we” because I am too complex to make sense of myself as a singular. I have always⁶⁰ perceived myself as a fragmented mosaic, like Virginia Woolf, but this vision has only brought me peace because it allows me to accommodate for my multiplicity, my contradictoriness, and the millions of subtly changed incarnations of Eva I have so far born witness to and will continue to see until there is no Future Eva nor Present Eva, but instead a paper doll chain of Past Evas, some touchable, others fragile or lost.

These concepts are fundamental to my understanding of my art and my purpose. I am fascinated in the interrelationships of thought and I will be dedicating my life to exploring these relationships. My culture, my society, and my age are being defined by specialization, careerization, and corporatization—my work is my resistance. Not only do I believe that the interdisciplinary is a mode which encourages deeper understanding of the specific, but I believe that the creative, generative mind works through exponential connections, and that therefore time is not wasted thinking from the borders between fields! I reject the deeply American (and by the same coin, Western and dominant) metaphor of time wasting which belies 1) an underlying fear of polluting pure knowledge and truth by straying from the language and thought of discrete things, and 2) seeing time as an amount which can be conceived of as a monetary amount that one can spend as a limited resource. This is not how the creative imagination functions! I believe that for an artist, actively processing, gathering, and filtering the stimuli of the

⁶⁰ This is not true. There were Past Evas who believed they were cohesive entities, but they were so Past, at the Present, I cannot remember when or why they changed. In some ways, functionally, they never existed, they’re so removed from the Recent Memory Evas and Present Eva.

world is always productive because it is use of the brain as it is meant to operate—
associatively.

Cognitive science has proven that our subconsciousnesses are constantly processing the stimuli which we generally, consciously perceive as drifting through and out of our awarenesses, only to “stick” through intentional cognitive machinations. This is not how our brains functions. We feed our minds like we feed our bodies, and similarly to nutrition, we need the complex combinations and interactions of chemicals with each other to build muscle strengthen bone. The creative person, which included the scientist, entrepreneur, designer, engineer, illusionist, etc. will build stronger associative muscles through the consumption of a variety of vitamins, amino acids, proteins and carbohydrates. I discuss the liberal arts with my peers in the large research university I attend constantly, I talk to science majors about how we all need to understand our bodies and the natural world more, I talk to history/classics majors about how we all need to understand our pasts and our myths about our pasts, I talk to philosophy majors about how we all need to understand for ourselves why we exist and what is meaningful in life. We need all of it. We may prefer fruit and shun vegetables, and that is our choice, but we are destined for malnourishment by choosing so. I refuse to advocate for intellectual starvation in the goal of placing poetry and art as the highest pursuits of humanity. I advocate that poetry and art are the highest pursuits of humanity, just as the sciences are, and math, and history, and philosophy. I resist reductionism, I resist simple categorization, but here I am stating that I am an artist and I mean this in all literal and nonliteral meanings, in every supportive and contradictory fashion, because the word “artist,” the identity of “Artist” are, and will always be in perpetual

flux, I am and will always be in flux. The more rules I learn, the more modes and constraints and subtleties I discover, the more free I become. I am 21, young, and curiously ignorant; I am aware that I will never be finished, but that I can be nourished by biting into luscious fruits and bitter roots, sweet meats and fresh fish. I am an omnivore for meaning. I do not care about prestige or recognition any more than I am involuntarily compelled to, these are the tools of self-limitation and the abandonment of reflexivity. This is a record of my present state of being.

My work on my thesis has allowed me to work forwards by working backwards, how? By looking at my writing, or more significantly for my purposes, the impulses of my writing, and identifying where I am deficient. I realized that I am fascinated by how hip hop can elevate the “nonpoetic” domain, how hip hop can render smoking, drinking, and interpersonal dysfunction in such a way that it transcends its subject matter. Because I am a young person engaging with fellow nihilistic youth who entertain debauchery for the sake of senselessness, I am interested in what is, or what can be poetic about these experiences. I am interested in how I can find meaning which can extend outside of my own mundane experiences by looking at those who do it well. Rapper-poets are some of our language’s finest athletes, they show us what our language is capable of doing, and they inspire me to consider the primacy of lived language, and reject the static status quo of English which grammarians love to feel they are protecting by dismissing African American dialect, amongst other forms of English languaging. Hip hop, visual art, and love/sex are not as different as they may appear: they are all politicized, they are all generative, they are all expressive. In this moment of my creative life I am drawn to work which forces me to disrupt my

preconceptions; as an aspiring decolonial feminist I must confront myself when I face intellectual conflict from my encountering of the coloniality of being⁶¹ in the works I aesthetically admire and am inspired by. My passion for the study, active consumption, and reimagining of hip hop is one fraught with intricacies of power and oppression, but so is my fascination with the dynamics of poetry's representation of beloveds as well as my obsession with art's dialogue from medium to medium.

I researched the "I/You" first person speaker/second person subject dynamic in love poetry after receiving feedback from peers and instructors that much of my strongest creative work was based around the "I/You." I thought about this external appraisal and after examining poems I had previously thought of as independent from one another, I found that my "voice", whatever immaterial thing that may be, was the strongest when in dialogue with a you. I noticed in my own work love poems containing first person speakers and second person subjects, and came to the conclusion that they were actually documenting dialogues with my selves and not the actual people represented as "You." I have been told a maxim from a professor of poetry which says that no poet under the age of thirty should write in the first person, and I found this statement very respectable even as I became aware of my proclivity for the "I/You." I wanted to psychoanalyze other love poems using these conceits of the "I/You," and lover/beloved dynamic to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of these constraints, to see where the sublimation of another's consciousness into my own could produce revelation rather than vainglory. I chose love and erotic poems because I love

⁶¹ As described by Nelson Maldonado-Torres "The coloniality of Being refers not merely to the reduction of the particular to the generality of the concept or any given horizon of meaning, but to the violation of the meaning of human alterity to the point where the alter-ego becomes a sub-alter." 257

love and I love sex and I am unendingly intrigued by their intertwined and distinct manifestations in poetry.

And finally, I (re)turned to visual art, my love before love, the non-language which preceded language. Since adolescence I have been a multimedia/mixed media artist. I would construct found-object sculptures from the severed bodies of Barbies, collage caricatures of women's bodies with overlaid acrylic paint and glass-glitter, and fill cigar boxes with Chavez currency and vials labeled "POISON" in typewriter-font stickers. Other times however, I painted nudes and hand-built coiled ceramic vessels. People loved to tell me which media I was best at: some responded to my collages, others my ceramics, or paintings, or sculptures. No one saw my work as cohesive and regarded my art-making as numerous but splintered. Yet there I was, a teenager thinking: it's all the same, can't you see? I'm thinking about the body, history, the nature and form of color. I am not a series of ionic columns; I am a mosaic.

Thinking about visual art, color, form, texture, and space is a well of inspiration for my writing. Even when I am not directly writing about a work of art, I feel that works of art augment my writer's eye. With my "Beyond Ekphrasis" essay I wanted to understand how poets have been able to transcend poetic descriptions of art and arrive as poetic descriptions of art as art. My thesis has been one of the most significant undertakings of my life because it has had profound personal effects on my perception of art, what art is, what it can be, what it can always be. I am done trying to simplify myself, done defending cohesion. I am many Evas, cheers to our lives, cheers to life! We just want to touch you in some small way.

I have accepted my obsession with the interrelationships of creative thought and I will be dedicating my life to exploring these exchanges. I am here, in this moment, in this time and place to assert my intellectual wanderlust and to demand of myself the reflexivity which will force me to constantly reassess and reframe my understandings of my work and the work of others. I will make missteps and formulate ideas or opinions which will make Future Eva cringe; I will be perplexing when I intend to be enlightening, obtuse when I intend to be wise. I accept my selves and I accept their fallibilities, the only thing that I cannot accept is complacency. I am here declaring myself a philosopher of creativity and my creative trajectory as my life's thought experiment. If Present Eva is Eurydice and Future Eva is Orpheus than I, Present Eva, vow to never, never look back, to keep moving forward so as to navigate my way through this and every Underworld I encounter.

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