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Abstract:

*Excuses for Emotion* analyzes representations of emotion in recent American poetry on the subject of parents and gay and lesbian icons. Much of this poetry demonstrates affection for and attachment to those figures, but those positive emotions are seldom without complications, whether ambivalence, resentment, doubt, or self-questioning. Moreover, even poems with a primarily negative emotional register tend to have similar complications. The standard explanation for these complications would be that human emotions are indeed complex, and that the engagement with complexity gives poetry its value as a genre. In practice, though, this complication has become less an achievement than a requirement. If it is to be taken seriously from an institutional perspective, contemporary American poetry requires what I call an excuse for emotion, a rhetorical cue that makes emotional “acceptable” by complicating it, calling its authenticity or accuracy into question, or allying it with a political cause taken more seriously than the emotion itself. My major argument is that one should not unquestioningly accept these conventions constraining the emotional content of poetry, which arise from a set of relatively unexamined assumptions about quality and significance, both in the field of literary scholarship and in the community of American poetry. I see this project as related to a recent interest in emotion within literary studies that has been called emotion theory, which considers the ways in which expressions of emotion and emotional norms carry cultural meaning.

Chapter One, “Sympathetic Sons,” looks at the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Robert Hass. Both poets write about mothers suffering from significant mental illness, which creates distance between them and their sons, even as the sons retain a strong sense of affection for them. Chapter Two, “Incomplete Daughters,” looks at the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Sharon Olds. Both poets write about parents whom the speaker admires and desires affection from but who ultimately deny them that affection, which sends them looking for it elsewhere. Chapter Three, “Displaced Children,” looks at the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, Rafael Campo, and Li-Young Lee. They write about parents whose experience as immigrants influences the ways in which their children understand, relate to, and interact with them, with the relationship both complicated and enriched by cultural difference. Chapter Four, “Women of Power,” looks at the poetry of lesbian feminist poets Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn, and June Jordan. Focusing on building optimism and determination while preventing complacency, they write about women throughout history who have had forms of power, but who also, for various reasons, have experienced failures of that power. Chapter Five, “The Promise of Whitman,” looks at the poetry of gay poets Allen Ginsberg, Richard Howard, Timothy Liu, and Mark Doty. They express attachment to Walt Whitman’s idealistic vision, even as they call it into question, especially insofar as it contrasts with the actual experiences of gay life.
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INTRODUCTION

In American poetry from roughly the 1960s onward, parents have become one of the foremost subjects. For many people, the relationship with their parents forms a cornerstone of their life experiences and their own sense of self. Certainly that is the cultural narrative, and it is quite possibly a fundamental part of human experience. Many commentators, particularly on the right, have lamented the breakdown of the “traditional” family, by which they mean a heterosexual couple who have produced biological children in the context of legally recognized marriage. Of course, that family structure, never having been entirely the norm, is now even less so, and the stigma of alternative family structures has decreased. On the other hand, numerous factors such as increased life expectancy, smaller family size, longer periods of education, later marriage and childbirth, increased housing costs, and increasing connectedness through technology have led to new and, in some ways, stronger bonds between many parents and their adult children.¹ Now, even in good circumstances the relationship between parent and child can be fraught with guilt, blame, differences in expectations, and differences in worldview. In other situations, the relationship can be non-existent or pathological. Still, to the consternation of cultural commentators who lament the rise of “helicopter parents” and other forms of perceived excess in closeness between parent and adult child, this shift has occurred, and it has been embraced by many.

¹ As for the time parents spend with their younger children, Garey and Valerie Ramey write, “After three decades of decline, the amount of time spent by parents on childcare in the United States began to rise dramatically in the mid-1990s” (129). I would speculate that this increased involvement would persist through at least early adulthood, which, anecdotally, is supported by the frequent mention in major news outlets of “helicopter parents” heavily involved in their children’s extracurricular activities in preparation for college and their actual lives in college. Interestingly, Ramey and Ramey add, “Finding no empirical support for standard explanations, such as selection or income effects, we argue instead that increased competition for college admissions may be an important factor” (129). This college-related focus suggests that this increased level of parent involvement has class-related dimensions. That said, it is precisely class strata containing a high proportion of college-educated individuals from which poets, tied as they are to the academy, tend to emerge.
Other factors—aesthetic, intellectual, and academic—have also played a role in the proliferation of poetry about parents. One has been a reaction against the New Critical\(^2\) privileging of “impersonality,” a dubious concept advocated by T.S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”\(^3\) This change brought a general expansion of subject matter, with an increase in emphasis on personal experience as exemplified most famously by the so-called Confessional poets,\(^4\) but also by the Beat poets, Black Arts poets, feminist poets, and others. These writers challenged assumptions about what was appropriate subject matter and tone, which was part of a broader challenge to assumptions about whose experiences mattered and were worthy of attention from “serious” people. In its simplest terms, this shift reflected awareness that the personal was political, and vice versa.\(^5\) So-called domestic concerns, long associated with female experience, began to be taken more seriously, and their reflexive dismissal began to become more suspect. When I spoke to Rita Dove during a question and answer session in 2010, she said that she saw another factor being the mid-century rise of the writing workshop, along with the

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\(^2\) Samuel Maio writes, “The New Criticism, of which [James E. B.] Breslin and [Ralph J.] Mills wrote, espoused the view that ‘a work of art is an object in itself,’ and some of the criteria of this ‘objective poem’ theory were the autonomy of every poem, verbal ingenuity and wit, sustained objectivity, complex strains of irony, and aesthetic distance. The revolt against such New Critical ideas of verse—including also regular meter counts and rhymed stanzas, allusions to literature or other arts, subjects of ideation and philosophy (but not of one’s subjective experience, which resulted in the poem being considered ‘a neutral object’)—informed the basis of contemporary personal poetry and its voices. This ‘revolution in poetic taste’ (to borrow a phrase of Louis Simpson) manifests itself in verse that is markedly different in subject and style from New Critical poetry, but which retains some remnants of the modernists’ personae” (8-9).

\(^3\) Eliot writes, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (10-11).

\(^4\) I understand the “Confessional poets” to be Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman. This term refers to their at-times taboo and sensational subject matter—such as depression, substance abuse, tempestuous relationships, and sexuality—described from the perspective of a speaker whom one might read as the poet him or herself, despite stylized language and the occasional use of persona.

\(^5\) Even the Confessional poets, less explicitly political than feminists and Black Arts poets, challenged social norms, especially gender norms, in politically significant ways; as Diane Middlebrook puts it, “Confessional poetry was not overtly political, but it participated in the protest against Impersonality as a poetic value by reinstating an insistently autobiographical first person engaged in resistance to the pressure to conform. The most distinctive confessional poems located the pressure in family life, specifically in the relations of parents and children” (Middlebrook 635-636).
expansion of access to higher education, developments that brought new perspectives in greater numbers into the field of institutional literary activity.\(^6\)

Another development that has occurred from the post-war era to the present has been the growth of social justice-related theory and political activity across broad categories of identity. To be sure, such ideas and movements existed before this time period, but this era brought with it a much more theoretically developed and academy-driven basis for social thought and action. In particular, essentialist claims and naturalized assumptions have been called into question, strict categories have been challenged, and the performative nature of identity and identities has been foregrounded. Having already been in existence, feminism and race theory developed further and informed each other. One could certainly tie the struggle for LGBTQ rights and queer theory into these other clusters of thought and action. However, the activism and theorization of people with non-normative sexuality was something fundamentally new on the scale on which it occurred.

For this project, I explore American poetry published from roughly the 1950s to the present that discusses either the speaker’s parents or gay and lesbian icons. Parents, in some ways the embodiment of normative sexuality, and iconic figures for individuals with non-normative sexuality might seem to be an odd pairing for a comparative study, but, as stated above, I see poetry about parents and icons as emerging from a general aesthetic and intellectual trend toward acknowledging and representing diverse lives, and advancing personal experience as a subject worthy of serious consideration. Also, given the development of queer theory, it would be difficult to talk about parents in an extended academic study without thinking about heteronormativity: what are the possibilities and limits of the parent-child model, how much does it define one in terms of past experiences and future goals, to what extent is it “natural” and to

\(^6\) On November 22nd, 2010 Rita Dove spoke at the University of Cincinnati in the Langsam Library Elliston Poetry Room in the afternoon, which is when I asked this question. Later that evening she gave a poetry reading on campus.
what extent is it culturally constructed, and can one envision a model of “heritage” that moves beyond natural reproduction and the nuclear family?

A common expression is “you can’t choose your parents,” which is certainly true on some levels. No one can choose his or her biological parents, and at least early in life one has little to no control over the people who are one’s primary caretakers. However, the same thing can be true of icons: you can’t choose your icons. Icons can be discovered, publicized, and even mythologized, but fictionalized icons do not have the enduring power to inspire and influence as actual people past or present serving as an icon: an object of admiration or inspiration, a model for oneself, one with whom one can identify, one who has passed through one’s own struggles or sense of shame or inadequacy, one who speaks to what it is possible to accomplish, or one with whom one can establish an imaginative emotional connection. On the other hand, in poetry one can choose one’s parents insofar as one chooses which qualities and experiences to focus on, which attitude to adopt, and the degree of influence one chooses to acknowledge. The same is essentially true for icons.

But why does it matter who our parents and icons are? Why can’t we just be who we are, regardless of who came before us? In important ways, who one’s parents are doesn’t matter. It’s certainly true that biological parents determine one’s genetic material, and parental figures shape one’s environment during formative years to a great degree, but judging someone on the basis of his or her parents, or icons with whom one associates that person, is problematic at best. Similarly, one should not impose limits on one’s potential strictly on the basis of one’s parents or the icons with whom one identifies. At the same time, rightly or wrongly, accurately or inaccurately, parents and icons do very much shape many people’s sense of themselves in a profound way. They establish a sense of one’s potential and the obstacles one faces in life. For
marginalized groups, icons can provide a sense of pride and dignity, both within the group and outside of it. Those icons can also serve as a source of emotional connection, or at least of feeling less alone. In terms of both influencing people and giving them a sense of emotional connection, parents and icons both typically have a strong impact, insofar as parents can rise to iconic status, at least in one’s own life, and icons can seem like actual acquaintances and friends with respect to the emotional intensity they can generate.

This project began as an investigation of praise. What does it mean to praise someone? Most obviously, it means acknowledging and calling attention to what one defines as positive qualities of that person. Praise often has a communicative and public dimension. One can have several reasons for praising another: to foster a bond between the one who praises and the praised; to encourage or otherwise cheer up the praised; to perform one’s humility or graciousness when the praised has somehow outperformed or excelled the one who praises; to inspire others to model their behavior after the praised; to attribute a sense of honor, capability, or legitimacy to a group to one with whom the praised one is associated; to demonstrate the fine taste or generosity of spirit of the one who praises; and to extol oneself through praising another with whom the one who praises is associated or whom he or she resembles. Typically considered positive, praise can have several negative aspects as well. It can inspire jealousy and resentment, and it can bring uncomfortable and unwanted attention to the praised. One can damn with faint praise, as well as praise grudgingly, mockingly, or ironically. One can praise in a way that oversimplifies a complex issue, that misrepresents reality, or that obscures and distracts from
negative qualities than can and should be addressed. One can also praise condescendingly, which is especially problematic when one praises a member of a marginalized group as a partial exception to that group’s supposedly otherwise consistent inferiority, or as evidence that social policy and attitudes toward that group really do permit some of them to “thrive” in circumstances that might be far more adverse than suggested. As these functions of praise suggest, the operations of praise involve not only the one who is praised, but also the one who praises. For me, this layer of praise is particularly interesting insofar as it diverges from the conventional understanding of praise as an outward-directed activity. In this project, to the extent that I still look at praise I am primarily concerned with individuals praising those who have influenced and somehow shaped the one who praises. This form of praise involves a triangulation of sorts, in which the one who praises acknowledges the limits of self-determination, as well as the power the praised exercises over them by virtue of that influence. Conversely, the one who praises also shapes the legacy and understanding of the one who is praised, contextualizes that influence, and asserts a degree of agency insofar as he or she has struggled against or embraced that influence.

Perhaps what most interested me about praise in poetry was the ambivalence that often accompanied it. In general, contemporary American literary culture privileges complexity and ambivalence. Being too straightforward, uncomplicated, or “emotional” in writing can and does lead to criticism of being mediocre, hackneyed, “immature,” overly dependent on sensational or unusual life experiences for material, and “sentimental.” Poet and critic Ira Sadoff makes a fairly characteristic dismissal of “conventional” lyric poetry on the basis of such perceived deficiencies, such as the “narcissism of aggrandizing sensitivity or victimization” in work that is characterized as “melancholy, alienated, replete with stasis and resignation” (4). One example of this appetite

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7 More broadly, Sadoff’s argument is that these poets perpetuate the ideology of the dominant order by not adequately interrogating their artistic conventions. He writes, “Their dominant mode is the voice poem, which both
for ambivalence appears in poet Gerald Stern’s foreword to Li-Young Lee’s first volume of poetry *Rose*. Stern criticizes what he considers to be common contemporary representations of fathers in poetry, though he does not name any specific writers: "The ‘father’ in contemporary poetry tends to be either a pathetic soul or a bungler or a sweet loser, overwhelmed by the demands of family and culture and workplace. At very best he is a small hero who died early or escaped west or found the bottle and whom the poet, in his or her poem, is forgiving" (9). Stern prefers a paradigm of complexity and struggle rather than one of straightforward forgiveness. He praises Lee’s poetry insofar as "the poet’s job becomes not to benignly or tenderly forgive him, but to withstand him and comprehend him, and variously love and fear him” (9). I have for several years wondered about what determines “acceptable” and “praiseworthy” representations of emotion in contemporary poetry. Toward the beginning of this project, it was the ambivalence of praise that made it interesting to me. However, as my thinking developed, I began to question what it is about ambivalence that makes it interesting. Ultimately, my focus has shifted to the question of what ambivalence accomplishes in poetry and what it prevents.

If it is to be taken seriously from an institutional perspective, contemporary American poetry requires an excuse for emotion,\(^8\) which includes poetic persona, disclaiming self-

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\(8\) While emotions such as Schadenfreude and rage are problematic in fairly obvious ways, it is not quite so clear as to why other emotions, such as the much-maligned “self-pity” are problematic. In the case of “self-pity,” do others feel that suffering is a zero sum game? Does the discussion of someone else’s sorrow/sense of inadequacy embarrass them? Does it model a sort of helplessness/lack of agency that they do not believe in? Do they believe that the self-pitying individual in question actually “has it good” or “doesn’t have it that bad”? And what about pride, and the much-maligned “narcissism”? Surely pride can be harmful if it asserts the worthlessness or inhumanity of others, or if it frees the prideful individual from observing the dictates of civility/considerateness. But what of a sort of benign
awareness, irony, the dialectic transformation of one emotion to another, ambivalence, and political context. These rhetorical cues make emotional “acceptable” insofar as they complicate it, call its authenticity or accuracy into question, or ally it with a political cause taken more seriously than the emotion itself. For the poets under consideration, ambivalence and political context are the most common excuses for emotion. In addition to praise, criticism is generally qualified through ambivalence and political context as well. The poet most critical of parents in this collection is Sharon Olds, but, even so, she writes about the intense affection, desire, and need for the parents experienced by the speaker, and she also explores the misfortunes that contributed to the personal shortcomings of the parents. Similarly, Rafael Campo criticizes the speaker’s parents for their ambivalence toward his sexuality, a decidedly political project. Robert Hass criticizes the speaker’s father for his imperfect response to the mother’s mental illness, a criticism that Hass in part frames as a critique of gender norms in mid-twentieth-century America.

I see this project as related to a recent interest in emotion within literary studies that has been called emotion theory. On one level emotion theory is a reaction against Poststructuralism and the bracketing of individual subjective experience in the interest of exploring the social forces that in many ways shape and define that experience. It does not necessarily reject the conclusions of Poststructuralism but rather returns the focus of academic inquiry to individual experience. Connected with feminism and queer theory, emotion theory considers the ways that deeply ingrained, socially conventional emotions perpetuate attitudes and power structures. It also considers the manner in which individuals challenging social order are criticized for their supposedly inappropriate or otherwise deviant emotions. In terms of methodology, emotion self-adoration? Why do people resent that? Why do they insist on their “humility,” which is often self-congratulatory or resentful?
theory often involves studying rhetoric describing or depicting emotion, which is the approach I take in this project.

One issue that arises when talking about emotions in any sort of serious way is the question of what exactly an emotion is and how it can be productively discussed. Philosopher Alison Jaggar notes the “the variety, complexity, and even inconsistency of the ways in which emotions are viewed, both in daily life and in scientific contexts” (117), which makes it difficult to define, and even talk about them. She says that the term emotion can cover a broad range of states, ranging from “apparently instantaneous, knee-jerk responses of fright to lifelong dedication to an individual or a cause; from highly civilized aesthetic responses to undifferentiated feelings of hunger and thirst; from background moods such as contentment or depression to intense and focused involvement in an immediate situation” (117). Sara Ahmed⁹ and Sianne Ngai¹⁰ find it useful to think about the manner in which emotions involve the judgment and assessment of situations, which obviously opens up emotions as a means of analyzing the operations of culture. This approach contrasts with the so-called “Dumb View” (Jaggar 119), which deemphasizes the role of judgment and intent with respect to emotion. Another divide is between those who view emotion as primarily interior¹¹ and those who view it less as “psychological states” and more as “social and cultural practices” (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion, 9).¹² However, Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribam caution, “Social construction provides some tools for challenging essentialisms and the unequal power relations

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⁹ Ahmed writes, “Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are ‘about’ something: they involve a direction or an orientation towards an object” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 7).

¹⁰ Ngai writes, “As a whole, the book approaches emotions as unusually knotted or condensed ‘interpretations of predicaments’—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner” (3).

¹¹ Ahmed notes, “The everyday language of emotion is based on the presumption of interiority” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 8).

¹² Ahmed writes, “In critiquing this model, I am joining sociologists and anthropologists who have argued that emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 9).
they have supported. However, as we have indicated, social constructionism has limited scope for intervening in cultural politics when it seeks to downplay the biological, thus failing to engage fully with the social and the individual” (15). Thinkers have argued whether emotions are “functions of body or mind” (Harding and Pribam 4). Another distinction that comes up is that between “emotion” and “affect”: “The affect/emotion split originated in psychoanalysis for the practical purpose of distinguishing third-person from first-person representations of feeling, with ‘affect’ designating feeling described from an observer’s (analyst’s) perspective, and ‘emotion’ designating feeling that ‘belongs’ to the speaker or analysand’s” (Ngai 25). Lawrence Grossberg chooses to use these terms to indicate the level of cognitive content present: “Unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations” (qtd in Ngai 25). Ngai sees value in Grossberg’s definition, though she uses the terms “more or less interchangeably” and to illustrate matters of degree more than to arrive at an absolute categorization.13

Like Ngai, I think that the answer to many of these questions about the nature of emotion is more a matter of degree than an absolute. It seems to me that these sorts of questions, while important and interesting, cannot be readily resolved in a definitive way, so it is necessary to state in what ways one is talking about emotion and move on with a project. In this study, I am looking at “emotion,” “expressions of emotion,” “representations of emotion,” and “emotional content”—all terms meaning roughly the same thing. I am reading poems for explicit mentions of emotion. Beyond that, I am drawing inferences from content and tone14 in order to talk about

13 Ngai explains, “In the chapters that follow, the difference between affect and emotion is taken as a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind. My assumption is that affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking in form or structure altogether; less ‘sociolinguistically fixed,’ but by no means code-free or meaningless; less ‘organized in response to our interpretations of situations,’ but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers” (Ngai 27).
14 Ngai notes that as a concept tone is useful albeit difficult to define: “Tone does a great deal of diagnostic and critical work for these writers and many others. Yet compared to other formal categories relied on for the analysis of
emotion. I do not meant the emotional response that the poem evokes in a reader; rather, I mean the emotion that the speaker appears to be trying to evoke (which may or may not match up with authorial intent) and the emotion that one could attribute to the speaker if one viewed him or her as an actual character.

I see my project as coinciding with what Rei Terada calls “a surge in the academic study of feeling” (14) from the 1990s onward. This surge, emotion theory, has focused heavily on the cultural work performed by emotions, representations of emotion, and discourses of emotion. As Ahmed says, “So rather than asking ‘What are emotions?’, I will ask, ‘What do emotions do?’” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 4). As Hardy and Pribam note, the development of what they call “emotion studies” has resulted from emotion being considered overly personal, too difficult to discuss, and stigmatized through its associated with marginalized groups as more emotional than “rational” dominant groups. They also note that the scientific disciplines historically interested in emotion “have been less concerned with the social, cultural and historical variability of emotional existence” (2). Within the realm of literary studies and critical theory, though, emotion theory responds to ideas about the “death of the subject” in Poststructuralism, which has seemingly focused more on the operations of language and culture than individual experience. Terada writes, “It may be difficult to imagine what the kinds of experience proposed by poststructuralist theory are supposed to feel like. Many readers have assumed that the very idea of strong emotion is inconsistent with poststructuralism” (Terada 1). However, she also writes, “Poststructuralist though about emotion is hidden in plain sight; poststructuralist theory deploys...
implicit and explicit logics of emotion and, as its very critics point out, willingly dramatizes particular emotions” (3). Her argument is that poststructuralist theorists engage with and elicit emotion, but they do so in a way that is not explicitly theorized, and that at least on the surface level conflicts with their skepticism toward talking about individual experience. Of course, my understanding is that Poststructuralist theorists bracketed emotion to the extent that they did in order to emphasize that individual experience was shaped by society. They also wanted to challenge the idea that emotions were purely natural, as well as to undermine spurious arguments, inside the academy and without, that relied on dubious accounts of or appeals to emotion. However, if one thinks more rigorously about emotions in a way that accounts for these concerns, as I think emotion theorists in general do, then there is no real reason to overlook emotion (certainly not out of a dogmatic or reflexive perpetuation of the habits of Poststructuralism), which is, after all, a major feature of culture, literature, and human experience.

Before this recent critical interest, though, critical theorists and literary theorists, including poststructuralists, have demonstrated some interest in emotion in a manner similar to, and serving as a precursor to, the current generation of emotion theorists. Raymond Williams introduced the concept of structures of feeling: the “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living” (36). He argues that these structures are a powerful tool for understanding culture and literature. He says, “It is here, at a level even more important than that of institutions, that the real relations within the whole culture are made clear: relations that can easily be neglected when only the best writing survives, or when this is studied outside its social context” (41). As for others theorists and critics, Terada writes, “Jerome McGann and Terry Eagleton, and others after them, have analyzed the ideological convenience of casting emotion as a basis for
naturalized social or moral consensus” (Terada 4). She also notes that “French feminists, Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Lyotard” have made significant contributions to new ways of thinking about eroticism. However, eroticism and desire have over the past several decades attracted more critical attention than other emotional experience.

Perhaps most significantly, feminists have brought attention to emotion and the cultural work it performs. They have critiqued the understanding of women (and other groups) as more inherently emotional beings, and therefore less “rational” and less fit for social power. They have examined the role that ingrained emotional response serves in perpetuating the social order. Jaggar says that people who experience dissatisfaction with this social order “experience conventionally unacceptable, or what I call ‘outlaw’ emotions” (131), which can lead to great anxiety and great self-questioning. However, she also argues that these outlaw emotions have political potential. She says, “Outlaw emotions stand in a dialectical relation to critical social theory: at least some are necessary for developing a critical perspective on the world, but they also presuppose at least the beginnings of such a perspective” (132). This statement shows three ideas—the social constructedness of emotional response, the evaluative role of emotion, and the emotional dimension of the movement for change (or the maintenance of the status quo)—that continue to inform the field of emotion theory. In turn, emotion theory continues to have strong ties to gender studies and queer theory, as well as to matters relating to race and ethnicity.

Furthermore, emotion theorists Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Lawrence Grossberg, and others

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15 Jaggar articulates this argument as follows: “Feminist theorists have pointed out that the Western tradition has not seen everyone as equally emotional. Instead, reason has been associated with members of dominant political, social, and cultural groups and emotion with members of subordinate groups. Prominent among those subordinate groups in our society are people of color, except for supposedly ‘inscrutable orientals,’ and women” (128).

16 Ahmed writes, “I would challenge any assumption that love can provide the foundation for political action, or is a sign of good politics. But what would political vision be if we did not love those visions?” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 141).

17 Berlant writes, “At the same time, the fact that political feeling has a history of mediation means that its conventions can change. The optimism of this book, and there’s not much of it, is located in the centrality of
continue to argue for the role of emotion in effecting social change—both by changing social norms of emotional response and by animating and guiding political action.

These concerns are certainly important to my own project and my own way of thinking about emotion. That said, my project is partly descriptive—what do these poets actually say?—and partly an exercise in critical, artistic, and institutional self-reflection—what could they have said differently? My contention is that the conventions of poetry constrain the emotional content of poetry in a way tied to the conventions of the academy, just as conventions of critical theory and literary criticism constrain those fields to certain emotional content. Two others having made comparable claims are Ngai, author of Ugly Feelings, and Michael D. Snediker, author of Queer Optimism. Focusing on “minor and generally unprestigious feelings” (6), Ngai notes, “Something about the cultural canon itself seems to prefer higher passions and emotions—as if minor or ugly feelings were not only incapable of producing ‘major’ works, but somehow disabled the works they do drive from acquiring canonical distinction” (Ngai 11). Similarly, Snediker states, “‘My critical project arises from a sense that queer theory, for all its contributions to our understandings of affect, has had far more to say about negative affects than positive ones’” (4). Snediker notes the tendency in the academy to take the position that a feeling such as optimism “solipsistically disengages from or flits above the crises of lived experience,” a position which he finds “fatuous” (32). He seeks to find ways to make positive feelings critically interesting, to theorize them so that they merit and attract serious scholarly attention: “Queer optimism, in this sense, can be considered a form of meta-optimism: it wants to think about

aesthetics and pedagogy to shaping fantasies, identifications, and attachments to particular identities and life narratives. The frustration accompanying that optimism has to do with the difficulty of inducing structural transformation out of shifts in collective feeling” (The Female Complaint xii).

Grossberg writes, “The very possibility of struggle depends upon an affective empowerment, what Gramsci (1971) referred to as an ‘optimism of the will’” (79).
feeling good, to make disparate aspects of feeling good thinkable” (Snediker 3). As for my own project, I am arguing for serious critical consideration of not any one particular swath of emotion, ugly or positive, but of strong, emphatic, dramatic, unironic, or otherwise “naive” or unsophisticated emotion. The equally important counterpart of this argument is my contention that the emotional content in poetry that seems to be taken most seriously—nuanced emotion, ironic emotion, emotion undermined and modulated through critical self-reflection—should not be assumed to be automatically more interesting than other forms of emotion. I would add that these forms of “difficult,” “complex,” and “mature” emotional content can be just as formulaic and simple to represent as emotional content deemed melodramatic, self-congratulatory, or solipsistic.

One might object that some emotions are more desirable, politically efficacious, and interesting than others. One might also argue some poems are simply more artful or moving than others. These things might be true, but the limitations of the conventions of praise and disapproval do not correspond absolutely to these qualities, and they certainly overlook other possibilities for the role of emotion in poetry. One might also point out that less ironic, more dramatic expressions of emotion pervade culture, particularly popular culture. That would certainly be true. One can even find dramatically divergent forms of emotional expression in slam poetry, for example. However, to define poetry in opposition to other forms of discourse, other genres, would be to curtail it severely and unnecessarily. Moreover, I’m interested in the forces that give rise to that compartmentalization of emotion in the first place. Of course, plenty of people are probably already writing poetry that challenges these norms. 19 People can write as

19 When talking about poetic practice I generally am not referring to “what people write” in the sense of all the people who write what they call poetry, either with or without formal training and eventual publication. Rather, I am pointing toward poetic production resulting in some measure of formal recognition from the mainstream American poetry community, which is deeply rooted in academia.
they please, but only work meeting certain generally agreed-upon criteria will be widely read, published, written about, and praised. The conventions of poetic practice are shaped by the work that poets encounter, but they encounter mostly work that already meets those established criteria. Poetic practice can shift, sometimes quickly and sometimes dramatically, but it can also be strongly conservative and self-perpetuating.

Any regulation of our lives, including our emotions, merits study and consideration. As Foucault argued, power is inescapable, but it is not always bad—sometimes it is even productive of good. (For my purposes, power takes the form of the norms shaping the use of emotion in poetry and its reception by trained readers.) However, we should still be aware of and critical toward its operations, especially when we are told that something is for our own good. If nothing else, it is good to ask these questions just to be sure, and to establish a more rigorous conceptual framework for future use. It is a simpler matter to ask these questions of what is outside of the academy—to identify oppressive ideologies, dangerous misinformation, misguided romanticizing, and counterproductive oversimplification. It is a less welcome endeavor to ask these questions of what is inside the academy, in which case one might face accusations of anti-intellectualism, intellectual laziness, and gratuitous hostility. Of course, scholars disagree with one another all the time, with varying degrees of sharpness. In some ways, the scholarly discussion within a field is an ongoing process of disagreement, modification, and the addressing of perceived limitations. That said, some scholarly conventions are more cherished and held to be more self-evident than others, and I strongly suspect this dichotomy between “difficult” and “easy” emotions to be one of them. Feminist scholars such as Nina Baym have already challenged the academic and artistic norms about the expression of emotion to great effect within the context of feminism and gender studies, especially in relation to nineteenth-century
American literature. As discussed in Chapter Two, Alicia Ostriker makes a similar defense of Sharon Olds against her critics.

So, we inhabit a regime of emotional regulation,\(^{20}\) whose operations I try to assess generously in the work of the poets under discussion while also remaining skeptical and asking what potential problems and limitations arise. That constitutes much of the theoretical substance of this project. Briefly, I would also like to address four minor but still significant trains of thought that have been important to *Excuses for Emotion*.

First, I believe one can read poetry about parents and icons as being about the speaker, insofar as those people have shaped the speaker in a way that he or she can celebrate, accept, or struggle against.\(^{21}\) That poems purporting to be about another figure are also about the speaker should not be a terribly controversial stance. I think people often talk about others as a means of saying something about themselves, both inside and outside of poetry. Crucially, these others often serve as the engine of struggle. A related point is that contemporary American poetry has a conventional lyric speaker who often dramatizes the self in struggle. By overcoming struggles, which are shown to be meaningful and challenging, the speaker can rise in the reader’s esteem. More broadly, those struggles can be against society, against parents, and against emotions or other qualities of the self, such as the dreaded “self-pity.” Struggle can be “interesting”: it can be a site of anger, jealousy, and condescension, but also of respect, playfulness, and even affection. I am not arguing that it’s a necessarily a bad thing. Neither am I arguing that the self-

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\(^{20}\) By that I mean that there are strong social forces that shape what poets compose, but also what is published, discussed, and awarded.

\(^{21}\) In that regard, while parents and political icons might seem to be vastly different on some level, my hypothesis has been that the role they play as figures in poetic self-fashioning. I also want to trouble the dubious distinction between personal and political poetry, as well as assessments that too readily assign greater merit to one or the other without a compellingly articulated reason, which I address in the conclusion of Chapter Three.
congratulation inherent in the speaker’s struggle is necessarily a bad thing. But why must they struggle and overcome? Why can’t they just criticize? Why can’t they simply be proud?

Second, I think that poetry has value. Most obviously, poetry is worthy of attention as a serious art form with a rich tradition, a large number of contemporary practitioners, and a strong institutional presence. And, despite my concerns, I understand that ambivalence, irony, nuanced emotions, and so forth can and do have value in poetry. They are modes of discourse that often exist to a limited degree elsewhere in culture, so in that sense poetry preserves an important place for them. These qualities are also consonant with social critique. They are conducive to generating the cognitive distance from cherished notions and common sense necessary to effect meaningful social change. Moreover, they themselves are part of human experience. Being conflicted, ambivalent, or unsure of one’s feelings is in no way more or less authentic than feeling a strong passion with overwhelming certainty. In addition, I think that that poetry has provided a means of talking about the self and society in complex, innovative, and self-aware ways. However—and here is my major concern—when “complexity,” “innovation,” and “self-awareness” become as perfunctory as they have, they lose their power. If one is to accept poetry as a serious art form with potential to affect intellectual and artistic discourse more broadly, then it would be a shame to limit in a significant and arbitrary manner the way in which one can discuss such topics as one’s emotions and the process of self-fashioning.

Third, emotional regulation varies according to the poet’s “identity.” Rare is the published poet nowadays who doesn’t have some form of higher education, usually at least a master’s degree. These degrees tend to be in creative writing, English literature, or a closely related field. As such, these poets have almost certainly had exposure to theory, and in particular to ideas about feminism and gender essentialism. Nonetheless, one could probably pick a major
literary journal or anthology and identify certain styles of voice and subject matter which skew overwhelmingly toward one gender, even if one eliminated all explicit references to gender in the poems in question. For example, I would imagine if a dramatic poem addresses a current or former sexual partner as “you,” is perhaps fraught with complications or at least full of sexual provocativeness, and has sensual or dark imagery, it is probably going to be the work of a woman. Similarly, if a poem is either jokey or surreal, has flashes of sensitivity and beauty to balance things out, and is perhaps mildly self-deprecatory in a way that nonetheless points to the speaker’s depth of feeling, it is probably going to be the work of a man. In theory there is absolutely no reason why the gender of the authors shouldn’t be reversed—no reason why a man shouldn’t be able to publish the former style of poetry and a woman should be able to publish the latter—but these gender norms remain entrenched (not absolutely, but widely nonetheless). I’m not advocating some vision of gender-neutral poetry that would bracket people’s gender identity and experiences, but I do see the range of acceptable expression of emotion to be tied to gender in problematic way for both men and women.

To use an example from Chapter Two, poet and critic Alicia Ostriker accuses the detractors of Sharon Olds’s passionate language of forming their judgments as a reaction to their anxiety about her transgressing the limits of acceptable expression for a female voice. While I largely agree with Ostriker’s argument, I find it problematic that she bases her defense on the grounds of Olds’s sex and not so much on the basis of the intrinsic merit of the qualities in question of Olds’s poetry. That might seem like a trivial complaint. However, if writing of that sort of emotional, dramatic nature is defended only as women’s writing, and not writing in

22 See “‘What Do Women Want?,” by Kim Addonizio; “Perfect,” by Erin Belieu (8-9); “All the Aphrodisiacs,” by Cathy Park Hong; and “She Wishes Her Beloved Were Dead,” by Cate Marvin (9-10).
23 See “Jet,” by Tony Hoagland; “Scary, No Scary,” by Zachary Schomburg; “A Song Called Aperture,” by Joshua Marie Wilkinson; “Scarecrow on Fire,” by Dean Young; and “Schwinn” and “As I Cross the Helipause at Midnight, I Think of My Mission,” by Matthew Zapruder.
general, then it becomes “women’s writing.” Now, I am quite confident that many aspiring male poets write, or have written, in a manner similar to Olds. However, that work has not made it into print to nearly the degree as it has in the work of women writers (I’m not making the claim that it’s the dominant mode of female poets by any stretch of the imagination, but at the same time I find it hard to believe that such work written by a man would be taken as seriously.) Such a situation risks essentializing women’s writing in a detrimental way. It limits men as well, in a way that also happens to reinforce traditional gender roles.

I would like to argue in favor of a sort of poetic “drag.” I’m not talking about persona poems in which the speaker assumes the identity of someone whom the reader will not associate with the author on a biographical level. Theory has pointed out that identities are constituted to a large degree by their own performance, that identity is far more constructed than natural, and that people signal their identity through identifiable language and codes. That said, I think poems often reproduce the identities of their authors in ways that are too automatic and unexamined. Now, I understand a poet might wish to address significant concerns or experiences that others like the author might share. Likewise, I recognize that there is political power in establishing a discourse (in poetry and elsewhere) for members of an identity group. Still, as discussed in Chapter Three, Li-Young Lee feels chagrined by the fact that he is read relentlessly as an Asian-American poet. Why can’t Lee write (and be read) like someone else? Why can’t a man write “like a woman”? Why can’t a gay poet write “like a straight poet,” and vice versa? Although beyond the scope of this study, my anecdotal experience is that various demographic groups tend to share stylistic similarities far more than would be explained by chance. By encouraging them (and freeing them from the fear of criticism) to explore writing in “drag,” we would be putting
theory about identity to significant use in a way that not only generates art but also illustrates the constitutive role of language in perpetuating congealed forms of identity.

Fourth, one might justifiably wonder what I propose to use as a basis for assessing poetry. As Baym has argued, conventions of literary judgment have varied stupendously over time. I can think of a (probably non-exhaustive) list of six criteria to use for judging poetry: intellectual complexity, ethical purpose, authenticity in relation to the reader’s experience or vision of the world, intensity of expression and content, evocativeness of language, and enjoyableness. In current literary critical practice, only the first two reasons are widely taken seriously. There might be difficulties in discussing the latter four in the context of a rigorous intellectual framework, and yet they are important aspects of actually experiencing poetry. To echo my earlier point vis-à-vis Snediker, it is worth thinking about the ways in which other criteria such as these can be critically “interesting.”

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I look at the work of thirteen American poets, born from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s, with the work I discuss having been published, with few exceptions, from the 1960s onward. The majority of these writers are still living. I have of course selected poets whose work explores parents and icons in ways that I personally find compelling to engage with. That said, I have also chosen to select what I call poets of prominence: poets who are in many cases well-known and widely anthologized, at least within the circles in which they tend to be read. Many of these poets are figures with whom the contemporary reader of poetry would be familiar, and who therefore represent poetry as it is actually encountered and thought about for many such readers.
I have tried to include poets representing different identities, personal backgrounds, and styles, though this project is by no means exhaustive. While I have tried to represent different styles and aesthetic schools, I have not drawn from poets who predominantly write work that is commonly called “experimental,” meaning work that primarily plays with language in a way that rejects readily apparent meaning, that is surreal, and that otherwise diverges from the convention of a speaker describing realistic personal experience with some emotional content. With its rejection of representation of clear emotional states and narrativized personal experience, this work simply does not lend itself well to the sort of analysis I wish to perform. A poet such as Timothy Liu writes the kind of work I am not exploring, but he does not limit himself to that mode of composition. After having assembled this group of poets, I noticed a number of small, perhaps random coincidences, such as Robert Hass and Sharon Olds both having been born in San Francisco within a couple years of one another. However, the largest surprise for me was that the majority of the poets write poetry about the experience of being a child of an immigrant, whether one parent or two. The third chapter, “Displaced Children,” investigates poets who often write about being the children of immigrants, but poets discussed elsewhere, such as Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg, are not to my knowledge as heavily associated with this aspect of their work and biography.

Poetry presents a particular set of challenges when one writes about it academically. As opposed to longer, more narrative work, an individual poem often has seemingly random elements in a small space, and it is sometimes difficult to discuss such a poem without reducing it to a key point or two while also tying the various elements together in a neat and elegant way.

24 The fifth chapter, “The Promise of Whitman,” is actually a fairly exhaustive look at poetry about Walt Whitman by recent gay American poets, which is a smaller category than I initially imagined.
25 I find this term suspect, insofar as it implies the work in question is more innovative and intellectually brave than “non-experimental poetry.” I would suggest instead the term “conceptual poetry,” or “language-oriented poetry” in some cases, as more neutral, as well as more precise.
As a general principle, I have tried to discuss individual poems as poems, and not to just discuss small pieces of individual poems in thematic groupings, because part of my aim is to discuss what a poem “does”; after all, by limiting my primary sources to poetry, I am in practice advancing a genre-specific claim, so I want to look at my objects as examples of that genre. In addition, poems are often elliptical and ambiguous to a greater degree than fiction, and their brevity often confines one to the mere space of an individual poem when one is searching for explanatory context. I have done what I could in dealing with this challenge. I have of course needed to rely on speculation, though I have tried to be explicit when I feel some significant uncertainty about a particular reading. Also, even though I have made an effort to discuss poems as discrete units, I have also found it useful to make points based on extrapolations from a more general “speaker” based on the poet’s work as a whole.

As for conventions I have chosen to follow, I refer to the central voice in the poem as the speaker, whether that voice evokes a very detailed character or whether it discusses matters not explicitly related to any sort of self readily identifiable as a character. On one level I find the term speaker to be cloying and somewhat disingenuous. Although poetry is not nonfiction, neither is it clearly fictional. In fact, many readers, and probably many practicing poets, assume that, unless otherwise stated, the poem depicts events and attitudes that are for the most part authentic and based on the poet’s life. One should not assume that to be true, but, after all, there are many things one should not assume. The fact, though, is that many people do make the assumption, and, by assigning the statements of the poem to the poet him or herself, they limit the sort of statements a poet could make that a fiction writer could get away with under the pretense of an unreliable narrator. That said, for the sake of consistency, and because it is impossible to determine precisely what is biographical and what isn’t, I have referred to the
central voice as the speaker and treated it as a character that, unless otherwise noted, remains consistent throughout a poet’s work. As for pronouns, though, I have always referred to the speaker as belonging to the same sex as the author, unless I have found a very compelling reason not to. In addition, although I provide a few brief biographical details when introducing the poets, I have largely avoided biographical claims in my analysis of the poetry and have only made biographical references sparingly. For a poet such as Ginsberg, whose biography is colorful and self-publicized, I have included a few tangential details just because I found them interesting. Conversely, I have largely avoided the biographical with respect to a figure such as Plath, for whom it serves as a distraction from the poetry, and for whom the focus on the biographical feels more intrusive.

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Chapter One, “Sympathetic Sons,” looks at the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Robert Hass. Both men have written about mothers suffering from significant mental illness, which creates distance between them and their sons, even as the sons retain a strong sense of affection for them. The speakers judge men in their family for their actions and attitudes toward their mothers. Ginsberg’s speaker applauds the sympathy of his father and brother, whereas Hass’s speaker is critical toward his own father and brother for failures of understanding with respect to his mother. This poetry examines the stigma of mental illness, as well as the marginal position of women throughout the twentieth century. I also look at theoretical work on sympathy, which acknowledges its potential to effect meaningful social change, but which also emphasizes the risk of sympathy resulting in the under-recognition of difference, being patronizing or
condescending, and also leading to relatively empty, self-congratulatory gestures. I conclude by reading the work of critics who have praised Hass for his stoic “maturity” and nuance. I ask to what extent those qualities are good in and of themselves, and I also ask whether he could have written about his subject matter differently without attracting serious criticism.

Chapter Two, “Incomplete Daughters,” looks at the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Sharon Olds. Both women write about parents whom the speaker admires and desires affection from but who ultimately denies them that affection, which sends them looking for it elsewhere. For Plath, the speaker’s stern, professorial father dies during her youth, which the poems present as a personal rejection of sorts. The mother appears more in the capacity of a rival, as well as a hindrance to the speaker’s aspirations and exceptional selfhood. For Olds, the handsome but alcoholic father and the beautiful and talented but critical mother are objects of passionate desire for the speaker, but they criticize her and deny her the affection and validation she craves. Plath’s speaker seeks solace in art and in injurious relationships with other men. Olds’s speaker seeks solace more successfully in marriage, motherhood, sex, and even in adult relationships with her parents, which, while still strained and problematic, allow her to find some measure of reciprocation for her abiding affection. I also look at theoretical work on trauma, obsession, and masochism, with the most emphasis on masochism and its problematic implications for women and feminism. Plath’s speaker is more conventionally masochistic than Olds’s speaker. I focus on their continued investment in relationships that cause pain. In the conclusion, I examine Alicia Ostriker’s defense of Olds against critics who deem her emotional content too overwrought. Ostriker premises her defense on what she suspects is the discomfort of those critics with Olds transgressing conventional limitations on the appropriate subject matter and tone for a woman. While largely agreeing with Ostriker, I reflect on the potential problems of focusing on Olds’s
work as women’s writing without theorizing the broader social regulations of emotion also inherent in that criticism. I note that male poets should also have access to Olds’s poetic strategies, but that under-examined gender ideology inherent in poetic practice and poetry criticism (both academic and belle-letttristic) impose a serious limitation on that access.

Chapter Three, “Displaced Children,” looks at the work of Naomi Shihab Nye, Rafael Campo, and Li-Young Lee, children of immigrant parents (Lee being an immigrant himself, albeit one who arrived in the United States in early childhood) who write about their speakers’ parents as such. Nye’s speaker has a Palestinian father who left the troubled political situation of his homeland for America, where he married the speaker’s mother, an American woman. A seemingly whimsical, gentle, and progressive man, he gives her a sense of connection to Arab culture, as well as to the plight of the Palestinians. Campo’s speaker has a Cuban father whose wealthy family fled to America after the rise of Castro. His wife, the speaker’s mother, is Italian-American, though they live in an area heavily populated by Cuban-Americans, and it is also implied that her husband’s family (particularly his mother) have pushed her to adopt Cuban cultural practices, particularly cooking. An emotionally distant but loyal and in some ways caring man, he gives the speaker a sense of his identity as Cuban-American, but his own attachment to Cuba creates, or at least serves as a metaphor for, his emotional distance from his son. He also has a problematic attitude toward the fact that his son is gay. While he does not seem to offer much in the way of direct criticism or to reject that aspect of his son’s life, the speaker nonetheless detects disapproval, or at least disappointment. Li-Young Lee’s speaker is the son of a father who fled Asia for political reasons, though those reasons are not fully explained in the poetry itself. The father arrived with his family in America, where he became a Christian minister. While the speaker himself talks freely about the cultural habits of his family,
some of which he himself appears to have retained, he does not place a great deal of emphasis on his ethnicity as such. Also, while concerned with immigrant experience, he does not evidence a strong investment in world politics and foreign affairs. His father appears to be wise and kind, though the speaker alludes to episodes of anger. Much of Lee’s poetry is concerned with the process of mourning for him, with the emphasis being on the emotional significance he holds for the speaker without necessarily a specific explanation of the significance. For all three poets in this chapter, the mother appears to a far lesser extent, and she is more likely to be associated with affection, sympathy, and existential meditations. I also look at scholarship exploring the emotional dimensions of diaspora and the immigrant experience, which suggests that, while there are common features, the actual emotional experience can be incredibly varied and highly individually specific. I conclude by looking at the criticism Li-Young Lee has faced for distancing himself from categorization as an Asian-American poet. I argue that while writing as the child of an immigrant can make certain emotions, such as pride, more acceptable to express, it can also limit the expression of other emotions, especially those that imply criticism of the parent. Lee chafes, and rightly so, at the expectation that he consistently focus on his ethnicity at the expense of more “universal” concerns and modes of discourse.

Chapter Four, “Women of Power,” looks at the poetry of lesbian feminist poets Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn, and June Jordan. They write about iconic female figures of importance to the women’s movement. These icons vary in terms of fame, and while most of them have made what appears to be a significant contribution, if sometimes only symbolically, to the advancement of women in society, a few are portrayed as having betrayed or undermined feminism and progressive politics. Focusing on building optimism and determination while preventing complacency, these poets look at women throughout history who have had various forms of
power, but who also, for various reasons, have experienced failures of that power, failures that women in different circumstances might somehow overcome, especially through social change and collective action. Rich looks at more conventional icons: artists, scientists, writers, and adventurers. Grahn looks at two elemental sources of power—beauty and strength—as exemplified by, respectively, American movie stars and the Celtic warrior queen Boudica. Jordan looks more at non-white and non-western women, with figures including royalty and activists. I also explore the way that thinking about emotions, including but certainly not limited to love and sympathy, has been central to feminism. In the conclusion, I compare the prose of Helen Vendler and Adrienne Rich to call into question spurious criticism of poetry as “too personal” or “too political.” I also return to the idea of failures of power. While representations of such failures accomplish the political-emotional work described above, I also question whether they are in fact also manifestations of genre-based emotional regulation—that they exist in a poem as a requisite complication or undermining of emotional content.

Chapter Five, “The Promise of Whitman,” looks at the poetry of gay poets Allen Ginsberg, Richard Howard, Timothy Liu, and Mark Doty. Their poems either include Walt Whitman as a character or reference him in some other way. The iconic gay American poet against whom all other are almost inevitably measured, Whitman represents egalitarianism, community, idealism, robust homoeroticism, and literary significance. In those ways, he serves as an attractive beacon of hope and possibility for gay male poets. However, his utopic vision and in many ways improbable literary success contrast with the actual experiences of gay life in the twentieth century, experiences marred by intense oppression on many levels, as well as the AIDS crisis. These poets express attachment to Whitman’s vision, even as they call it into question. Ginsberg imagines encountering a bardic but still somewhat lost-seeming Whitman in a
contemporary supermarket. Howard imagines dialogues between an old, unwell, and cantankerous (but still passionate and idealistic) Whitman and two of his literary admirers, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde. Liu reflects on the legacy of Whitman in the context of anonymous sex in public restrooms, a reflection that simultaneously elevates that form of sexual encounter while also contrasting with the actual work of Whitman, even more idealistic and less overtly sexual. Doty takes a more meditative view of Whitman, as he contemplates modern life, as well as the possibility of community and personal connection, with Whitman serving as an ideal that the speaker seems neither able to fully embrace nor fully discard. I also look at the work of queer theorists who have dealt with negative emotions in varying degrees, and I ask, along with Michael D. Snediker, if it is possible to focus on positive emotions in a way that is “interesting” from a critical perspective. I conclude by asking if it would be possible for a poet to write in the style of Whitman today. I think the answer is no, but I also call for serious consideration of the changes to critical and poetic practice that would have to occur for the answer to be yes.
Allen Ginsberg and Robert Hass both write from the perspective of sons whose mothers suffered from serious, disruptive mental illness in an era when mental illness was stigmatized and treatment, often ineffective, could descend into brutality. The speakers of these two poets express sympathy for their mothers, and do not attribute significant blame to them for the chaos they created during their childhoods. Similarly, they speak very little about any lingering harm that might have been caused by these women, either in order to minimize their culpability or because perhaps little such harm actually occurred. Rather, they express an abiding affection and an elemental emotional need for their mothers. As for other members of their immediate family, they judge them with respect to how they acted toward the mother. In Ginsberg’s poetry, the father Louis and the brother Eugene react with considerable patience, affection, and feeling. Even though they eventually give up on the mother living a life outside of the institution, the speaker portrays them in a positive light. On the other hand, the speaker in Hass tends to be icier toward his father and brother with respect to their perceived misunderstanding of the mother. This performance of sympathy toward the mother illustrates not only the affection of the speakers, but also their emotional generosity. Moreover, it supports the explicit critique each poet makes of the social forces that limited the mothers during their eras, forces related not only to mental illness but also to gender and, in Ginsberg’s work, to ethnicity.

I would define sympathy as feeling concern for someone else’s pain, hoping their condition improves, acknowledging the degree of their suffering, and perceiving their suffering as, at least in part, unjustified or unjustifiable. Sympathy has the potential to serve as a call for action, or at least reflection, and to bring a sense of urgency to addressing the problems of others.
Literary scholarship investigating sympathy has emerged most prominently from work on nineteenth-century American literature, particularly work on Sentimentalism, and it has explored issues such as the emotional dimensions of representations of female experience—of women both offering and requiring sympathy—and of Abolitionist literature. In this context, Glenn Hendler writes, sympathy “is an emotional response to reading or seeing an expression of another’s feelings. It is thus at its core an act of identification. To feel compassion, as opposed to mere pity, one must be able to imagine oneself, at least to some extent, in another’s position” (3). Approaching sympathy as a means of understanding and relating to others, these critics do not view sympathy as an unalloyed good but rather see it as subject to the same sort of problems to be found in how one understands and relates to others in general.

Hendler writes, “[T]he risk of sympathy is that the idea one can feel like another person feels can be overshadowed by the paradoxically narcissistic and self-negating desire to feel with that other, to share the other’s experiences as if they were one’s own” (5). In my understanding of Hendler’s assertion, the result might be that one oversimplifies the situation of another as a result of excessively relying on one’s own experiences and ideas as a means of understanding the object of sympathy. Narcissism could reduce sympathy to an empty gesture of self-congratulation. Excessive self-negation might compromise one’s judgment and make one become vulnerable to manipulation. One might become an enabler of self-defeating behaviors that ought to be discouraged. Similarly, one might endorse a problematic worldview—or at least

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26 Hendler writes, “Within the evolving ‘culture of sentiment’ that reached its American apotheosis in Stowe’s novel, the most highly valorized emotional form was compassion, or what eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers called ‘sympathy’” (3).
27 I do not find this distinction between sympathy and pity to be convincing in a broad sense, except perhaps as a matter of degree of identification, similar to the common understanding of empathy as more identificatory than sympathy.
28 Hendler notes, “Sentimentalism’s reliance on this fantasy of experiential equivalence is at the root of its affective and political power, but it has always caused unease in some of its readers” (7).
rationalize and downplay it—because it is identified with the object of sympathy, especially if those who are perceived to be responsible for the object of sympathy’s suffering are hostile to that worldview. People’s suffering might give them legitimate forms of knowledge that challenge dominant assumptions, but the authority of the knowledge is not absolute, especially when they oppress or otherwise marginalize others.

Kristin Boudreau cautions that sympathy can destroy “the strangeness that separates individuals, allowing for human commerce, but in doing so it also deprives us of a charming bewilderment, reducing all relations to sameness and making a ‘criminal continuity’ of the world of human relations” (xiv). She notes that even in the nineteenth century prominent writers were aware of this risk, even as they ambivalently perpetuated it: “Reluctant to abandon what had, by the early nineteenth century, become an American commitment to sentiment, writers like Frederick Douglass, Louisa May Alcott, Henry James, and William Dean Howells explored the most dangerous effect of sympathy: its unsettling ability to reduce wonder to complacency” (xiv).

Boudreau’s criticism appears more curious to me than Hendler’s does. A sense of wonder, rooted as it often is in incomprehension and unfamiliarity, does not suffice as a foundation for human relations. Moreover, viewing others as exotic, while perhaps exciting, often reduces them to mere objects of fascination and romantic oversimplification. Still, one will inevitably encounter the unfamiliar and the imperfectly comprehended, so perhaps it is good to invest such encounters with an exciting sense of possibility, along with a desire to see and explore more. Insofar as it serves to promote a sense of curiosity and respect for others, as well as idealistic action on their behalf, wonder could be a positive force. I do not see the risk of sympathy eroding wonder to be especially great, but it still merits discussion.
These concerns, though, mostly apply to the “Other.” Of course, the mothers in these poems are different from the speakers, because of gender, as well as mental illness (paranoia and delusions in Ginsberg’s work; severe alcoholism, at the very least, in Hass’s). However, the position of these mothers relative to the speakers is almost a paradox: the speakers have grown up around them and have considerable emotional attachments to them, but at the same time the illness of the mothers makes them almost unreachable. Moreover, the speakers find themselves in a position of power relative to the mothers, but they reflect on a time when their mothers, though disempowered themselves, nonetheless had much greater power over and influence on them.

Given a troubled relationship with the mother and the mother’s own incapacity, sympathy is one of the only things the speaker can do. In various poems expressions of sympathy both call attention to and work against negative social attitudes toward gender and mental illness. Sympathy also fits into a larger worldview, applying to the speakers’ fathers as well, in which the stronger are expected to be kind and sympathetic to those who are less self-sufficient, less powerful, more marginal, and more in distress. As for how it reflects on the speakers themselves, this sympathy demonstrates a certain nobility of spirit, of being able to accept their mothers despite their difference and to move beyond the suffering they caused, which may have been largely unintentional. Moreover, it is a means of empowerment for the speakers: they reflect on experiences that could have, and perhaps did, damage them during a period when they had very little direct control over their own lives, but by putting themselves in the position to describe those events, as well as by assuming the role of sympathizer, they manage to take some control over those events. Lastly, sympathy offers the speakers a sense of emotional connection to their

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29 Hass describes the speaker’s fear that “Nothing could reach her” (*Sun under Wood* 10).
mothers. It becomes a way of reconciling the affection they feel (or feel that they need to feel) for their mothers with the personal distance and potential resentment they might otherwise feel.

Of course, both Ginsberg and Hass explore the failures of sympathy as well. Ginsberg’s speaker eventually has his own mother institutionalized, and his sympathy does not seem to overcome his personal pain. Hass’s speaker judges himself for judging his father. At times he recalls interactions with his mother as tiring, embarrassing, and absurd. He even describes moments of youthful rage toward her. Moreover, the siblings of the two speakers appear to be less well-adjusted than the speakers themselves, so it is possible that they would hold more of a grudge against their mothers, whose actions, intentional or otherwise, have not been completely harmless. Nevertheless, these failures serve to demonstrate the limitations of their project of sympathy, not to call it into question on a fundamental level.

**Allen Ginsberg**

Associated with the Beat writers, Allen Ginsberg began publishing as a member of the so-called Silent Generation in the 1950s, an era whose quietism he challenged with a frank discussion of sex, homosexuality, and drug use. This subject matter resulted in him being charged with obscenity for *Howl*, his best-known poem, although he was eventually acquitted. Hobnobbing with rock musicians and other famous individuals of his day, Ginsberg became something now virtually unheard of in American: a literary celebrity, and, in particular, a poet-celebrity. One can also notice a consistent, even at times openly acknowledged, thread of self-fashioning and self-promotion in the actual poetry. In the preface to *Collected Poems 1947-1980*, Ginsberg writes, “Herein author has assembled his poetry books published to date rearranged in

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30 See Chapter Two for a discussion of the speaker’s brother and sister in Sharon Olds’s poetry for a similar example.
31 For example, “Ginsberg was touring with Bob Dylan and the Rolling Thunder Review” in 1976 (Trigilio 158).
straight chronological order to compose an autobiography” (5).\textsuperscript{32} The quasi-legal language and reference to himself in the third person are an amusing contrast to his typical voice, and I read the tone as ironic or playful.

In any case, the idea that his works could compose an “autobiography,” along with the notion that a suitable arrangement is to be found simply by going with chronological order, highlight his carefully maintained appearance of spontaneity. That appearance certainly lends itself to self-aggrandizement, as it frames the adherent as the inspired genius, rejecting the constraints of revisions of literary convention for an electric, Whitmanic outpouring from the soul. On the other hand, this surface-level spontaneity is consonant with other artistic and literary aims as well. Ginsberg pays frequent homage to Whitman and Blake, for the former’s lusty and inclusive bardic documentation of his life and times, and for the latter’s mystical and sometimes clamorously irrational declarative poetics. Moreover, in an important way, Ginsberg is very much continuing in the sense of High Modernism, of Joyce, Eliot, and especially W.C. Williams, with whom he corresponded and who wrote introductions to Empty Mirror and Howl.\textsuperscript{33} He is trying to push the representational powers of art, to make frequent reference to other literary figures while also depicting personal experience, from the intense and erotic to the mundane and silly, while also discussing content of political and social importance. Of course, at the beginning of Ginsberg’s career, the heirs-apparent of Modernism were the New Critics, with their finely wrought and densely allusive compositions. The work of Ginsberg represented a new way forward, a way that challenged both social and artistic norms. Around the same time, and even in

\textsuperscript{32} Accordingly, while it usually feels somewhat unnatural or even contrived to refer constantly to “the speaker” in poetry, it seems especially so in the case of Allen Ginsberg, whose collected poems do in fact read as an autobiography of sorts, from his earlier, header work that is in many ways his boldest and most controlled, to the Blakean excesses in the sixties, probably fueled both by his fame and by the spirit of the times, to his later work that became increasingly preoccupied with age and increasingly committed, though not exclusively, to clarity.

\textsuperscript{33} In addition, Williams included a letter from Ginsberg in Paterson (Raskin 2).
the same city, another movement, that of the New York School poets, was underway, and they too were concerned with gayness and urban life. Frank O’Hara, with *Lunch Poems*, shared to some extent Ginsberg’s pose of spontaneity, as well as an emotional openness and a similar, though decidedly lesser, candor about sexuality. For Ginsberg, as for others like O’Hara, this attempt to represent personal details posed a direct challenge to a social order that would not only silence but also criminalize the personal details of their own lives, particularly as gay men.

While my project is not biographical, and I think it is especially important to distinguish between the life of a poet as highly mythologized as Ginsberg and the work itself, it is worth mentioning at least in passing that his father played an actual literary role in his life. Ginsberg’s father Louis was a published poet, who wrote in traditional forms and with a substantially more constrained tone than his son. In the preface to Louis Ginsberg’s *Morning in Spring and Other Poems*, Ginsberg addresses the difference in style but adds “I won’t quarrel with his forms here anymore: by faithful love he’s made them his own” (*Deliberate Prose* 218). In one amusing anecdote from Ginsberg’s early career, he sent his father a copy of “Howl” with the expectation that his father would be shocked, but his father responded by letter with effusive praise. Later, both men would stage poetry readings together; Louis said that people came in order “to see how a father and a son, who seem so different, can get along” (qtd in Trigilio 13).

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34 Raskin writes, “In 1955 in San Francisco—where he let his madness go naked in public for the first time in his life—he told himself that he would never show *Howl* to Louis, since Louis would disapprove. Then, as though to prove himself right, he sent the manuscript to Louis and waited for the inevitable rebuke. On February 29, 1956, Louis wrote from Paterson, New Jersey, to Allen in San Francisco—where much to his delight he had become the ‘local poet-hero’ in the wake of the Six Gallery reading. Louis’s letter from the other side of America shocked Allen and pleased him, too. ‘It’s a wild, rhapsodic, explosive outpouring with good figures of speech flashing by in its volcanic rushing,’ Louis gushed, as though he’d be infected by his son’s raucous rhythms. ‘It’s a hot geyser of emotion suddenly released in wild abandon from subterranean depths of your being.’” (27).

35 Regarding joint readings given by Allen and Louis Ginsberg from 1966-1975, Trigilio writes: “As the *Jerusalem Post Magazine* feature on Louis describes them, these Allen-Louis readings themselves were complex stagings of an unlikely alliance between ‘establishment’ fathers and countercultural sons in which audiences comprised ‘two groups: Hippies and their fathers’ (Gefen 9). Louis observes that audience members come to the readings ‘to see how a father and a son, who seem so different, can get along’” (13).
Naomi, she was a Jewish immigrant from Russia with some artistic interests of her own, including visual art and folk music.\textsuperscript{36}

Despite Ginsberg’s iconoclasm and his commitment to the advancement of non-heteronormative discourse, his discussion of parents tends to be uncritical and even somewhat celebratory. He sometimes refers to “father” and “mother” in a mystical sense. In “Transcription of Organ Music” (148-149), he talks about the “Creator” and writes, “The Father is merciful” (149). In “Psalm IV” (246), he seemingly refers to William Blake as “father.” “Father Guru” (702), a chant-like poem, introduces the guru as “Father guru.”\textsuperscript{37} In “The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express” (332-338), he refers to the goddess Kali as “Kali mother” (335). Moreover, he invokes the pathos of the parent-child bond to illustrate political horrors, as he does in “Sky Words” (1145-1146), when he describes “Mothers bones covered with words / Skeleton Children made of words” (1145).\textsuperscript{38} All of these passages represent parental figures as objects of respect or sympathy. In addition, Ginsberg celebrates parenthood as the means of propagating humanity, a decidedly heteronormative impulse, but he also considers this issue from the perspective of a gay man whose preferred sexual activities are non-reproductive. In an earlier poem, “This Form of Life Needs Sex” (292-294), Ginsberg discusses an aversion to the female body and the simultaneous awareness that the female body is necessary to perpetuate humanity. Overplaying the sense of revulsion, this passage largely confines the discussion of women to their

\textsuperscript{36} Raskin writes, “Naomi was immensely creative—an artist, folksinger, and storyteller—and yet she never fulfilled her own creativity. To Allen, his mother’s own individual tragedy seemed emblematic of the larger generational tragedy that befell so many immigrant women from Europe who found the madhouse at the end of the American dream” (30).

\textsuperscript{37} Trigilio sees evidence of this conflation of the father and the guru in Ginsberg’s actual life: “Chapter 1 also explores how the complexities of transference and countertransference might be applied both to his relationship with his father, his first guide in spiritual matters, the poet Louis Ginsberg, and to his relationship with his father-guru, Trungpa, also a poet” (xiii).

\textsuperscript{38} Ginsberg also makes reference to the discourse of parenthood being appropriated by the political right, as he does in “Industrial Waves” (845-848): “The New Right’s a creepy pre-Fascist fad / Salute the flag & call on Mom & Dad / Shit on the niggers it’s their fault they were slaves / In a free market you can get rich filling graves” (845). This stanza illustrates and mocks the imbrication of heteronormativity, nationalism, racialism, and laissez-faire capitalism in modern right-wing ideology.
reproductive functions. The speaker refers to woman as a “mystery scary as any fanged god / sinking its foot in its gullet & / vomiting its own image out if its ass” (292). While asserting the legitimacy of a gay man’s desire for the male body and lack of attraction to woman, this early poem does clumsily descend into misogyny, which Ginsberg’s subsequent work largely avoids.39

In a later poem, “May Days 1988” (979-981), the speaker himself expresses self-consciousness and self-reproach about not having produced offspring: “waking in N.Y. 61st year to realize childless I am a motherless freak” (981). Moreover, in his second-to-last published poem, “Dream” (1159), Ginsberg writes of a dream of having a baby as a source of great comfort. Hospitalized with hepatitis C, the speaker feels “half grateful, half apprehensive” as he wonders what to do with this child, but he realizes that his lover Peter will gladly care for it. He feels reassured that “the miracle was in Peter’s reliable hands,” and he is impressed with Peter’s compassion. The poem concludes: “still thinking it’d happened, consciousness returned slowly 2:29 AM I was awake and there’s no little mystic baby—naturally appeared, just disappeared— / A glow of happiness next morn, warm glow of pleasure half the day.” Aside from the sex and age of the characters, this narrative is conventional, almost self-parodyingly so, and yet Ginsberg frames it as a great solace, which highlights the emotional power that conventional narratives can produce. This poem also evokes the mystical concern with the cycle of life that appears in his work.

Nonetheless, Ginsberg’s poems do contain negative representations of parents and the aftermath of bad parenting. In “Imitation of K.S.” (961), he describes a muscular twenty-year-old companion, whose violent, alcoholic father shot at him with a gun when he was thirteen years old. The speaker does not provide any additional background information, but the actions of the

39 It is interesting to read this passage in conjunction with the section of “Kaddish” in which the speaker encounters the bizarre behavior of his naked mother. The intensity of his revulsion makes more sense in that context, though I don’t think that that connection alone explains this particular passage.
parent seem to have contributed to the maladjustment of the son, who exhibits violent fantasies and intense discomfort with physical intimacy. That said, he follows the speaker around, helps carry his harmonium, and even nestles together with him in bed. Another poem, “John” (1014-1015), describes a sweet-natured lover who tells the speaker that he loves his hair, even though: “No one liked my hair / Mother pulled it toward the movies / Father hit the top of my head / Street gangs set it afire” (1014). It is unclear whether Ginsberg here is discussing his own parents, though, as the mother “pulling it toward the movies” is a strange line, the image of the father hitting the top of his head contrasts markedly with all other representations of Louis Ginsberg, and street gangs (plural) setting it on fire, while certainly, possible, seems to be an exaggeration, and a somewhat surreal one at that. In any event, these two poems depict the way that parental disapproval and abuse leads people to seek comfort and approval from lovers.

In general, Ginsberg’s speaker takes a consistently charitable and affectionate stance toward his parents. He makes many references to his parents, often by their first names, throughout his poetry, and a handful of poems, “Kaddish” being the longest and most well-known, focus primarily on them. Notably, his parents play in an important role in his personal mythology. In “Improvisation in Beijing” (937-939), he writes, “I write poetry because my father was poet my mother from Russia spoke Communist, died in a madhouse” (937). Ginsberg shows a great deal of concern with literary genealogy, by acknowledging other contemporary writers with a shared vision, paying homage to his literary forebears, and pointing to his own biological lineage in the form of his father, the poet Louis Ginsberg. Similarly, his mother represents both irrationality and marginality, two qualities to which Ginsberg lays claim, particularly in his

40 With respect to Ginsberg himself (and not the speaker), Collected Poems 1947-1980 is dedicated to his father Louis and his mother Naomi (3), while White Shroud is dedicated to his stepmother Edith (839).
writing. It is tempting to view Louis as the Apollonian and Naomi as Dionysian elements in Ginsberg’s conception of himself and his art.

The speaker’s mother Naomi plays a complex role in Ginsberg’s poetry. She serves as an actor in the mother-child relationship for which the speaker feels an abiding, and unfulfilled need. In “They’re All Phantoms of My Imagining” (888), the speaker states that he “needed a stepmother’d accomplish my natural mother’s tears.” In “May Days 1988” (979-981), he writes of feeling like a “motherless freak” (981). In “Journal Night Thoughts” (275-279), he includes a Coleridgean gloss to the right of the main section of the poem. He notes: “Kaddish / Completed” (278). The following gloss is: “‘You’re not done / with your mother / yet.’ / Sd Elise C.” (279).

These passages frame the composition of “Kaddish” as an emotional grappling with the speaker’s relationship with his mother, and they suggest an ongoing emotional engagement, noted in the voice of a female speaker. Ginsberg also bears witness to the mother’s status as a refugee. “Hard Labor” (948) mentions that she fled the Cossacks in 1905. The speaker juxtaposes her history with the fact that he is “a fairy with purple wings and a white halo,” which links her marginal and precarious position as a Jew with his own as a gay man, although the tone of the comparison suggests he views his situation as less immediately threatening.

The overarching theme of Naomi, though, is mental illness, which throughout much of the twentieth century remained poorly understood and highly stigmatized, and treatment could often be ineffective, humiliating, and inhumane. To some extent, in dealing with the shame and stigma of mental illness, a poem such as “Kaddish” played an important role. It also charted relatively new literary territory by showing the emotional experiences of dealing with a loved one, particularly a parent, struggling with mental illness. Beyond that, Naomi also signifies as an element of the irrational, a site of resistance to the dominant social order, and a perpetuation of
certain literary trends such as Symbolism, Dada, and Surrealism, not to mention the work of Blake, to which Ginsberg lays claim. This appropriation of mental illness is a bit dubious, although as a gay man, with homosexuality itself being characterized by the medical establishment as a psychological disorder, this sort of appropriation as a means of resistance to the medical establishment and heteronormative culture makes sense.\textsuperscript{41} Ginsberg also discusses her psychiatric problems in religious and mystical terms. In “Guru Om” (560-561), he writes “Maya revolves on rubber wheels, Samsara’s glass buildings light up with neon, Illusions’s doors open on aluminum hinges— / my mother should’ve done asanas & Kundalini not straightjackets & Electroshock in the birthdays of Roosevelt’s FBI—” (562). Although criticizing the way in which she was treated is certainly legitimate, the implication that mental illness can be resolved through greater spiritual awareness is misguided and dangerous. Later in his career, Ginsberg seems to have distanced himself from the discussion of the more sensational aspects his mother’s mental illness. In “Salutations to Fernando Pessoa” (976-977), he writes, “Frankly too Candid about my mother tho meant well” (977). As much as Ginsberg accomplished the important task of promoting discourse about the stigmatized issue of mental illness, here the speaker acknowledges the complicated ethics of representation.

Ginsberg’s most famous poem about parents, “Kaddish” (217-232) is a long poem written as an elegy for his mother Naomi after her decades-long struggle with mental illness.\textsuperscript{42} Although it discusses events from her early life, the work mostly focuses on her periods of paranoid mental instability, with her believing that others are attempting to poison her and that rods implanted in her head are controlling her thoughts. The other three major characters are the

\textsuperscript{41} And there’s also the matter of Ginsberg’s own time in a mental institution, referenced obliquely in “Kaddish.”

\textsuperscript{42} Vendler writes, “Ginsberg, in California when his mother died, missed her funeral, where (as Ginsberg’s brother wrote him) there were not enough people present to form a minyan, so Kaddish could not be said for her. Several years later, Ginsberg wrote his own Kaddish to repair the lack” (\textit{Soul Says} 10).
speaker, his father Louis, and his brother Eugene (also called Gene). Louis comes across as a forbearing and gentle man, who takes care of the children while Naomi is institutionalized and who continues to send Naomi checks long after they’ve divorced. One sees his sense of humiliation when Naomi has a breakdown in public and makes wild accusations about him in front of others. However, he endures, and he eventually finds another significant relationship in his life, although, as the poem notes, by that point he has been emotionally damaged. In terms of emotional damage, it is perhaps the brother Gene who comes across as the most affected, as the poem shows him as being unattached and adrift despite his sensitivity and intellect. He seems to jump around in his choice of careers, reacts poorly to the stresses of teaching, which he studied for four years to do and yet quits after six months, and goes from being single or celibate through his early adulthood to having what seems to be a series of casual sexual encounters. As for the speaker, he describes his own sense of confusion, frustration, and guilt, although these emotions do not overwhelm him. When he philosophizes about the nature of death, he appears to be trying to believe, or rationalize, that his mother has had some improvement or release from suffering. For example, he writes, “And read Andonais’ last triumphant stanzas aloud—wept, realizing how we suffer— / And how Death is that remedy all singers dream of, sing, remember, prophesy as in the Hebrew Anthem, or the Buddhist Book of Answers—and my own imagination of a withered leaf—at dawn— ” (217). Perhaps it’s meant to comfort himself, or maybe it reflects the human desire to imagine transcendence when no other means or remedy seems available. For all three figures, the emotional tragedy seems to begin in affection and a sense of loyalty and devotion that is ultimately tested by Naomi’s outbursts, to the point at which all of them more or less eventually give up on her and leave her permanently institutionalized.
In the opening section, the speaker is walking around Greenwich Village after a sleepless night of reading Kaddish aloud and listening to Ray Charles. Heading toward the Lower East Side, he pictures his mother arriving there fifty years ago as a little girl from Russia. He imagines death as a release for her: “Death let you out, Death had the Mercy, you’re done with your century, done with God, done with the path thru it—Done with yourself at last—Pure—Back to the Babe dark before your Father, before us all—before the world—/ There, rest. No more suffering for you. I know where you’ve gone, it’s good” (218). The speaker notes that she is free from her paranoid fear of her husband Louis, but she has also lost his “sweetness.” He also mentions his brother, in a puzzling passage, as someone who is still grieving. As for himself, he says, “Now I’ve got to cut through—to talk to you—as I didn’t when you had a mouth” (219), which posits the poem as a sort of working-through of emotions. In a similar vein, in the opening of the second, longer section the speaker says, “Over and over—refrain—of the Hospitals—still haven’t written your history—leave it abstract—a few images / run thru the mind—like the saxophone choruses of houses and years—remembrance of electrical shocks” (220). He does not say why it might be best to “leave it abstract”—perhaps he refers to a sense of decorum, the trauma of the experiences in question, or the difficulty of using language to convey the strange mixture of sensational, mundane, and tender experiences connecting him and his mother.

Moving into narrative, the poem then relates an incident when the mother stares out the window of their Paterson apartment and believes that she sees an assassin lurking around the corner of a nearby church. Either the speaker or the mother calls the doctor, though it isn’t entirely clear who does so, and the doctor suggests that they come to see him. As the twelve-year-old son guides his mother through the city, he is “hoping it would end in a quiet room in a

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43 The passage is: “You made it—I came too—Eugene my brother before (still grieving now and will gream [sic?] on to his last stiff hand, as he goes thru his cancer—or kill—later perhaps—soon he will think—)” (219).
Victorian house by a lake” (221). His mother starts to plead with him, and she claims that three big sticks have been implanted in her back and are affecting her. She adds that the speaker’s grandmother is attempting to poison her, and she speculates that her husband Louis might be under her control. Saying “I’m your mother” (221), she convinces the speaker to take her to Lakewood, a rest home, so she can hide. When she sequesters herself behind a closet and demands a blood transfusion, they are made to leave. After finding a temporary lodging place that will accept his mother, he helps her take in her belongings and then leaves. Utterly dejected, he speculates that it might be better if she were “safe in her coffin” (221), or at least a schoolgirl again, so that she would have a set routine of studying and tending to family obligations. He notes that the initial onset of her mental illness occurred in 1919, at which point she stopped going to school and kept to a dark room for three weeks. She went to upstate New York and recovered. The speaker reflects on glimpses of happiness and stability from those early years as shown by pictures of her sitting in the grass with flowers in her hair, smiling, and playing the mandolin. These thoughts of the past show that Naomi is more than her illness and suggest that she has a self to recover, but by comparison they also underscore the dismalness of the present.

When the speaker returns home, he meets his exasperated father but is seemingly too exhausted to care: “O Paterson! I got home late that nite. Louis was worried. How could I be so—didn’t I think? I shouldn’t have left her” (220). Around 2 a.m. the phone rings, and Louis listens to the frightened landlady say that Naomi is hiding under the bed and screaming about insects and Mussolini. He takes the morning train to Lakewood, and when he arrives Naomi is still under the bed. The speaker wonders about the emotional toll this experience takes on him:

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44 This phrase echoes a passage from Plath’s “Stings,” which I briefly discuss in the next chapter.
45 This passage further complicates the emotional dimensions of the experience by alluding to the fact that the speaker is experiencing youthful homosexual desire: “Went to bed exhausted, wanting to leave the world (probably that year newly in love with R——my high school mind hero, jewish boy who came a doctor later—then silent neat kid” (222).
“Naomi still under bed—thought he brought poison Cops—Naomi screaming—Louis what happened to your heart then? Have you been killed by Naomi’s ecstasy?” (223). The use of “ecstasy” carries a religious connotation, in some ways romanticizing her condition, but also demonstrating respect toward it. Nonetheless, this phrase indicates how utterly her condition consumes Naomi, as well as how far removed it is from the experience and understanding of Louis.

Lying in bed, the speaker waits so nervously that he is shaking. Alone, Louis returns late that night, and he tells his son that Naomi had a breakdown in a drugstore. Ginsberg describes a scene of disarray, with confused customers and police staring as Naomi rants about her delusions: “Customers vomiting their cokes—or staring—Louis humiliated—Naomi triumphant—The Announcement of the Plot” (223). At that point, Louis contacts the doctor and sends Naomi to the mental hospital, Greystone, where she spends the next three years. When the speaker visits her, sometimes by himself, she begs him to take her home. He replies, “No, you’re crazy Mama,—Trust the Drs.” (224). Holding out some hope that the expertise and authority of the medical establishment can aid his mother, he himself can do little aside from explain the situation to his mother.

Returning home from his legal studies, the speaker’s elder brother Eugene learns about Naomi being committed the next day, and he cries in anguish. Eugene is an earnest and industrious young man, living in a furnished apartment and working eight hours a day to support himself through law school. Despite the proximity of brothels, he remains a virgin throughout this period. He writes “poems about Ideals and politics” (224), as well as letters to the editor. Before that, he had studied for four years to be a teacher and then quit after six months of dealing with discipline problems and lack of student interest in the subject matter. Ginsberg writes, “and
he did not know much—just that he lost— / so broke his life in two and paid for Law—read
huge blue books and rode the ancient elevator 13 miles away in Newark & studied up hard for
the future / just found the Scream of Naomi on his failure doorstep, for the final time, Naomi
gone, us lonely—home—him sitting there—” (225). Of the three male relatives, Eugene seems
to be the most lost. The speaker views him and his struggles sympathetically, and the speaker
attests to his emotional attachment to and care for his mother. The speaker also looks at the
emotional state of Louis in this period: “And this year Lou has poetic loves of suburb middle
age—in secret—music from his 1937 book—Sincere—he longs for beauty— / No love since
Naomi screamed—since 1923?—now lost in Greystone ward—new shock for her—Electricity,
following the 40 Insulin. / And Metrazol had made her fat” (225). This passage presents Louis in
an admiring light: artistic, sincere, and longsuffering. The speaker makes no negative judgment
about his desire for another lover; in fact, he seems to welcome it. Still, he makes sure not to
forget the loneliness of Naomi.

Before Naomi returns home, the speaker excitedly anticipates her playing the piano and
mandolin, as well as cooking lung stew as she used to do. However, when she does return, she
just goes into a room by herself to lie down in the dark. Not wanting to leave her by herself, the
speaker follows, and she says, “‘Don’t be afraid of me because I’m just coming back home from
the mental hospital—I’m your mother—’ / Poor love, lost—a fear—I lay there—Said, ‘I love
you Naomi,’—stiff next to her arm. I would have cried, was this the comfortless lone union?—
Nervous, and she got up soon” (225). This scene captures the tentativeness of their relationship,
as well as the awkwardness and uncertainty about how they should act in the absence of an
existing social script for their situation.
The speaker wonders about his mother, “Was she ever satisfied?” (226). Even though she believed that Roosevelt and the government knew the names of her would-be assassins and she felt safer, she still wanted to move away from Louis. In another episode, she locks herself in the bathroom with something dangerous, perhaps razors or iodine, so Louis breaks down the door, and with the speaker’s help, pulls her to the bedroom. This incident is followed by relative calm, a winter when she read and took walks by herself, at one point slipping on ice and breaking her arm. Eventually, though, Naomi moves out and lives on her own, while supporting herself by doing clerical and using the money Louis sends her. She finds a boyfriend, a doctor named Isaac. Nevertheless, her general condition seems to decline. She laments, “I’m hot—I’m getting fat—I used to have such a beautiful figure before I went to the hospital—You should have seen me in Woodbine—” (226). Later, looking at baby pictures in a magazine, she resolves, “I will think nothing but beautiful thoughts” (226). At one point she claims to have met God the day before in his cheap country cabin, where she cooked him a dinner with lentil soup, vegetables, and bread. She says, “I told him, Look at all those fightings and killings down there, What’s the matter? Why don’t you put a stop to it? / ‘I try, he said—That’s all he could do, he looked tired. He’s a bachelor so long, and he likes lentil soup” (227). The matter-of-factness with which she recounts this supposed encounter illustrates the depth of her delusions, and it suggests the sense of absurdity and futility of the situation for the speaker. The sad resignation of God perhaps mirrors that of the speaker. Still, the episode also demonstrates Naomi’s sweetness and solicitude.

When the speaker goes to visit his mother, he feels discomfort, evoked by images such as cold fish and watery vegetables, “disconsolate food” made even more difficult to deal with by her obvious desire to please him. Moreover, she has body odor and often walks around naked. The speaker recounts an incident when he thought that she was attempting to entice him to have
sex with her. He describes the ragged condition of her body, with scars from various operations, and says, “I was cold—later revolted a little, not much—seemed perhaps a good idea to try—know the Monster of the Beginning Womb—Perhaps—that way. Would she care? She needs a lover” (227). Ginsberg is showing his interest in the human body, and detailed descriptions thereof, especially ones that challenge propriety. The phrase “Monster of the Beginning Womb” evokes his mystical interest in the life cycle. He is also implying, though, that this experience jolted the speaker out of any sanitized vision of motherhood.

With Naomi gone, Louis is putting his life together somewhat, and even manages to find a new relationship with a woman he eventually marries, but the speaker notes, “tho sere & shy—hurt with 20 years Naomi’s mad idealism” (227). Nevertheless, Louis still feels loneliness, with the speaker in New York, his brother in the army (which puzzles both the speaker and Louis), and Naomi away. When the returns to visit one day, his teacher father is sitting at his desk and weeping. As for Eugene, after he gets out of the army, he starts picking up women, and he undergoes rhinoplasty. Returning to New York University to complete his legal studies, he lives with Naomi for a year as “the weird nurse son” (228), but her condition continues to deteriorate, which causes him to lose weight from stress and eventually move out. She begs her children to live with her, but to no avail: “Listen to your mother’s please, I beg you!” (228). Around this time the speaker mentions spending eight months in a mental hospital himself, but he says that his own issues are not under discussion before quickly moving on.

Naomi begins to suspect Dr. Isaac of wanting to harm her, and she starts kicking her sister Elanor, who is suffering from heart disease. She continues to have delusions of grandeur and persecution: She declares: “I am a great woman—am a truly beautiful soul—and because of that they (Hitler, Grandma, Hearst, the Capitalists, Franco, Daily News, the ‘20s, Mussolini, the
living dead) want to shut me up—Buba’s the head of a spider network—” (229). Still, Naomi also manages to take night classes in painting at the Bronx Adult High School: “Sad paintings—but she expressed herself. Her mandolin gone, all strings broke in her head, she tried. Toward Beauty? or some old life Message?” (228). These activities reaffirm the fact that she is not defined exclusively by her illness, which humanizes her and adds to the pathos of her condition. Like Louis’s poetry, it also serves to illustrate the artistic heritage of the speaker.

After relatives call to tell the speaker that Naomi has gotten even worse, he and Eugene go to visit her, and she tells them about the plots she believes to be going on around her, at which point the speaker loses his composure, pushes her against the wall, and yells at her to stop kicking her sister Elanor. She looks at them in contempt and continues to talk about her delusions. At this point in the poem it becomes apparent that all the people Naomi’s life are starting to give up on her and want to move on with their own lives. Louis needs a divorce in order to get married, and Eugene has started practicing law. The final time that Naomi is taken away, it is the speaker himself who calls the medical personnel. To convince him that she is sane, she goes to the bathroom and puts on lipstick. The speaker rides with her in the ambulance and tells he that he is doing this for the sake of his aunt Elanor and uncle Max. He is with her until 4 a.m.: “I saw her led away—she waved, tears in her eyes” (230). This passage evokes Naomi’s suffering and sense of helplessness. It also shows that she still feels affection for her son, despite his having been the one to have caused this latest institutionalization. Two years later, after taking a trip to Mexico, the speaker visits his mother only to discover that she has suffered a stroke. She has grown thin, white-haired, wrinkled, and frail-looking. The poem states that a lobotomy scar is evident on her skull, although it does not indicate when this procedure occurred. The final time he goes to visit her, after a two-year absence, she doesn’t even recognize him. She
“Who are you? Did Louis send you?—The wires— / in her hair, as she beat on her head—
‘I’m not a bad girl—don’t murder me!—I hear the ceiling—I raised two children—’ (231). He
starts to cry, and the nurse gives him time to step outside to compose himself, but when he
returns his mother continues to yell at him and tell him he’s not Allen.

Another year passes, during which time the speaker moves to the San Francisco area. He
begins to cope with his feelings toward her by writing long letters and composing poetry:

“Another year, I left N.Y.—on West Coast in Berkeley cottage, dreamed of her soul—that, thru
life, in what form it stood in that body, ashen or manic, gone beyond joy— / near its death—with
eyes—was my own love in its form, the Naomi, my mother on earth still—sent her long letters—
& wrote hymns to the mad—Work of the merciful Lord of Poetry” (232). Positing the power of
art as solace, the speaker perhaps also opens the possibility of viewing this entire poem as a
process of healing for himself. Again, he connects what she does as art, which elevates her
behavior beyond shameful or dismissible pathology, and which also points toward his own
artistic heritage, as it were.

One night the speaker returns to his place in San Francisco, where he sees Orlovsky and a
friend named Whalen. He finds a telegram from Gene telling him that Naomi had died. She was
almost sixty years old. He steps outside and reflects that she is better off. Two days after her
death, he receives a letter she wrote him: “Strange Prophecies anew! She wrote— The key is in
the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window—I have the key—Get married Allen don’t
take drugs—the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window. / Love, / your mother’ / which
is Naomi—” This last section does a lot of work. It reiterates a sense of guilt, along with a sense
of relief, in which the speaker deals with her death by viewing it as a release from her suffering.
One also sees Orlovsky being there for Ginsberg, just as he later is when Louis dies. The letter
demonstrates that Naomi was still thinking about her son and had affection for him. At the same time, it points toward the relentless nature of her delusions. Lastly, the concluding line, “which is Naomi—,” makes the point that whatever difficulties there might have been in their relationship, that however much their relationship differed from accepted social scripts of parent-child relationships, she still shaped his experience of being a son, an experience to which he brings articulation and to which he lays claim.

Another significant poem involving the speaker’s mother, “White Shroud” (889-892) describes a dream in which the speaker interacts with her long after her death. The poem opens by saying that the speaker is in “The Great City of the Dead” (889), where his grandmother and mother live, and where he lacks a home. He describes wandering with the “living pacifist David Dellinger” (889) up to North Manhattan, and his mission is to find a place to stay. After wandering around, he notices a homeless woman, with white hair and bad teeth, who is living in an alley with a mattress, multiple blankets, a fan, and cookware. The speaker says, “Cranky hair, half-paralyzed, complaining angry as I passed. / I was horrified a little, who’d take care of such a woman” (890). To his astonishment, she is his mother Naomi, and to his surprise she recognizes him too. He asks her why she’s living there, and she replies: “I’m living alone, / you all abandoned me, I’m a great woman, I came here / by myself, I wanted to live, now that I’m too old to take care / of myself, I don’t care, what are you doing here?” (891). He remembers that he is looking for a home. The speaker evidences a clear sense of filial devotion, and feeling needed seems to offer a sense of meaning. Deciding to stay with her, he remarks: “Those years unsettled—were over now, here I could live / forever, here and have a home, with Naomi, at long last, / at long long last, my search was ended in this pleasant way” (891). He contemplates being able to help her financially with money earned from writing and cooking, as well as being able to

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46 David Dellinger was “one of the Chicago Seven war activists” (Trigilio 163)
help her with housekeeping and to keep her company. Remembering that his mother viewed his grandmother as an enemy, he mentions that the latter lives nearby, but even as he does so he feels great joy that both women are back in his life. He continues: “My breast rejoiced, all my troubles over, she was / content, too old to care or yell her grudge, only complaining / her bad teeth. What long-sought peace!” (891). A reunion with the mother, a second chance at a relationship, and the mitigation of her mental illness presents considerable hope for emotional fulfillment.

In the brief, final section, Ginsberg describes waking in Boulder to write this poem, “this tale of long lost joy” (892), then walking downstairs where his lover Peter Orlovsky is watching the weather report, his long hair illuminated by the glow of the television, a simultaneously mundane and beatific image. He kisses Orlovsky and starts to cry. The domestic arrangement with Orlovsky seems to have increasing importance in Ginsberg’s later work, and, as in the poems about Louis, Orlovsky seems to also play an important role as an emotional mainstay in the speaker’s life. Ginsberg juxtaposes the emotional structures of a relationship with parents, a structure that is heteronormative, with a relationship with gay life partner, which challenges heteronormativity. He does not reject the heteronormative, and at the same time he writes matter-of-factly about non-heteronormative living arrangements, which suggests that he is navigating the dominant order while asserting the legitimacy of his own identity.

According to Tony Trigilio, “White Shroud” also serves to provide greater social context for the mother’s suffering: “‘Kaddish’ redeems Naomi through the Western form of the elegy and the poet’s own Buddhist-inspired revision of the Kaddish prayer. In turn, ‘White Shroud’ redeems the poet, the son himself, as it constructs a narrative in which Naomi’s insanity, portrayed in ‘Kaddish,’ is instead a product of the social neglect from which contemporary
homelessness emerges” (Trigilio 162). In my understanding of the two poems, “Kaddish” still looks at social context, and “White Shroud” isn’t entirely concerned with it, but I think what Trigilio is reacting to is a difference in Ginsberg’s rhetoric. His later style is, at times, more direct, and in this particular work he does not especially use the sort of mystical language found in his earlier work, which can contribute to the problem of making issues seem existential when they are in fact largely socially determined.

As for the speaker’s father Louis, a poet himself, he becomes a more important figure in Ginsberg’s later work. He comes across as a mild-mannered, broadminded, and hospitable figure. As such, he constitutes an interesting anomaly in a body of work populated by countercultural visionaries, the mentally ill, and the erotically fervent. Toward him, the speaker demonstrates what appears to be genuine affection, as well as concern and gratitude for his hospitality; consistent, stray references to Louis seem to indicate that he is often on the speaker’s mind. As for Louis’s leftist politics and work as a poet, I would not say that Ginsberg demonstrates a strong sense of admiration, as he doesn’t praise the father extravagantly for these qualities and he himself went further in both regards, but his discussion of these qualities does register as a solid sense of approval.47 Moreover, Ginsberg often foregrounds Louis’s identity as a poet, although little direct discussion occurs as to the manner in which he might have directly influenced his son’s own interest in poetry and early development as a poet.

“Don’t Grow Old” (659-664) is a poem in seven sections, dated from January 1976 to July 1976, that deal with the end of Louis Ginsberg’s life and the poet mourning for him. The

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47 Trigilio writes, “Allen Ginsberg’s earliest and most famous works in Howl and Other Poems and Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958-1960 document his struggles with his mother’s mental illness, his disappointment with his father’s eventual middle-class artistic and political quietism, and his efforts to understand his homosexual identity in pre-Stonewall America” (1). However, I do not see the speaker’s attitude toward the father as disappointment; although Louis does not go as far as the speaker does in challenging social norms, that very fact leaves open the space for the speaker himself to be the trailblazer, the iconoclast.
“Old Poet” (659) suffers from fatigue, hindering him from doing things such as talking walks and taking off his shoes. The speaker reads to his tired, eighty-year-old father from Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality”: “...trailing clouds of glory do we come / from God, who is our home...” (660). The father responds: “‘That’s beautiful,’ he said, ‘but it’s not true’” (660). Perhaps the speaker is doing his best to comfort the father, though maybe he is trying to comfort himself in the process. However, the father’s response shows a measure of intellect and toughness. Then the father relates an anecdote about his boyhood in Newark, when he wondered for years what lay behind some trees near his home. He says, “When I grew old, I walked around the block, / and found out what was back there— / it was a glue factory” (660). This subsequent remark is a little more disturbing, as it shows childhood curiosity leading to a grim discovery, which serves to dispel any romanticization of death.

As do other poems about aging parents, this poem serves as an opportunity for the speaker to reflect on mortality in general and his own advancing age. He imagines familiar sights from the father’s life that he will soon no longer be able to see, including Times Square, the sun rising over New York’s skyline, and the moon over Paterson. In the fourth section the speaker reflects, “Will that happen to me? / Of course, it’ll happen to thee” (661). He imagines his hair turning gray, his knees weakening, and his chest sagging before his eventual demise. The final section concludes with an air resignation and acceptance, with the speaker asking “What’s to be done about Death? / Nothing, nothing” (664). He asks rhetorically if he should not do the things he planned to do, such as going to his father’s funeral and teaching Buddhist poetics over the summer, as well as not being “buried in the cemetery near Newark Airport someday?” (664). The point is that one cannot prevent death and one should not stop living, with the implication that worrying about death is a fruitless distraction from one’s actual life. Although Louis himself
does not teach this lesson directly, his wry, and in some ways courageous, resignation situates him as a valued source of knowledge.

Sharing an almost identical title (the only difference being quotation marks), “‘Don’t Grow Old’” (718) reveals that its title comes from a wry statement made by the father. The first of its three sections opens with an exchange twenty-eight years before the narrative present, where, after building up his courage and resolve, the speaker chooses a weekend back from college to tell his father that he has “sexual difficulties—homosexuality” (718). Ginsberg writes: “A look startled his face, ‘You mean you like to take men’s penises in your mouth?’ / Equally startled, ‘No, no,’ I lied, ‘that isn’t what it means’” (718). The father is startled, but his frank response, as well as his decision to ask a question rather than to make a statement, suggests tolerance and sympathy. It’s also worth noting that the young speaker feels able to broach the topic with him, even if doing so is a matter of great difficulty and he immediately backtracks. The next stanza occurs in the narrative present, when the speaker and his partner Peter, a former ambulance attendant, help the father out of the bath, onto his bed, and into his night clothes. Ginsberg writes, “Mouth drawn in, his false teeth in a dish, he turned his head round / looking up at Peter to smile ruefully, ‘Don’t ever grow old’” (718). This poem is dated 1978, still an era when homosexuality had not gained widespread acceptance, and yet the father takes his son’s partner in stride. This section again illustrates the pathos of his physical decline, as well as his dry, fatalistic sense of humor.

The next section describes a grandson, with no job and no residence of his own, coming to stay with the father after the speaker suggested that he do so. With all of them sitting together on a couch in the evening, Louis asks the grandson what sort of job he is looking for. He says dishwashing, but worries about having heard that it makes the skin on his hands raw and red.
Louis suggests being an office boy, but the grandson says that air-conditioned buildings and fluorescent light are unhealthy. Somewhat vexed, Louis proceeds to list several jobs that the grandson could take, along with the perils he might face, which range from the serious (being mugged as a taxer driver) to the absurd (having a box of bananas fall onto him as a grocery store employee). Again, Louis demonstrates his wit. It’s hard to tell, though, how sarcastic he’s being; he might be gently trying to make a point, and couching it with humor, or he might have more of an impatient edge. Based on his general demeanor, I would assume the former, but the matter is not entirely clear. The section concludes, “Later, in bed after twilight, glasses off, he said to his wife / ‘Why doesn’t he comb his hair? It falls all over his eyes, how can he see? / Tell him to go home soon, I’m too tired’” (719). Perhaps he values his space, or maybe he simply just doesn’t feel a tremendous bond with his grandson. Or, perhaps at this stage of his life he really is that worn-down and fatigued.

The third and final section is entitled “Resigned.” Set a year before the narrative present, Louis, the speaker, the speaker’s Tibetan guru, another poet, and various guests are gathered in Boulder. Ginsberg writes: “After coffee, my father bantered wearily / ‘Is life worth living? Depends on the liver’” (719). The Lama smiles. Louis then bends his head and says to no one in particular, “What can you do....?” (719). Once more, we see his weariness and wit. He also provides an interesting contrast to the guru as one who is outwardly less “profound” and yet offers his own form of wisdom. The speaker seems to be impressed with the father in this regard, and I suspect that he views himself undergoing a process similar to that of his father with respect to aging, one of grim wit, resignation, and some grace.

“Visiting Father & Friends” (941-942) demonstrates the affectionate relationship between the speaker and the father as revealed in a dream, though the poem does not reveal that the
events are a dream till later. The first few stanzas describe Ginsberg seeing old friends Gregory Corso and Neal Cassady, both looking healthy, Corso at a party and Cassady wandering around town. Then the speaker remembers that his father is living nearby, a block away from his lover Peter in an apartment complex on Riverside Drive, populated largely by Jews and refugees from the Nazis. Wondering why he hadn’t been to see his father recently, the speaker visits, and the father tells him he can spend the night on his couch. Through the night, he realizes his father is sleeping on the floor on a “foam rubber plastic mattress I’d thrown out years ago, / poor cold mat upon the concrete cellar warehouse floor— / so that was it! He’d given up his bed for my comfort!” (941-942). These events show that the speaker remembers his father as kind and generous, as well as self-effacing insofar as he offers no protest and conceals the hardships he goes through on another’s behalf. Similarly, the poem indicates that speaker desires to maintain a connection with his father, and that he thinks of him from time to time.

The final section describes the peace that the speaker derives, in the narrative present, from his recollection of the father. He insists that the father return to his usual sleeping location, and he apologizes for not having visited sooner, which he attributes to not having known where his father lived. When the speaker awakes in Beijing, where he is teaching about poetry, he notes that Peter is still alive and Neal and his father are dead. The poem expresses a sense of joy and reassurance: “How good to see him home, and take / his father hospitality for granted among the living / and dead” (942). The poem represents a dream, so in that regard forgetting that Louis had died during the course of the dream can be taken on a literal level, since that sort of thing is not an uncommon occurrence during dreams. On a metaphorical level it also signifies that the speaker’s sense of emotional connection to the father remains immediate, undimmed by the passage of time.
Robert Hass

Robert Hass is a mainstream lyric poet. His poems tend to have a unified speaker or narrator, and his themes include family life, the relationships between men and women, friendship, and social justice. Later in his career, he has begun to incorporate more formal experimentation, which is to say more fragmentation and conceptual elements, although the work retains clear surface meaning and is relatively easy to follow. While his experimentation is light, I view it as particularly successful, insofar as it serves to add notes of ambivalence, frustration, and emphasis to his otherwise finely wrought and tightly controlled verse. As for the craft of Hass’s individual poems, two things characterize them. The first is a concern with image. Hass has a tremendous gift for evocative imagery that not only creates strong mental images but also, in the sense of the objective correlative, contributes to mood. The second is a concern with human relationships and psychological interiority. He brings a high level of focus and detail to human lives, especially in his later work. Some of his poems appear to be autobiographical, whereas others appear to be persona poems. Yet others appear to be third-person accounts of other people’s lives. Some of those works appear to be brief accounts shared with the speaker by a friend or acquaintance, while others are much more intricate narratives, whose specificity give the sense of being factual, although the high degree of detail suggests at least embellishment and creative license if not outright fiction.48

The representation of the speaker’s parents, and, in particular, the mother, is a major thread in Hass’s oeuvre, yet it is one that does not appear till his fourth collection, Sun under Wood (1996). Hass tends to mention the mother more indirectly, and while he describes specific

48 In “Santa Lucia II” (Human Wishes 42), Hass notes, “The speaker in this poem is a woman who, apparently, writes about art professionally. “This passage is the only instance in Hass’s poetry where the poems itself directly acknowledges the fictitiousness of an otherwise realistic contemporary-seeming narrative.
episodes from her life, they tend to represent key elements in his emotional relationship with her, which lead more to a reflection on how the speaker feels about her rather than how she has directly shaped him. She is a severe alcoholic whose behavior suggests further underlying mental illness, though Hass does not specify that to be the case. He does touch on the damage that the parents have caused the speaker. In “Thin Air” (Human Wishes 76-78), Hass alludes to “what my parents in the innocence of their malice / toward each other did to me” (76). Nonetheless, the phrase “innocence of their malice” suggests not only a lack of intentionality but also, to a degree, a lack of culpability. The figure who appears to suffer the most because of the mother is the speaker’s brother, who develops his own problem with addiction. Again, however, no causal link other than genetic misfortune is implied. When the speaker does express annoyance with his family, he typically does so toward his brother and father for failing to understand his mother. He also demonstrates some annoyance toward his father more generally, although nothing the father does is particularly vilifying, and in the few instances the speaker does seem annoyed, I have the distinct impression that the reader is supposed to understand the speaker as projecting his own feelings onto the father or otherwise venting. Ultimately, Hass’s project with respect to the mother is one of witness and sympathy, a project seemingly rooted in affection.\footnote{One sees evidence of this affection in stray moments, as in “The Dry Mountain Air” (Time and Materials 74-75), where the speaker describes seeing an image of Lake Louise adorning the dining car of the California Zephyr: “a view of Lake Louise, intimate to me because, / Although it was Canadian, it bore my mother’s name” (75). Humorously, though also tenderly, Hass captures the somewhat absurd calculus through which people form emotional attachment based on associations with what is known and familiar.}

Sun under Wood stands out in Hass’s oeuvre as both a stylistic turning point and a unique work in its own right. It marks his turn to a poetics more oriented toward human relationships, as well as more direct in its meaning. Earlier work places more emphasis on image and allusion, two mainstays—and one could even say necessities/requirements/sine qua nons—of twentieth-century American poetics. This collection, even more so than those that followed, adopts a broad
essayistic scope in its poems, a few of which are at least several pages in length. In terms of development, such poems tend to proceed associatively, often interweaving matters of world-historical significance with personal anecdotes.\(^{50}\) One interesting feature of Hass’s approach is what I might term reticence, which is to say that in his work he sometimes does not arrive at what appears to be the topic of primary importance until midway through the poem, or even later. One could view this tendency as a cloying example of the imitative fallacy, wherein the speaker does not arrive at his ostensible topic as a result of reluctance, of the difficulty of arriving at utterance on a topic that is painful or that society discourages one from talking about. I think that that sort of thing, in part, is what Hass is attempting, although the poems are not so heavy-handed that this conceptual aspect serves as a major distraction. What they also seem to do is to model the difficulty of making sense of personal experience by exploring other facets of existence, especially history, social injustice, nature, and religious thought.\(^{51}\) In some ways, this comparison seems an attempt to put things in context, so to speak. Hass might be claiming that the matters in his poems are but a small part of a larger and potentially much more painful reality. To that end, he lays claim to the import of the personal, and he overlays it with matters of world-historical significance.\(^{52}\)

In the brief poem, “Our Lady of the Snows” (\textit{Sun under Wood} 5), Hass depicts the mother’s drinking during the speaker’s childhood as a force that causes him to grasp at agency

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\(^{50}\) Referring to Hass’s earlier collection \textit{Praise}, David Kellogg calls it “an early instance of a style that would proliferate widely in eighties American poetry: this style, or set of styles, merges informal, almost flippant personal narrative with a larger discursive sweep invoking political, historical or philosophical reflection” (416).

\(^{51}\) Linda Wagner-Martin writes, “In the work of Forche and such other poets of her generation as Michael Palmer, Robert Haas [sic] and Joy Harjo, the use of personal myth has become aesthetically complicated by a consciousness of the world’s anguish” (58).

\(^{52}\) In “\textit{English: An Ode}” (\textit{Sun under Wood} 62-70), Hass writes: “There are those who think it’s in fairly bad taste / to make habitual reference to social and political problems / in poems. To these people it seems a form of melodrama / or self-aggrandizement, which it no doubt partly is. / And there’s no doubt either that these same people also tend / to feel that it ruins a perfectly good party / to be constantly making reference to the poor or oppressed / and their misfortunes in poems which don’t, / after all, lift a finger to help them. Please / help yourself to the curried chicken.” (65-66)
out of a sense of powerlessness and to long for some sort of transcendent change. The first stanza describes a side altar, where a statue of a young girl “made the quality of mercy seem scrupulous and calm.” As a child, still forming his impressions about the world and susceptible to the influence of others, he sees in this religious imagery a vision of agency, of being “scrupulous and calm,” to which he aspires. The speaker reflects on the instances when the mother was hospitalized (Hass presents her drinking as an illness by mentioning hospitalization) or drinking heavily and he would light a votive candle to “bargain for us both” or just imagine flying away. The young speaker draws hope from following conventional rituals, such as lighting the candle, but his imagination appears as a more potent means of escape. This quality of imagination appears in the short third stanza: “Come down! come down! / she’d call, because I was so high.” On my first reading, I assumed that the person calling was the mother, although I am fairly sure it’s meant to be the statue. The speaker seems to be pulling away from her, from tradition, from the expectation that he as a child be “scrupulous and calm.” The tension is between wanting to deal with the issue of his mother drinking within the system and to break free from the system entirely. The final stanza describes the speaker remembering himself surveying the contents of his older brother’s closet: “convinced that I could be absolutely transformed / by something I could borrow.” Those clothes in his brother’s closet presumably would make him “absolutely transformed” into an adult male, free, if he so chose, to walk away from the situation. Interestingly, the poem describes these days as “navigable sorrow,” as if “navigability” serves to exculpate the mother or to perform a traditionally masculine act of stoicism.

“Dragonflies Mating” (*Sun under Wood* 6-11) is a poem in six sections whose themes include the accidental eradication of Native American populations by diseases carried by missionaries, the conflicted feelings of the speaker toward his alcoholic mother, and the nature of
desire as compared and contrasted with the eponymous dragonflies mating. The unifying thread is the human desire for attachment and love, which can cause unintentional harm, sometimes on a monumental scale. In the second section, Hass recounts a tale from the 1930s of Jaime de Angulo speaking to a Native American in a Santa Barbara bar. De Angulo asks the man about his people’s creation myth, and he says that Red Fox needed to urinate but, not wanting to drown anybody, turned toward the place that would become the ocean. De Angulo asks why Red Fox had to worry about drowning anybody if the world had not been created yet, and the man says he asked his own father the same question: “And my old man looked up at me with this funny smile / and said, You know, when I was a kid, I wondered about that” (7). This section illustrates the manner in which beliefs pass from parent to child through generations, even if those beliefs are patently logically inconsistent. There’s a note of humor here, but there’s also the somber knowledge that a culture has faded into obscurity. Hass develops this theme of perpetuation more broadly toward the end of the poem.

In the middle of the poem the speaker turns to the subject of his youth, a time during which he says that basketball practice was his absolute favorite thing. He worried that, deep into her drinking, his mother would arrive “and humiliate me in front of my classmates with her bright, confident eyes, / and slurred, though carefully pronounced words, and the appalling // impromptu sets of mismatched clothes she was given to / when she had the dim idea of making a good impression in that state” (8-9). This scene conveys part of the impact the mother’s drinking had on the speaker as a child. He finds solace in basketball, and yet his mother bumbles into that aspect of his life and causes him severe embarrassment. Interestingly, Hass speaks of embarrassment, but he doesn’t show the reaction of any onlookers. Rather, he focuses on the speaker as if to concentrate the power of his embarrassment into a single point. Anyway, the
mother appears as she usually does in Hass’s work, culpable but mostly harmless, confused, childlike, and vulnerable. Hass states that the speaker would notice her enter gymnasium but continue to bounce the ball and pour his concentration into watching the rim and feeling the ball in his hands before shooting: “It was a perfect thing; it was almost like killing her” (9). As in “Our Lady of the Snows,” this scene illustrates the childhood sense of frustration, the acute distress of being unable to deal with an alcoholic parent and the accompanying strong, even violent, desire for control. The concluding simile, “it was almost like killing her,” seems a little hyperbolic, especially juxtaposed as it is with the discussion of Native American deaths, but it too illustrates a strength of feeling, a limited capacity to reflect, and, on the part of the mother, a perhaps well-intentioned habit of behavior that goes decidedly awry.

The six-line fourth section is a metapoetic aside:

When we say “mother” in poems,
we usually mean some woman in her late twenties
or early thirties trying to raise a child.

We use this particular noun
to secure the pathos of the child’s point of view
and to hold her responsible. (9)

53 In a darker vein, Hass describes the young speaker at Catholic school learning about early missionary work in the Americas: “The Franciscan priests who brought their faith in God / across the Atlantic, brought with the baroque statues and metalwork crosses / and elaborately embroidered cloaks, influenza and syphilis and the coughing disease. // Which is why we settled an almost empty California” (8) (In fact the prevailing view is that syphilis originated in the Americas and spread to Europe from there. Also, since influenza is zoonotic, it probably already existed in the Americas, I would think. He overlooks smallpox.). The speaker says, “It would, Sister Marietta said, have broken your hearts to see it. / They meant so well, she said, and such a terrible thing // came here with their love” (8). While surely the motives of missionaries must vary tremendously, the strange truth is that the introduction of these diseases, and their consequent effect on a native population without immunity, was not something that people of this era could have even comprehended, let alone predicted. Of course, the Catholic narrative as described reflects a definite slant on and appropriation of this historical tragedy, but as much as the ills of colonialism are discussed, this particular aspect is ironic in the truest sense of the word, and it illustrates a situation that, to use the common expression, could have happened to anyone.
Hass is probably right about much poetry, and this passage demonstrates, or seems to
demonstrate, self-awareness and even self-criticism. However, I would argue that what Hass is
doing here is equally perfunctory: the revelations, the self-indictment, the retrospective sympathy,
the disavowal of blame, and particularly the implication that blame is hackneyed or childish.
These moves demonstrate a coming-to-terms, so to speak, that is representative of much
contemporary American poetic practice. Ultimately, though, the speaker is presenting himself as
mature, stoic, and magnanimous, presumably at the expense of those upon whom the past has a
stronger and more immediate claim. The short fifth section has an Eliotic tone and Eliotic
archetypal imagery of roots by riverbank in winter. The speaker declares “Fear is a teacher” (10).
Ostensibly the fear is that “Nothing could reach her, / Nothing can reach you” (10). This style
certainly recalls Eliot and the figure of the poète maudit, lost in a sad but poetic sense of
isolation. This mode contrasts markedly with the prose-like disclaiming self-awareness of the
previous section, as if to suggest that the speaker vacillates between the two reactions.

The sixth and final section opens with the eponymous image of dragonflies mating atop a
Shasta daisy bud. He notes that the flower head looks both like a womb and an erection.
Similarly, the image of the mating dragonflies seems to display something profound: “The insect
lovers seem to be transferring the cosmos into each other” (10). However, the difference
between what he sees and what is actually happening does appear to occur to the speaker: “I
think (on what evidence?) that they are different from us. / That they mate and are done with
mating. / They don’t carry all this half-mated longing up out of childhood / and then go looking
for it everywhere” (10-11). These lines tie the events of the speaker’s childhood, particularly the
problems with his mother, to his current feelings, his current state of unfulfilled desire and
longing. This thought leads him to reflect on the harm desire causes: “They don’t go through life

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dizzy or groggy with their hunger, / kill with it, smear it on everything” (11). However, he adds that perhaps they do not possess the ability to be moved by gazing upon nature. Hass is suggesting that the human capacity to feel, and to feel wonder in particular, is compensation for human sensitivity and the wounds of the past. The poem concludes with the speaker speculating that the dragonflies are locked into an evolutionarily-driven bliss and that “They can’t separate probably / until is done” (11). The tone here is one of inevitability, as well as insatiability. The possible inability of the dragonflies to separate also suggests the human tendency to remain in relationships that are hurtful and unhealthy because of some primal need or fundamental drive for connection or validation.

Another long poem, “My Mother’s Nipples” (Sun under Wood 12-22), discusses the speaker’s mother in greater depth than any other single poem by Hass. Like his long poems in general, it’s strongly associative, though more than the others this work explores its own nature and action as a metaphor. Also, interspersed throughout are long prose passage describing episodes from his life involving his mother. Self-referentially, the poem opens, “They’re where all displacement begins” (12). As if to prove this point, Hass immediately begins describing construction taking place in what was previously mostly undisturbed nature: “They bulldozed the upper meadow at Squaw Valley” (12). The sensual descriptions of the earth (“the scent of wet grass on summer mornings,” “the sage smell the earth gave back after dark”), the suggestive construction work (“the framers began to pound nails,” “they poured concrete / and laid road”), and the generally rounded landscape, along with images of fertility, all seem to link to the metaphor of breasts in one way or another. This move illustrates how evocative but also how reflexive, even absurdly so, the comparison between nature and female fertility and sexuality can be. After this point has been established, a brief, two-line passage quotes an unidentified woman:
“‘He wanted to get out of his head,’ she said, / ‘so I told him to write about his mother’s nipples’” (12). What follows is two pages of various characters describing their mother’s nipples in ways that, in fact, do not get them out of their head but rather reflect their preoccupations, their tendencies, their pretensions, and their sense of self. Some of these are quite funny. The cosmopolitan exclaims: “Alors! les nipples de ma mère!” (13). The utopian says, “I will freely share / les nipples de ma mère” (13). The melancholic says, “There were never there, / les nipples de ma mère. / They are not anywhere” (14). The indigenist goes on at some length, describing the seven-day vision quest of a boy named “Loves His Mother’s Tits” who sees an eagle crying three times and thus becomes “Eagle Three Times” (14). This long passage, clearly a satire on those who try to appropriate native cultures, can be read in conjunction with the imagery of Native Americans elsewhere in this collection, which at times also reinforce that difficulty of knowing the cultural other. The final character who speaks is the regionalist, who says: “Los Pechos. / Rolling oak woodland between Sierra pines / and the simmering valley” (14). He sounds very much like the speaker describing the voluptuous landscape in the first stanza.

The next two sections describe the speaker’s mother’s actual nipples and indicate that the speaker has in fact seen them. The first describes the mother’s body in a way that makes her sound sexually appealing, which is reminiscent of Sharon Olds. The mother has pink and soft nipples, and she was “a small person, compact body” (15) who wore white muslin tennis outfits. However, that passage segues from the image of a chic, attractive woman to one beset by psychological problems: “In the photographs / she’s on the beach, standing straight, / hands on hips, grinning, / eyes desperate even then” (15). The next section establishes the historicity of the mother, as well as points toward prevailing anxieties about women’s bodies: “Mothers in the
nineteen forties didn’t nurse. / I never saw her naked. Oh! yes, I did, / once, but I can’t remember. I remember / not wanting to” (15). The poem never does identify that instance.

The next section is prose, and it starts simply, “Two memories” (15), each concerning medical treatment of the mother’s drinking, medical treatment that obviously hearkens back to an earlier era. In the first, the speaker remembers worrying that his mother’s drinking would keep his family from visiting his aunt and uncle, which would mean that he wouldn’t get to watch *The Lone Ranger* on their television. Still, they end up going to dinner, and while the aunt adopts a sanctimonious tone toward the mother, the scene is otherwise relaxed, unremarkable, and even banal. However, after dinner, the doorbell rings: “It was two men in white coats and my mother bolted from the table into the kitchen and out the back door. The men went in after her. The back stairs led into a sort of well between the houses, and when I went into the kitchen I could hear her screaming, “No! no!” the sound echoing and re-echoing among the houses” (15-16). This sequence of events suggests a few different things. The first is that the young speaker, excited simply by the prospect of watching a television show, does not have the emotional and cognitive development necessary to process what he sees. Another is that the evening was a ruse, and that he was used by his aunt, uncle, and presumably father as a prop of normalcy. The third is the severity of the mother’s drinking, perhaps legitimately requiring her to be committed to prevent her from causing significant injury to herself. The fourth is the genuine distress of the mother, which in turn points to her own emotional struggles, as well as her lack of autonomy and perhaps the harshness of institutionalization during that era.

The second memory occurs on a Sunday when speaker is around ten or eleven years old and visits his mother at the State Hospital in Napa Valley. The verdant lawns resemble a park, which contrasts with the family turmoil. The speaker tries to understand what is happening to his
mother: “I had asked my grandmother why, if my mother had a drinking problem, that’s the phrase I had been taught to use, why she was locked up with crazy people. It was a question I could have asked my father, but I understood that his answer would not be dependable” (16). Her initial reply is that he should ask his father, but she reconsiders and says, “They have a treatment program, dear, maybe it will help. I tried out that phrase, treatment program” (16). One sees here the unreliability of the information available to the speaker, the information being filtered as it is through euphemism, embarrassment, worry, and incomplete understanding. It also indicates an emotional distance from the father, a distance that figures not only in this poem but also elsewhere in Hass’s work. The speaker describes his mother: “My mother was sitting on a bench. She looked immensely sad, seemed to have shrunk. Her hair was pulled across her forehead and secured with a white beret, like Teresa Wright in the movies” (16). The speaker and his brother sit next to her and cry while his father holds his sister’s hand and his grandparents stand to the side. This image suggests simultaneous connection and a profound disconnect. Later, when the adults are talking, he stares at a nearby middle-aged woman glancing about and talking, nearly whispering, to herself in another language. He says, “She was so careless of herself that I could see her breast, the brown nipple, when she leaned forward. I didn’t want to look, and looked, and looked away” (17). Here the depressing and confusing mingles with erotic curiosity, everything combining to create a lasting and deeply ambivalent impression.

The next short section returns to the narrative present, and the description is far calmer and more peaceful, as if to calm down from the troubling memories. Back to a hot morning in the mountains, the speaker’s lover Brenda works in another room as he listens to the rumble of construction and the songs of various birds for mating season: “They’re mating now. Otherwise they’re mute. / Mother-ing. Or Mother-song. / Mother-song-song-song” (17). The calmness of
this scene indicates some emotional distance from the past, as well as suggesting that the dark episodes of childhood have not completely determined his future. At the same time, his projection of the word “mother” onto the birdsong suggests that these events remain very much with him, as well as that, more generally, his emotional ties to and need for his mother remain strong.

In the following section, the speaker thinks about when he and his brother were in college and they laughed until they had tears in their eyes about the way that, when they were in elementary school, their mother would bake them chocolate cake as a panicked way to make amends after she started to drink. However, with that association in their minds, the very smell of the cake sickened them and made them not want to eat it. The mother is working within a limited range of social vocabulary, and she is engaging in the actions of a conventional mid-century housewife in order to apologize for and otherwise cover up her severe alcoholism. At that time—though perhaps this has changed—there was not a clear script to be followed. In some ways this incongruousness seems to make the experience even worse for the speaker. Still, the young speaker shows the ability to laugh about it uproariously, though perhaps fatalistically, as a means of coping with it, and even of bonding over it. The reaction of the speaker in the narrative present seems to be somewhere in the middle, an acknowledgement of both the darkness of the memory and its humor.

Another prose section describes the mother spending time with the dying father. Hass writes, “When my father died, I was curious to see in what ratio she would feel relieved and lost” (19). She would sit there and make small talk about the cafeteria and the nurses, while occasionally turning to her semi-conscious husband on morphine “and say, in a sort of baby talk, ‘It’s all right, dear. It’s all right’” (19). Hass continues, “And after he died, she was dazed, and
clearly did not know herself whether she felt relieved or lost, and I felt sorry for her that she had no habit and so no means of self-knowing. She was waiting for us to leave so she could start drinking” (19). Given the events of the poem thus far, it might come as a surprise that the father dies first, that the father and mother are still married, and that the mother, at least nominally, is assuming a caregiving and responsible role. Again, the poem portrays the mother in a sympathetic light, and it also illustrates that the son feels a certain distance toward his father, one clearly shared to some degree by the mother. Hass reiterates that the mother does not have the social vocabulary with which to understand herself, which underscores her position in this poem as someone misunderstood and forsaken to a degree both by society and by those around her. Even after all those years of drinking, though, she still waits for others to leave to do so, out of some sense of shame, courtesy, or simply habit.

Hass says that around the time of the father’s death the mother only once seemed highly alert, when an employee of the undertaker came to tell her he needed a copy of her marriage license in order to take care of matters relating to insurance and pensions. The speaker says that “she looked briefly alive, anxious, and I realized that, though she rarely told the truth, she was a very poor dissembler. Now her eyes were a young girl’s” (20). The speaker ponders what secret she might be hiding, and as she is still noticeably trying to figure out how to handle the situation, he says, “I told her not to worry. I’d locate it. She considered this and said it would be fine. I could see she had made some decision, and then she grew indefinite again” (20). The speaker is taking a protective role toward the mother. He is performing his understanding of her, just as he is emphasizing what he considers her good and helpless qualities. For example, even though “she rarely told the truth, she was a very poor dissembler.” Similarly, “her eyes were a young girl’s.”
He is also demonstrating his ability to comfort her, as his action leads to her quickly calming down.

The speaker makes a trek to find the parents’ marriage license, and he learns that they eloped in Santa Rosa in 1939. After he speaks to the clerk, it takes her a while to find the license. She says that he told her the marriage occurred in February, but it had in fact taken place in October. Since the speaker’s brother was born in December 1939, he realizes that the secret was that his brother had been conceived outside of marriage. This revelation leads him to reevaluate his view on his parents’ relationship, and to grapple with the fact that, for all of his awareness of their marital difficulties, the relationship might have been even more strained than he tended to imagine. Hass writes:

> Hard to see that it meant anything except that my father had tried very hard to avoid his fate. I felt so sorry for them. That they thought it was worth keeping a secret. Or, more likely, that their life together began in a negotiation too painful to be referred to again. That my mother had, with a certain fatality, let me pick up the license, so her first son would not know the circumstances of his conception. I felt sorry for their shame, for my father’s panic. It finished off my dim wish that there had been an early romantic or ecstatic time in their lives, a blossoming, brief as a northern summer maybe, but a blossoming. (20-21)

This passage is one of the few instances in Hass’s oeuvre of an expression of sympathy for the father, though it is here yoked to sympathy for the mother as well. Again, it is the speaker who is ultimately the confidante of the mother, however reluctant her confidence may be, and the one to
shoulder a burden for her. Also present is the fact that he “felt sorry for their shame,” which indicates a criticism of the social norms that led them to feel shame and to enter in a tumultuous and dissatisfying marriage.

The final prose section describes yet another incident stemming from the mother’s alcohol use. At around the age of ten, the speaker comes home from school to find his mother gone. Searching for her, he feels an instinct to look at a local park, and he finds her sleeping under an orange tree. Unable to wake her, he decides to wait by her until she regains consciousness: “I suppose I wanted for us to look like a son and mother who had been picnicking, like a mother who had fallen asleep in the warm light and scent of orange blossoms and a boy who was sitting beside her daydreaming, not thinking of anything in particular” (22). Again, the traumas of the speaker’s childhood are evident, as well as the attempt to portray “normalcy,” the limited social vocabulary and the accompanying shame. Coming as it does toward the end of this long poem, I would argue that this self-consciousness about the speaker positioning himself next to his mother has a broader metaphoric significance, and it suggests that the speaker even now, from a mixture of feelings ranging from affection to dependency to frustration to humiliation, is still trying to position himself next to her, so to speak, which is the work of this long poem.

In parts of the poem Hass uses the concept of song as a theme: “What we’ve never had is a song / and what we’ve really had is a song” (21). This statement suggests that life experiences and the longing for something different both have a poetic quality to them, a sort of meaningfulness or poignancy, and that they also are mediated by our recollection and our own preoccupations and desires, just as a song or other artistic creation would, despite its verisimilitude. At the very end, the poem returns to song imagery: “You are not her singing, though she is what’s / broken in a song. / She is its silences. // She may be its silences” (22).
Hass concludes: “I tried to think of some place on earth that she loved. // I remember she only ever spoke happily / of high school” (22). The speaker is still grappling with the metaphor of singing, as well as the manner in which it explains his relationship to his mother. Ultimately, he cannot decide what he meant to her, whether her influence was positive or negative, whether her influence is more present in his finer qualities or his unfulfilled desires. As much as the speaker seems to pride himself on understanding the mother, or at least making the attempt to do so, he possibly comes up short here. Though, then again, he is at least performing that attempt, and one might reasonably assume that the mother really only did speak fondly of high school. High school is an incredibly banal note to end on, and it fits with the anticlimactic threads in this poem; it is dispiriting to contemplate a life with no sustained, pronounced joy apart from a brief bright period in adolescence. Moreover, the speaker is noting the tendency of the mother to look to her own youth for significance, and to craft her own personal narrative as well.

“Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer” (Sun under Wood 47-58) describes a period in the speaker’s life ranging from being recently divorced to finding a new lover while travelling in Korea. Like much of Hass’s work, particularly in Sun under Wood, this long meditative poem is full of recurrent images and themes: divorce, the Korean landscape, Buddhism, desire, pain, joy, and, in particular, emptiness. Early in the poem, reflecting on emptiness, the speaker refers to his mother and brother. With regard to his mother, he remembers a conversation with her that occurred toward the end of her life, when she was living in a hotel room and suffering from emphysema: “‘I’m doing fine / except for the asthma.’ ‘It’s emphysema, Mom.’ / ‘We used to call it asthma. Anyway, I’m just lucky / I have my health’” (49). Hass has his moments of dark humor, and this passage is one of them. Again, he highlights the mother’s suffering, as well as
her cluelessness and the unconvincing, at times almost deranged, attempts on her part to project
good cheer and a positive attitude.

With respect to the speaker’s brother, Hass describes him in the psychiatric ward of a San
Francisco hospital, where he is detoxing from crack. They stand in the courtyard as the brother
and a pregnant young woman take a smoke break. Four stories up, a man is pounding on window,
which the woman interprets as him trying to get her attention: “A shy, pleased smile (gap in her
bad front teeth). / And said to me, coyly, ‘Fatal attraction.’” (49). However, it turns out that the
man simply needs insulin from an orderly who is also down there smoking. Then, the brother
talks about withdrawal, “‘The really crazy jones / lasts about two hours and when you come
down, / you really (r-r-r-really) come down. You got nothing left / but the lint in your pockets”
(49-50). The juxtaposition of the mother and the brother suggests something about the way
desire and need are passed from person to person. To that end, earlier in the poem Hass writes
about being on a trip to Korea and seeing “a carved placatory shrine, a figure of a couple
copulating, / and underneath in hangul: we beget joy, we beget suffering” (49). Of course, the
pregnancy of the ward mate highlights that as well, particularly inasmuch as at the time of the
composition of the poem it was highly publicized that a pregnant woman addicted to crack
would give birth to a child physically addicted to crack. And the young woman’s
misinterpretation of the man trying to get the orderly’s attention adds an element of farce. It’s
interesting that Hass elsewhere does not make the speaker’s family look quite as farcical.
Perhaps the fact that he does so here underscores the bitterness of the speaker’s recent divorce,
the way that emptiness such as that which he writes about makes everything seem farcical,
particularly the desires of others when one’s own desires feel thwarted or derided. Later in the
poem, though, the speaker seems to move away from that overwhelming sense of emptiness:
“Private pain is easy, in a way. It doesn’t go away, / but you can teach yourself to see its size” (57). To teach oneself that, he makes a suggestion to “Invent a ritual” (57), such as building a small fire on a mountainside and watching till it exhausts itself—“Then you get up, brush yourself off, and walk back to the world. / If you’re lucky, you’re hungry” (57-58). This poem, like the other poems in this collection, dramatizes the search for a proper perspective on desire and painful personal desires.

“August Notebook: A Death” (Apple Trees at Olema 11-17) describes at great length the days following when the speaker learned about his brother’s death, alone, in a dingy apartment littered with food wrapping and prescription bottles. This poem grapples with the simultaneous incommensurability and banality of the situation, the not-unexpected death of a poor and mentally ill brother with substance abuse problems. In so grappling, the poem approaches the subject essayistically, from a variety of angles, as is Hass’s general tendency. The fourth and final section depicts the speaker on the day on which his brother’s body is cremated. He states that he begins to understand the behavior of people who would burn a body at a river’s edge:

As if to say, take him, fire, take him, air,
Watch the ashes in the fast water
or, in a small flaring of anger, turn away, walk back
toward the markets and the hum of life, not quite
saying to yourself There, the hell with it, it’s done. (15-16).

This natural imagery, as well as the thoroughness of the consignation of the deceased to the elements, paints an appealing alternative to the variously dirty and institutional settings, as well as the complicated feelings, that the speaker has experienced. Most of the remainder of the poem
is composed of exchanges the speaker remembers having with his brother. He recalls saying to his brother, who’d just gotten into some sort of trouble, “You know, you have the impulse control / of a ferret” (16). The brother replies, “Yeah? I don’t know / what a ferret is, but I get greedy. I don’t mean to, / but I get greedy” (16). Hass then describes him: “An old grubber’s beard, going gray, / a wheelchair, sweats, a street person’s baseball cap” (16). Then, the brother reflects on Billie Holliday, and he opines that, “if she were around now, she’d be nothing” (16) because he does not believe that she’d be well-suited to singing the style of hip-hop songs that are currently popular. The speaker replies, “You just got evicted from your apartment, / you can’t walk and you have no money, so / I don’t want to talk to you about Billie Holiday / right now, okay” (16). He shows the limits of his own patience. Blithely disengaged from his problems, his brother vexed him. He is not adopting an elegiac posture of simple grief and praise for the deceased; rather, he is showing the complications of the men’s relationship in a way that is, in varying degrees, unflattering to both parties.

The final exchange that the speaker remembers concerns his mother. The brother tells him (on more than one occasion, it is implied, by the phrases “he would say” and “I would say”), “You know, / I’m like Mom. I mean, she really had a genius / for denial, don’t you think? And the thing is, / you know, she was a pretty happy person” (16). The speaker disagrees: “She was panicky, crippled by guilt at her drinking, / and she was evasive to herself about herself, / and so she couldn’t actually connect with anybody, / and her only defense was to be chronically cheerful” (16). In turn, the brother says, “Worse things than cheerful” (16). The speaker demonstrates more sympathy toward the substance abuse of the mother while not attempting to rationalize the brother’s own substance abuse. As a result, I infer that he does not blame his mother’s childrearing for his brother’s problem but rather sees more of a genetic basis. It is
probably easier to assume a genetic basis because he himself seems to have escaped his childhood without major trauma or insufficiency driving him to addiction. Possibly the speaker simply felt more of a tie to his mother than to his brother. Perhaps, too, the fact that she felt “crippled by guilt” and that she tried to hide the emotional ravages of her problem makes her more sympathetic to him than the brother, who, after all, has “the impulse control / of a ferret” (16). In addition, the speaker presents himself as the defender of the mother, as he is in other poems talking about the father. The poem concludes, “Well, I am through with those arguments, / except in my head, and not through, I see, with the habit— / I thought this poem would end downriver downriver— / of worrying about where you are and how you’re doing” (17). Self-awareness with respect to the artistic process bookends the poem (the first section includes a reflection on composing the poem itself). Also, the poem rejects a facile gesture of relinquishment, or even of a longing for relinquishment. The fact that the argument he continues to have in his mind is about the appropriate way to understand his mother, though, suggests that this poem might be at least as much of an elegy for her as it is for the brother.

A few poems focus more on the speaker’s father. In “The World as Will and Representation” (Time and Materials 18-19), the speaker describes being around ten years old and watching his father make his alcoholic mother take Antabuse in the morning in order to prevent her from drinking. Hass notes that the poem occurs in the late nineteen-forties, when typically men worked and women stayed at home with the children. This detail evokes sympathy for the mother, shown to be subjected to confining and stultifying gender norms. Perhaps to put his son at ease, the father winks at him: “His wink at me was a nineteen-forties wink. / He watched her closely so she couldn’t ‘pull / A fast one’ or ‘put anything over’ on a pair / As shrewd as the two of us” (18). The speaker reflects on these phrases as also indicative of the
cultural constructedness of the relationship of his parents, as well as the source of unpleasantness in recollection that might otherwise be nostalgic: “I hear those phrases / In old movies and my mind begins to drift” (18). Hass notes the father had to go through his routine of grinding up the medication, dissolving it in water, making the mother drink it, and then waiting to make sure her system had time to absorb it so she could not just vomit after he left. The speaker describes the difficulty of capturing such a moment artistically, or perhaps simply of remembering it: “Hard to render, in these lines, / The rhythm of the act. He ground two of them / To powder in a glass, filled it with water, / Handed it to her, and watched her drink” (18). Routine and mundane as this task may seem, it embodies the emotional turmoil, distrust, and power dynamic of the family.

In another evocation of incongruity, the speaker describes reading the comic strip Blondie with his father, a representation of a considerably less tumultuous home life. When he leaves for work, he tells his son, “Keep an eye on Mama, pardner” (19). Being left with the responsibility of policing the mother’s drinking certainly places the child in an uncomfortable position. Again, the father’s cheerful tone suggests either an attempt to deflect from the seriousness of the matter at hand or a lack of awareness of how to approach the situation. In the scheme of the poem, the mother appears to be ill, and the alcoholism seems so severe as to be beyond complete control, so, interestingly, it is the father, who is the capable parent, whose awkward attempts to lighten the mood, whose association with mid-century gender norms, and whose temporary abdication of serious responsibility to the speaker as a child make him seem less than fully admirable. On the other hand, one could also view him in a sympathetic light, as he appears to be handling his wife’s alcoholism in a manner that would probably have seemed acceptable and possibly even progressive at the time, which is to say attempting to address the matter medically. Along those
lines, the speaker alludes to a scene from the *Aeneid*, where a man leaves a burning city while carrying his father on his shoulder and holding his own son’s hand. Like the man in this passage, the father attempts to navigate a perilous situation with others depending on him.

The poem concludes with the following reflection: “We get our first moral idea / About the world—about justice and power, / Gender and the order of things—from somewhere” (19). The notion that this influence is a “first moral idea” that comes “from somewhere” is an atypically vague pronouncement from an otherwise highly specific poet. As such, the tentativeness does not reflect uncertainty of the speaker per se but rather complexity, both the complexity of the experience at the time and the complexity of its influence. The poem leaves open the possibility that this influence even has positive elements, as it instructs the speaker “about justice and power, / Gender and the order of things.” On the other hand, this stoicism also reinforces a stereotypical view of masculinity, where suffering becomes accepted upon reflection and offers, even demands, personal growth and a sense of perspective.

“Consciousness” (*Time and Materials* 82-84), as the title suggests, is a meditation on consciousness. The poem is highly associative, as it explores memory and reflection in an attempt to make sense not only of the subjective experience of consciousness but also of the origin of consciousness in early life and its dissolution in death. Almost a page into the poem, the speaker arrives at what appears to be the main subject of the poem, the speaker’s father. Hass writes, “I think I respond with such quick hostility to anything that smells / like reductionist

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54 Like Ginsberg, Plath, and Olds, among others, Hass evokes a sense of myth in order to add a sense of import to a description of family life.

55 Formally, it appears to be a series of prose paragraphs, although on closer inspection, the length of each line in any given stanza, including the final line of that stanza, is roughly the same length, and yet the average line length varies slightly from stanza to stanza. As a result, it is more accurate to describe the form as a series of long, loose, heavily enjambed free verse stanzas. Conceptually, this form seems to suggest that although consciousness itself might appear to have the relatively uninterrupted flow of prose, there is in fact a deeper structure that is more discrete than continuous. Or, maybe this form suggests a desire on the part of the poet to show the imposition of form even when there is little that can be assigned a coherent structure.
materialism because it was my father’s worldview” (83). As elsewhere, the speaker finds fault with his father for being too rational and cool, which is possibly the father’s strategy of avoiding engagement with problems and not making himself vulnerable. Hass then describes that reductionist worldview in a slightly absurd juxtaposition: “‘Bobby,’ he was sitting in a chair on the porch of the old house / on D Street, ‘it’s a dog-eat-dog world out there’” (84). He makes this pronouncement as the speaker is playing with crayons on the stairs and, across the street, neighbor dogs are copulating. In the next stanza, the speaker remembers bounding up those five porch stairs joyously and has “complicated feelings about the / fact that it was one of the most vivid pleasures of my life” (84). Then, his mind leaps ahead to his father lying in a hospital near death, “When I came into the room where he was dying of cancer, my father / gave me a look that was pure plea and a I felt a flaring of anger. What / was I supposed to do? He was supposed to teach me how to die” (84). Again, the speaker demonstrates resentment for his father relying on him, perhaps too much, and one also gets the sense that the speaker feels as though he has missed out on some significant form of affection or emotional validation from the father. Minutes later, the father dies. The speaker says, “I felt such a mix of / love and anger and dismay and relief at the sudden peacefulness / of his face that I wanted to whack him on the head with his / polished walnut walking stick” (84). The conflictedness of emotion serves not only as a comment on consciousness itself but also on the nature of at least this particular parent-child relationship.

Later, the poem returns to the father in a move that is more sympathetic and self-critical than earlier: “It was years before I understood that my father was telling his / young son that he hated the job he had to go to every day” (85). The lack of emotional display he faulted his father for was perhaps a strategy for dealing with his unhappiness. Similarly, this realization means that
it is possible that the father was in fact trying to communicate with him more than he thought, but in a way he was not equipped to understand. In the concluding stanza, Hass writes, “Consciousness, ‘that means nothing,’ Czeslaw wrote. ‘That loves / itself,’ / George Oppen wrote. My poor father” (85). These lines advance a more cynical view of consciousness as either meaninglessness or self-involvement, as if to call into question the value of the preceding meditation. The fact that the speaker alludes to these other male poets suggests a sort of lineage, as if they performed some of the traditional fatherly role of providing guidance and imparting wisdom. However, the last three words return to the focus to the speaker’s actual father, as if to suggest that, amid all of these other experiences and reflections, his emotional relationship with his father is one of the most significant parts of his existence. It is a strong and strongly asserted emotional gesture to punctuate a poem otherwise concerned with the flotsam and jetsam of consciousness.

Conclusion

One question that guides my thinking in this project is, what could these poets have said differently? What limitations do culture and dominant literary practice place upon the emotions that are considered acceptable for them to express? Obviously some emotional reactions are more harmful and less justifiable than others. Similarly, people pretend to have or exaggerate certain feelings in order to manipulate others. That said, I largely set aside the question of what emotional content is more wise or authentic in order to ask what the emotional content does: how does it invite the audience to judge the speaker, and what, if any, social vision does this content promote? In order to clarify this thinking, I find it useful to consider the possible reactions to
alternative emotional content. In this section, I look primarily at Hass and what critics and reviewers praise him for *not* doing.

Ginsberg has received considerable praise within the academy, and his work is widely read, taught, and taken seriously. For those who might look skeptically at his rhetorical exuberance, they have the option of reading his style as a product of his particular cultural moment. Still, some readers in the academy simply do not take his work seriously. For example, poet and scholar Tony Trigilio refers in his book to a “fellow scholar” who dismissed Ginsberg for “hysterical loudmouthedness,” and another who dismissed his work as “ranting” (ix). Trigilio says of these comments, “[I]t seemed just too easy to dismiss him in this way without at least a glance at how hysteria and loudmouthedness (not to mention the potential value of poetry as ranting) could be read as deliberate strategies, as actual crafted prophetic utterance rather than mere spectacle” (ix). He proceeds to argue that Buddhist poetics form a useful theoretical lens through which to read those aspects of Ginsberg’s tone that others find objectionable. However, I am here more concerned with the remarks of Trigilio’s colleagues. It is perfectly legitimate to dislike the work of any given poet, but it is often telling when one considers the language with which people frame that dislike. They criticize the intensity of expression, and, at least in the institutional world of creative writing, that suspicion of strong emotion is hegemonic.

As for Hass, he has attracted far less scholarly attention than Ginsberg, despite being a widely read and anthologized poet. However, he has received praise for his nuanced emotions and frank but thoughtfully circumscribed and self-aware statements, the antithesis of what

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56 It seems that, with few exceptions, American poets born after Sylvia Plath have been doomed to receive scant critical attention outside of publications and websites directed toward writers themselves. Sometimes poets are read critically as members of a certain identity group. For a while Jorie Graham attracted some critical attention, probably because people thought her obscure language would make her the next hot topic in the tradition of Jon Ashbery, but they were sadly mistaken. I would imagine that her unscrupulous conduct as the judge of a poetry book prize (an already ethically suspect endeavor) as exposed by the website Foetry did not help her prospects of becoming the author whom seemingly everyone feels should be discussed in at least one chapter of his or her critical tome.
Ginsberg was excoriated for above. Liam Rector writes, “Whoever is initially or finally responsible, the speaking voice in Sun Under Wood is generally that of a grown man, taking up his own fatality, refusing the easy and sloppy adolescent, psychological whine of J’accuse. There’s a tenderness in Hass’s choice of subjects and his worldly responsibilities towards them, and even a further sense of citizenship and an attending civic responsibility” (168). He delineates categories of a “grown man,” stoic, civically-minded, performing his own autonomy and self-sufficiency. The alternative is the adolescent, whom Rector characterizes as sloppy, whiny, and not self-sufficient, as if for a “grown man” to complain or express pain in a way not socially sanctioned would be to emasculate himself. Thomas Gardner congratulates Hass on avoiding the “easy.” Referring to Hass’s earlier collection Praise, he says, “Ultimately, what Hass [criticizes] is the notion—common to both our poetry and our talk shows—that some failure or horror, some inner or outer ‘dark,’ can function as a simple ‘passport’ to an accurate vision of the world” (130). He contends that to subscribe to the idea that this darkness “guarantees authenticity is to give up the live intricacies of thinking and describing for something easy. (That this is one of Hass’s consistent temptations, wounded as he was by a difficult childhood, can be heard behind the too-harsh dismissal of ‘stupidly’ ‘talking this way.’)” (130). Again, Gardner posits that a too uncomplicated representation of personal pain is less worthy of serious artistic consideration. Interestingly, and perhaps paradoxically, Hass’s perceived avoidance of this tendency creates a space in which the critic can express sympathy for the poet being “wounded.” It is Hass’s downplaying of pain, as well as his visible and perhaps self-critical efforts to do so, that renders him worthy of sympathy for Gardner.

Also writing about Sun under Wood, Don Bogen refers to representations of familial strife: “The dangers in dealing with this personal realm are obvious: egotistical self-
dramatization, wallowing in one's own status as victim, pop-psychology blatherings. But Hass is too rigorous a poet to fall into the traps of confessionalism. The suffering in the poet's family is not so much dramatized as analyzed within the contexts of his more fundamental concerns with art, nature, and human relations” (176). As in the statement by Rector, Bogen describes an unmediated, possibly resentful or morose representation of personal suffering as facile, as “blatherings.” He distinguishes the work of Hass from the traps of “confessionalism,” which is perhaps not a blanket critique of the poets traditionally identified as Confessional, e.g. Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, but which does appear to be a dismissal of poetry perceived to be too direct, too demanding of the reader’s sympathies, too emotionally uncomplicated, too un-self-reflexive. Instead, Bogen praises the more analytical and more “fundamental” concerns in this collection.

Charles Altieri notes his tendency, as a self-professed advocate of the avant-garde, to dismiss certain work of Robert Hass that he finds, at least at first glance, too emotionally straightforward and insufficiently “challenging” (633-634). However, he displays a grudging acceptance of Hass’s work because he believes it is possibly subtly undercutting the emotional content it might otherwise appear to represent unquestioningly. He writes, “There is a large difference between being merely banal and coming to terms with necessary banalities that frame our lives and that both make and test intimacy. So one has to be careful to examine how closely and how well poetry deliberately risks charges of banality in order to map modes of accepting repetition and limitation” (637). Another criticism he says that it is possible to level against Hass’s work is that the speaker, in his very sensitivity, is self-congratulatory: “he succumbs uncritically to the narcissistic temptations of identifying with the set of imaginative roles that our society now offers the ideally ‘sensitive’ male” (637). Once more, though, Altieri holds open the
possibility that Hass is in fact representing emotion in a way meant to somehow interrogate it. This thought pleases Altieri: “Perhaps Hass asks us to see that this speaker is so eager to display his wisdom that he prevents any deeper appreciation of what cannot be put into either words or sympathetic expression. Perhaps the sensitive men can be the problem, not the solution—I say a little too gleefully” (638). As in the remarks above, there are some troubling gender implications, as if for a man to be too demonstrative of his emotions, too “whiny,” too “sensitive” in his behavior is worthy of dismissal and derision. This dismissal and derision fills Altieri with glee, an emotional response that he acknowledges has problems, but also one that he boldly lays claim to, as if to suggest the rightness of his own instincts and the pure, principled, and correctly masculine place from which his intellectual and aesthetic ideals emerge.

Did Hass’s speaker have any options other than a sort of stoic, nuanced sympathy with which to talk about his mother? If he had blamed her for the suffering she caused him, he would be seen as petty, not self-sufficient, and complicit in a society that wronged both women and those with serious mental illness. If he had expressed despair, he would have been excoriated for “self-pity,” melodrama, botched “confessionalism,” and a sort of unmanliness. In both instances, he would be perceived as being immature and adopting the “easy” path, whatever that means. That is not to say that Hass is only left with a self-denying stoicism; as Gardner’s comment reveals, the speaker’s downplaying of his own emotion makes him not only praiseworthy, but sympathy-worthy as well. As I have argued earlier, I see his representations of sympathy as socially progressive, personally empowering, and viable as a means of connecting with an otherwise emotionally closed-off figure. Still, even though that sympathy is largely a good thing, the culture of American poetry and the academy does not leave Hass much of a choice. Although sympathy has been my focus in this chapter, I feel that these limitations also apply to emotional
content more broadly, which is exhibited in Hass’s self-aware, self-reflexive, nuanced, and at-times ironic style, marked by strategies for not only calling into question but also performing active skepticism of “easy” emotion.
INCOMPLETE DAUGHTERS

Two poets known for their vivid description of personal experience and interpersonal relationships, Sylvia Plath and Sharon Olds have written at length about their speakers’ parents, especially their fathers. These speakers have experienced some form of perceived early rejection. In Plath’s work, the father died while the daughter was young, which left her feeling bereft and abandoned. Her work also implies the father was to some degree an aloof or imposing figure, whose German nationality and position as a scholar further heightened her sense of distance from him. Meanwhile, the mother, who appears considerably less, is often a controlling figure, though perhaps a well-intentioned one in some ways, who hinders the speaker from achieving her true potential or real self. As for Olds, the parents are less often archetypal and elemental, but the struggles are similar. The father is an alcoholic. Both the father and mother engage in at least some physical abuse of the speaker. Their Calvinism represents for the speaker their attempt to control her and to shame her, and it serves as a self-righteous pretense for them to vent their own anger. For Plath and Olds, the speakers seem to have a fundamental need for love and validation from their parents, and the affection that they do feel toward them makes the distress all the more acute.

These early experiences harm the speakers, and they fill them with emotional needs that manifest in various ways. The poets mingle the language of accusation with that of desire. At times describing individual parts of the parents in great detail, they seem to be piecing them together, so to speak, something that occurs quite literally in Plath’s “The Colossus.” In some instances, this process is connected with the creation of art. Furthermore, the speakers seek emotional validation in relationships with men. For Plath’s speaker, the result is catastrophic. For
Olds, the result is largely redemptive, though not without complications. In Olds’s poetry, the speaker ultimately reconciles with her parents to a large extent, a development made possible by age and by their physical decline, but even then her needs remain keen and only imperfectly fulfilled.

Trauma can profoundly alter the lives of those it affects, especially in ways that they might be ashamed or afraid to discuss. The insidious persistence of trauma challenges social expectations about willpower alone being able to alter one’s feelings and to let one move beyond difficult experiences; these expectations are often used as a reason to downplay the seriousness of another’s suffering. By studying trauma, one brings attention to the human toll of war, prejudice, and various forms of socially condoned or overlooked harmful behavior. In this respect, the scholarship subverts rationalizations relying on nobility, necessity, inevitability, and so forth that seek to obscure the true levels of suffering. In part, James Berger links the growth in trauma studies to a “preoccupation with family dysfunctions” in the media (571). This preoccupation is tied to a sort of split consciousness about the family: “There appears to be the sense both that the family is the only hope for curing all social ills and that the family is damaged beyond hope” (571). Published long after Plath’s work, Olds’s poetry explores these two ostensibly contradictory perspectives, whereas while Plath does discuss positive elements of being a mother, her poems about being a daughter (and wife) focus considerably more on dysfunctional elements. Common to the work of both writers, though, is the tendency noted since at least the time of Freud (Berger 570) for trauma to lead to obsession and repetitive behavior. Both poets explore this obsession explicitly to some extent, and Olds, focusing on her parents throughout decades of work, certainly performs this obsession in her oeuvre. Incidentally, Lennard Davis speculates, “One thing that is striking about this set of conditions [of obsession] is
how closely it compares with Michel Foucault’s notion of societal control of individuals. [...] Could we perhaps see obsession as the visible end of a regulatory mechanism gone wrong?” (14). In the case of Plath and Olds writing about a speaker wounded by and consequently obsessed with parents, I think this speculation might have some merit insofar as the authority of the parents brings added weight to the harm they caused, as if it were deserved instead of merely unfortunate. Similarly, this obsession might be a form of self-flagellation stemming from the speakers’ sense of difference from the social norm as a result of their trauma.

Surely trauma features prominently in the poetry Plath and Olds have written about their speakers’ parents, but in this chapter I want to focus on their variously obsessive responses to that trauma. My key, but not exclusive, concern is with the ways in which the response to the harm caused by the parents has been tied to expressions of love and desire, which suggests on one level that the poets are positing a fundamental need for a sense of emotional connection with a parent, so strong that it persists in spite of—or, perhaps on some level because of—the fact of their mistreatment or abandonment. On another level, this expression of yearning gives added weight to their complaint: the parents do not just mistreat another person; they mistreat an acutely vulnerable person who, in turn, feels a painfully immense and virtually unconditional affection for them.

Avis Shivani has excoriated Olds for what he considers her sensational and unsophisticated work: “Infantilization packaged in pseudo-confession is her specialty. Her gory imagining of every single stage of her father's death from cancer in The Father gives Jerry Springer exhibitionists a run for their money (incidentally, the whole thing was imagined).” He takes particular exception to what he perceives as her “masochism,” which he sees as ensnaring female poetry workshop participants throughout the land: “Female poets in workshops around

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57 Like Berger, he references talk shows as a significant site of culture’s interest in and engagement with trauma.
the country idolize her, collaborate in the masochism, because they say she freed them to talk about taboo subjects, she ‘empowered’ them.” As many writers and critics do, he then references “confesssionalism” without particularly defining it, which leaves me to assume he means first-person poetry dealing with personal experience of a painful, taboo, or otherwise fraught nature: “[Olds has] given confesssionalism such a bad name it can't possibly recover.” His own exaggerated (polemical?) reaction aside, I have wondered to what extent it is accurate or useful to characterize what Olds, as well as Plath, does as masochistic. In the broadest sense, the speakers of both poets have an attachment to that which causes pain, their parents, and they continue to revisit that site of pain. Plath’s speaker attempts to replicate that relationship elsewhere, though Olds’s does not. Plath writes more explicitly about female attachment to damaging relationships, and in talking about the pleasant aspects of illness, recovery, and confinement, and about the exhilaration of accidentally cutting one’s thumb in kitchen, she does approach a more robust definition of masochism—though such moments in her work are comparatively rare. On the other hand, Olds’ adult speaker recreates a painful childhood experience by briefly strapping her arm to a chair with a rubber band, but that’s basically it—hardly the whips and chains of popular imagination. What Shivani fails to distinguish is between the act of writing about painful experience as masochistic and the act of writing about the enjoyment of, or at least attachment to, experience that is painful to a significant degree. Given his failure to define the term, he seems to be suggesting that Olds’s misdeed of her chosen subject matter is compounded by the fact that she, or at least the speaker, seems to enjoy talking about it.

However, more thoughtful scholarship on masochism in the arts provides a more useful lens through which to read Olds and Plath. Another scholar of nineteenth-century American
literature, Marianne Noble has identified masochism in women’s writing of this era as: “a ‘weird curve,’ I emphasize that it is in some sense unnatural, a reaction to the constraints upon women’s lives. But it is also a form of self-expression, beautiful—or at least fascinating—once one can see beyond its weirdness” (4). She acknowledges that representations of masochism in women’s literature can draw women to “experience their desire vicariously through that of a man, or [...] be attracted to violent men,” but she also contends that “to the extent that eroticized representations of suffering made available a language of passion, desire, and anger, they were an important form of literary agency” (6). She adds that masochism can be a form of political agency: “Histrionic victimization is a particularly effective strategy for self-empowerment in a liberal society in which most citizens want to be seen as nonviolent and compassionate” (9). Similarly, she extends a claim made about men to women as well: “Deleuze, as well as Nick Mansfield, Carol Siegel, and Laura Frost, represent the masochistic position as one of self-empowerment through apparent repudiation of power” (9). Noble traces one problem with masochism that has led critics to be skeptical of it to the work of Freud, who argued that it was an essential aspect of femininity, which she finds patently absurd; in fact, she writes, “as numerous feminist commentators upon masochism insist, ‘Western women’ are not necessarily any more masochistic than men are, and so to attribute the problem to sweeping generalizations about Western women is to foster potentially damaging stereotypes and misconceptions” (14). Her most central assertion seems to be that even though a desire might be socially mediated or

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58 Noble writes, “Such dismissive approaches to the masochistic patterns that are all too evident in both Harlequins and nineteenth-century sentimental literature derive, I suspect, from an understandable resistance to Freud’s association of femininity with masochism, which has justifiably angered feminists for almost a century by implicitly authorizing a view of woman as essentially attracted to abuse. Freud’s essentializing of female masochism has put women in the position of needing to prove they do not want to be abused, to insist that they do not secretly enjoy coercion and domination” (13).
socially constructed, that does not make it any less real as a desire.\textsuperscript{59} She quotes Sandra Lee Bartky on the problems of the “sexual voluntarist” belief that “[a]rmed with an adequate feminist critique of sexuality and sufficient will power, any woman should be able to alter the pattern of her desires” (7). In this regard, a poem with masochistic content might in fact be true to the experiences of some women who themselves are aware of the problems of that desire. Certainly when the speakers of Plath and Olds explore personal pain, some amount of ambivalence is present, and that pain lends itself readily to a feminist critique of culture. That said, writing from this perspective does imply a lack of agency on some level, so it is not without complication. Whatever the political valence of the emotion under discussion, though, it points to the larger issue that “real” emotions in literature are often subject to outright censure, and in general they require some sort of excusing subtext or nuance lest they be dismissed as regressive.

Leo Bersani also writes about the positive features of masochism, one of which is that it “serves life”: “I wish to propose that, most significantly, masochism serves life. It is perhaps only because sexuality is ontologically grounded in masochism that the human organism survives the gap between the period of shattering stimuli and the development of resistant or defensive ego structures” (34). This emphasis on survival strategies seems particularly applicable to the work of Olds, for whom survival is an important theme. Bersani even sees something inherently masochistic in desire—“We desire what nearly shatters us” (34)—though I myself would not make that argument. Another point he makes is that art is the result of “ironic self-reflection” that serves to sublimate masochism into a “domesticating, and civilizing, project of

\textsuperscript{59} Noble writes, “As scholarship of the past thirty years has shown, desire is not something added onto a preexisting subject but rather is itself constitutive of subjectivity. The women of WAS [Women Against Sex] might argue that ideologically generated desires are not \textit{true} desires, but surely that is precisely what they are. They are not essential, innate, natural, or prior to language and culture, nor are they immutable, but they are \textit{real} components of a woman’s subjectivity, fundamental to who she is. If the self is a social construction, then the repudiation of all politically incorrect desire is, in a real sense, the repudiation of the self” (7).
self-recognition” (38). While I find such totalizing arguments suspect, this claim, while not entirely true, does have an interesting resonance with the work of Plath and Olds, who often liken—whether explicitly or implicitly—the obsessive and painful focus on the parents to the creation of art, often involving “ironic self-reflection.” The supreme example of this situation is probably Plath’s “The Colossus,” which I will discuss shortly.

**Sylvia Plath**

Sylvia Plath’s poetry focuses less on subtle psychological realism than intensity with respect to language and emotion. In her work one finds sexual rivals (“The Rival” [166], “Words heard, by accident, over the phone” [202]), wrongdoing lovers (“Burning the Letters” [204], “For a Fatherless Son” [205], “Daddy” [222]), and troubled (“Lady Lazarus” [244]), ill (“Tulips” [160], “Fever 103” [231]) or variously injured speakers (“Face Lift” (155), “Cut” [235]) who see in self-destruction, obliteration, and delirium an otherwise unattainable purity, and who at times identify with a bored and aloof God. The concern with purity also manifests in recurring imagery of statuary and museums, as well as persistent imagery of infertility. “Barren Woman” opens, “Empty, I echo to the least footfall, / Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas” (157). “The Munich Mannequins” opens, “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children” (262). As such, her characters tend toward the archetypal, and for the most part would fit equally well into the poems of T.S. Eliot. Although problematic in its discussion of

60 Bersani writes, “Rather, Freud's work textually recapitulates the processes of repression, symptomatic violence, and ascetic sublimation which, I believe, also unleash sexuality in human history as murderous aggression. On the other hand, the taming of our sexuality perhaps depends on the cultural ‘assumption,’ or replay, of its masochistic nature. The irreducibly dysfunctional relation between pleasure and adaptation in human life is, paradoxically, ‘corrected’ only by our ironic reflections of, and on, the dysfunctional itself. Only through this process of ironic reprise—productively mistaken replications of consciousness—is the violence of our masochistic sexuality modulated into a product, or rather process, of culture. Cultural symbolization, then, would be nothing more mysterious than the work of this replicative process” (Bersani 41).
gender, Robert Lowell’s claim in his introduction to *Ariel* that within her poetry Plath is not such much female as “feminine” does speak to this archetypal approach to character. Moreover, given Plath’s own apparent commitment to ideas of female exceptionalism, i.e. that a woman proves her worth by showing that she is different from and consequently better than other women, I have the sense that Lowell’s assessment is consonant with her own thinking. In light of these considerations, reading Plath’s work as a whole gives me the sense of an impasse. This impasse does not result from social forces as much as from elemental, naturalized ones, and it can be most effectively transcended through the intensity privileged by her poetics.

This stylized, elemental view of interpersonal relationships extends to Plath’s representations of parents. In the poetics of Sylvia Plath, the father figure serves as an absent but authoritarian figure, sometimes a cruelly indifferent, or indifferently cruel, semi-divine entity, whose presence has interfered with the speaker’s ability to form stable relationships and to achieve a coherent sense of self. The mother figure exists at a greater remove, and at times threatens the autonomy of the speaker. Of course, such readings fit into a biographical reading of Plath, a reading supported by her journals, but I think such a reading can exist without that biographical context. Indeed, insofar Plath has become an over-determined figure (with at least one major motion picture chronicling her life), I would argue that it is salutary to consider her work at at least some distance from her biography, and especially from the circumstances of her death.

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61 Sally Bayley and Tracy Bain note a “growing movement in Plath studies that is suspicious of an older but still lingering school of Plath criticism that sees her as a ‘confessional’ writer” (1).
62 Susan Van Dyne writes, “Because the poems and novel that made Plath’s name came to almost all her readers as posthumous events, her work has inevitably been read through the irrevocable, ineradicable and finally enigmatic fact of Plath’s suicide” (3). This frame of reference is, as Van Dyne note, almost unavoidable, but, as a lens through which to read the work, it is prurient and intrusive on one level, and a distraction on another.
Plath’s two best-known poems about the speaker’s relationship to a father are “The Colossus,” the eponymous poem from her first collection, and “Daddy,” from her posthumous collection *Ariel*. An exercise in wry absurdism, “The Colossus” (129-130) describes the thirty-year long quest of the speaker to “put together” her father, who in the poem is a giant statue. In the widely anthologized “Daddy” (222-224), the speaker rails against her “brute” (223) father, a stern German professor who “Bit my pretty red heart in two” (224), ostensibly by dying before she could achieve some sort of emotional necessity, the failure to do so having resulted in a suicide attempt and a disastrous relationship with a man who stood in for him. In addition, a few lesser-known poems also explore the speaker-father relationship. The speaker of “On the Decline of Oracles” (78) reflects on a “vaulted conch / By two bronze bookends of ships in sail” owned by her deceased father. The sound of the sea audible in the conch represents the sense of longing felt by the speaker after her father died. “Electra on Azalea Path” (116-117) describes the burial place of the speaker’s father, and, borrowing from the Electra myth, it posits the love of the daughter for her father as a destructive force, which resulted in the speaker’s suicide attempt previous to the poetic present. “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” (118) meditates on the father, “Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees.” “Little Fugue” (187-189) is an impressionistic recollection of the speaker’s deceased father, where color imagery serves to evoke different emotional registers as the speaker moves through an unresolved process of grief from the time of her loss to the poetic present.

To some degree, these poems all participate in an overarching narrative of loss that leads to a profound emotional lack, dealt with by striving for love and accomplishment in a manner_

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63 As Ted Hughes notes in his endnote, “Azalea Path was the name of the cemetery path beside which SP’s father’s grave lies” (*The Collected Poems* 289).
that tends to be futile at best. The father is an imposing figure of authority,\textsuperscript{64} associated with his professorial nature, and sternness, as well as with his German identity. Along those lines, he evokes prestige in the form of high culture; Plath associates him with myth and statuary. Despite this formidable presence, the father is now only available through traces: scraps of memory, recollections of isolated body parts, such as an eye or a mustache, and inauspicious memorials. This absence burdens the speaker with an ultimately inconsolable dissatisfaction, which she attempts to ameliorate through achievement and creation. These efforts seem intended to gain the approval of the father on some level and thereby to validate a speaker beset by unresolved emotions.

In “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” (118), the setting is a garden rife with imagery of sexuality and fertility. Plath writes of the flowers, “Their musk encroaches, circle after circle, / A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in.” Similarly, she writes that “The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings / To father dynasties.” The garden contains a “Golden Rain Tree,” which, while the name of an actual tree, clearly serves to evoke the myth of Zeus assuming the form of golden rain to impregnate Danaë. While the vegetation exhibits masculine qualities, the bees exhibit feminine ones. In Plath’s work, bees often carry an association with femaleness,\textsuperscript{65} especially with respect to the hierarchical distinction between regular bees and the queen. Elsewhere, in “Stings,” she writes of bees that stung a man, “They thought death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen” (215). In this poem, she says of the garden, “Here is a queenship no mother can contest.” This line indicates that the beekeeper’s daughter desires to

\textsuperscript{64} In reference to Plath’s earlier writing, Steven Gould Axelrod makes a similar observation: “Peering out from behind Plath’s father’s thesaurus, the figure of the dominating patriarch haunts her poetry of this period. Parallel to this dangerous yet sexually charged masculine figure is an almost equally frightening maternal figure” (77).

\textsuperscript{65} Christina Britzolakis writes: The beehive is “a rich source of paradox and contradiction. For example, it is a matriarchal society of female producers, a detail which is crucial to Plath’s reflection on power. It is also, of course, an authoritarian society. The hive allows the poet to assume multiple and constantly changing points of identification—including those of beekeeper, queen and worker-drudge. This mobility of identification is signalled by a pervasive imagery of clothing and disguise” (120).
stand out from other women, and this “queenship” depends to some extent upon the recognition
of the father. The poem concludes as follows: “Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg / Under the
coronal of sugar roses // The queen bee marries the winter of your year.” The queen manages to
command the attention of the father, but only for a limited duration. Moreover, the beekeeper
father is paying attention on his own terms; he is putting the queen bee to his own use.

The father navigates this erotically charged environment with cool composure:

“Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees, / You move among the many-breasted hives,
// My heart under your foot, sister of a stone.” Although this line might imply that the father
figuratively tramples his daughter with his capable, commanding presence, a more nuanced
reading is that his mastery has transfixed her and he has become a figure of awe. As a result she
is subordinate to him—“My heart under your foot”—insofar as she desires recognition from him.
In part this dynamic reflects unequal gender relations, but the poem does not strictly correlate the
father with the masculine qualities of the garden. He is “hieratical,” which is to say sacred (a
quality which can either be highly erotically charged or asexual), and visual indications of his
sex are presumably obscured by the frock coat. He may command the attention of the queen, but
not through his masculinity so much as his mastery. In fact, surrounded by the masculine
elements of the garden, he is the exceptional “maestro,” and quite possibly it is an
exceptionalism parallel to the “queenship,” toward which the daughter aspires.

A highly associative poem addressing the difficulty of remembering the deceased father
figure, “Little Fugue” (187-189) loosely plays with the idea of a fugue both in the musical sense
of a composition where themes are introduced and then developed through repetition, and in the
psychiatric sense of a condition involving impaired memory. That is to say, more than simply an
ekphrastic exercise, the associational nature of this poem explores the fitful working of memory.
As for thematic repetition, the two themes that the poem develops most prominently are disability and color. Color imagery\textsuperscript{66} evokes the manner in which stray images can direct the play of thought and recollection, and the focus on physical detail provides a counterpoint to the imagery of disability,\textsuperscript{67} primarily disability of the senses. In that way, the poem makes an interesting linkage between the shortcomings of memory and feelings of disempowerment. After the associative mediation at the beginning of the poem, the speaker remembers Beethoven’s “Grosse Fugue.” This thought of Beethoven brings up deafness and sound, as well as German-ness, with respect to the death of the father figure during the speaker’s childhood: “Great silence of another order. / I was seven, I knew nothing. / The world occurred. / You had one leg, and a Prussian mind” (188). The “Great silence” describes the incommensurate experience of loss at a young age, an experience whose enormity the speaker appears never to have quite been able to process fully. Also, as elsewhere, Plath is here equating German ethnicity with sternness. This German father made her childhood “A yew hedge of orders, / Gothic and barbarous, pure German” (188). Moreover, she describes him, during World War I,\textsuperscript{68} cutting sausages in a California Delicatessen: “They color my sleep, / Red, mottled, like cut necks” (188). Adopting a more sadly affectionate tone, the speaker notes that all that remains of the father for her are details: “I remember a blue eye, / A briefcase of tangerines. / This was a man, then!” (188).

\textsuperscript{66} Laure De Nervaux-Gavoty understands Plath’s use of color imagery as follows: “Plath’s expressionist aesthetic also permeates ‘Daddy’ and ‘Little Fugue’, whose stark and deliberately restricted range of colours (black, white, grey, red and blue) plays a central role in the rhetoric of terror deployed in these poems. Plath’s spectrum is a highly idiosyncratic one that does not lend itself to any straightforward deciphering. Her surrealistic, dream-like colours heighten the fragmented quality of the world and the self featured in the poems of 1962” (122). She also notes Plath’s considerable involvement in the visual arts as a source of color’s significance for her (110).

\textsuperscript{67} Plath’s rather unfortunate appropriation of disability culminates in the contrived line, “I am lame in the memory” (188), a facile metaphoric use of disability that is not surprising for its historical era, and that calls to mind other problematic appropriations in Plath’s oeuvre, such as her identification with Holocaust victims in “Daddy.”

\textsuperscript{68} Insofar as the conclusion of “the Great War” (188) predated Plath’s birth by well over a decade, this detail is at most semi-biographical.
Continuing with the yew imagery\(^6^9\) established early in the poetry, Plath compares this enormity to a tree: “Death opened, like a black tree, blackly” (189).\(^7^0\) In the final stanza, she writes: “I survive the while, / Arranging my morning. / These are my fingers, this is my baby. / The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor” (189). The unresolved sense of loss has emptied the present of significance. As suggested by the double entendre of “Arranging my morning,” this situation leaves the speaker with the task of trying to achieve some sense of closure by moving on with her life, a prospect which the poems paints in decidedly dismal terms. Memory is elusive, and yet even in elusiveness its flashes of intensity and hints of deeper meaning make the present look pallid by comparison.

Also dealing with the theme of loss and memory, “Electra on Azalea Path” (116-117) meditates on the burial place of the father, with the daughter-father dynamic informed by the myth of Electra, who took vengeance against her mother Clytemnestra for the murder of her father Agamemnon. It is also reasonable to assume that the title also alludes to the Electra complex, especially insofar as Ted Hughes quotes Plath herself in her endnote to “Daddy” as saying during a BBC broadcast, “Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex” (\textit{The Collected Poems} 293). Curiously, though, this poem posits the period after the death of the speaker’s father as an abeyance, a time when an imperfect understanding of the world results in comfort and security: “It was good for twenty years, that wintering— / As if you had never existed, as if I came / God-fathered into the world from my mother’s belly: / Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity” (116). The “wide bed” servers as a physical marker of the absence of the father. Plath compares this “wintering” to bees lasting out the winter. Still, the speaker does not

\(^6^9\) In certain cultures of the British Isles, the yew has symbolized death and grief, as well as resurrection (Lehrer and Lehrer 128).

\(^7^0\) In a later poem, “For a Fatherless Son” (205-206), she also compares the absence of a father to a tree: “You will be aware of an absence, presently, / Growing beside you, like a tree, / A death tree, color gone, an Australian gum tree—” (205).
remain disengaged from the memory of the father during this period. Plath writes, “Small as a doll in my dress of innocence / I lay dreaming your epic, image by image. / Nobody died or withered on that stage” (116). This passage revisits Plath’s theme of experiencing the father through fragmentation, “image by image,” while also piecing him together, so to speak, by composing his epic. Insofar as the word “epic” is incongruous with the cloying “Small as a doll in my dress of innocence,” the contrast suggests the unreality of the young daughter’s imaginings, and it furthermore implies that the speaker has developed to the point where she can reflect on her earlier state of mind with a sophisticated wryness.

This childish comfort lasts until the speaker encounters the physical reality of the father’s burial site. Plath describes the burial grounds as a “charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead / Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower / Breaks the soil. This is Azalea Path” (117). The name “Azalea Path” constitutes another instance of irony in the poem, for not only does the name of the flower confer an incongruous cheer on the scene, but also the decorative plant-life itself is artificial, with “artificial red sage” and “plastic evergreens”: “the rains dissolve a bloody dye: / The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red” (117). This redness leads the speaker to reflect on the bloodiness of the Electra myth, which causes her to question the applicability of that myth to her situation: “I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy” (117). The inauspicious reality of the burial ground drives this reckoning with the way in which the speaker has attempted to deal with her loss through elaborate fantasy.

Reaching the core of the speaker’s dilemma, Plath writes, “I brought my love to bear, and then you died. / It was the gangrene ate you to the bone / My mother said; you died like any man. / How shall I age into that state of mind?” (117). The impasse is that the speaker cannot “age into that state of mind”: she cannot reconcile herself to the cruelly impersonal fact that her own father
“died like any man.” Along those lines, this final stanza plays with notions of agency and causality. “I brought my love to bear, and then you died” at first seems to imply that the love of the speaker resulted in the death of the father. However, that sequence of events actually appears to be strictly temporal, as opposed to causal; the daughter only imagines that her love had such an effect as an irrational manifestation of grief. She describes herself as “the ghost of an infamous suicide, / My own blue razor rusting in my throat” (117). As in other poems, Plath implies a link between grief and suicide. The poem concludes, “O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father—you hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death” (117). Again, the speaker does not appear to be dead, obviously, and her love was not the cause of the father’s death, so this continued self-blame indicates that she has internalized a sense of guilt. She is knocking for pardon from a figure who will never be able to respond. A common move in Plath’s work, the series of appositives, “hound-bitch, daughter, friend,” suggests an instability of identity. Significantly, though, all of these identities are defined in relation to the father, and his inability to validate any or all of those identities leaves that instability intact. The Electra myth does not especially apply to this situation except insofar as the love for the daughter appears as a destructive force, and in this case it appears to have been truly destructive to no one other than her. If one considers that this very unsuitability is what is being foregrounded, and that the rickety “stilts of an old tragedy” are being exposed, then this title might in fact be highlighting that the speaker has no readily available narratives to apply to her situation and thereby use to cope. The narratives that bear some superficial resemblance are ultimately so unsuitable that they only serve to underscore the unresolved state of her grief.

Like “Electra on Azalea Path,” “On the Decline of Oracles” (78) explores the way that the physical realities of the present make the daughter think about her deceased father, but
whereas the former poem contains an ironical lack of resolution, the latter poem posits that the father has left the daughter with a romanticized sense of longing represented by the sound of the ocean in a sea shell he kept close to his books:

My father died, and when he died
He willed his books and shell away.
The books burned up, sea took the shell,
But I, I keep the voices he
Set in my ear, and in my eye
The sight of those blue, unseen waves
For which the ghost of Böcklin grieves.

Plath is referring to Arnold Böcklin, a major nineteenth-Century Swiss painter, best known for his painting (of which several versions exist) Island of the Dead (Anson and Hodge 43). In this work, a dark-skinned ferryman delivers a white figure to a garlanded dock at the foot of a large, shadowy stone island, next to which the two figures look insignificant in size. The island has doors and windows carved into its stone, and giant cypress-like trees dominate the island’s middle. Robyn Marsack suggests that the reference to Böcklin alludes to the physical decline of the artist in his later years: “The Tuscan peasants, used to Northern painters who revelled in the Italian landscape, were puzzled by Böcklin's behaviour, as [James Thrall] Soby recounts: ‘Toward the end of his life, for example, Böcklin had sat for hours in his garden, paralyzed and near death, but holding to his ears great sea shells so as to hear the roar of an ocean he could no longer visit.’” (43-44). Surely the pathos of this biographical account holds relevance for the poem, and the following line, “The peasants feast and multiply,” demonstrates a romanticized, as well as problematically classist contrast between the man of sensitivity and achievement alone
and overwhelmed by the appetitive, philistine masses, who encroach upon him just as age does. The allusion to Böcklin encourages a similarly romanticized view. Unsurprisingly, then, this early poem of Plath delves further into a clumsy, Yeatsian symbolism, where three unidentified men enter the yard and “Invade the cloistral eye like pages / From a gross comic strip.” Again, the “comic strip” represents a distasteful commonness. The poem concludes with a gesture toward a decline from a heroic past to a future personified by the three men on the “shabby stair,” The conflation of mourning with this vague sense of cosmic decay is not particularly effective, but it does establish themes to which Plath would return to throughout her career, such as the discontent of the exceptional individual and the desire for accomplishment and prestige as a response to an emotional void, often the result of loss.

The eponymous poem from her first collection, “The Colossus” (129) foregrounds and dramatizes the lack of complete emotional access to the father figure for a speaker in the darkly absurd task of trying to “put together” (129) his body, which is a giant statue, with his “fluted bones and acanthine hair[...]littered / In their old anarchy to the horizon line” (130). Plath’s previously discussed poems about father emphasize the helplessness of the speaker, a mourning daughter haunted by memory and molded by the experience of loss. “The Colossus” grants the speaker greater agency. Namely, the speaker here acknowledges that the loss of the father has profoundly affected her, but she explores the ways in which her fixation on the father, as well as her obsession with him, has shaped her existence. Like the other poems, this one acknowledges a fundamental impasse: “I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” (129). However, even in these opening lines, the imagery of craft denaturalizes the emotion of loss in a way that creates space to examine it as a process that the speaker herself is not only participating in but also perpetuating. That is not to say that the poem advocates some
spurious notion of willpower being enough to overcome grief, or any other negative emotion, for that matter. Rather, it examines the complexity of a largely negative emotional process involving not only helplessness (the helplessness to undo what has happened, as well as the helplessness to efface the impact of it) but also the ways in which her habits of thought, dramatized by the upkeep and repair of the colossus, keep her mired in self-defeating obsession, along with her self-excoriation for such obsession, even though it stems from a significant life event and only a grossly naive view of psychological subjectivity would place blame on her for not overcoming that obsession through sheer willpower.

In less lofty terms than Percy Shelly’s “Ozymandias,” Plath describes the scene around the colossus as indecorous and in shambles: “Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles / Proceed from your great lips. / It’s worse than a barnyard” (129). The speaker comes across as equally ridiculous: “Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol / I crawl like an ant in mourning” (129). This satirical bent dramatizes the speaker’s disgust at her own mourning. Able to achieve enough emotional distance to view her grief analytically, she still cannot overcome it, the failure to do so leading to a frustration with the intractability of the situation. Intractability leads to feelings of frustration, questions of priority, and questions of competence, which often find an outlet in mordant satire, as they do here. This tone also expresses resentment toward the father, an understandable, if misdirected, emotional response to the effect that his absence has on her. The satire indicates her struggle with that power he has over her. In a similar vein, the speaker says, “A blue sky out of the Oresteia / Arches above us. O father, all by yourself / You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum” (129). Elsewhere a source of admiration, or at least intimidation, the association of the father with cultural prestige here fuels additional resentment.
In self-reflection, the speaker states, “Thirty years now I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser” (129). The phrase “none the wiser” has two possible, non-mutually exclusive readings. The first is that the speaker has learned nothing from her labor, which suggests that her efforts have not been productive, either because the task was exceedingly difficult or it was not worthwhile to begin with. More idiomatic, the second possible reading is that speaker is deriding herself for continuing at a task that is unproductive or perhaps even counterproductive, presumably as a result of some measure of foolishness, obstinacy, and wishful thinking. At the same time, the speaker exhibits a detached fascination with, and perhaps even a certain pride in, the ruins which she claims to be trying to repair: “It would take more than a lightning stroke / To create such a ruin” (130). In fact, towards the end of the poem, it becomes apparent that she has become quite at home in this scene of decay, and the final stanza concludes, “My hours are married to shadow. / No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing” (130). Plath returns to marriage rhetoric, as in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” and elsewhere, as a metaphor for impasse, often with pronounced dark and obsessive qualities. The acknowledgment that the speaker has given up on the outside world illustrates the isolating nature of her obsession, although it might also betoken a sense of resignation, with the frustration of failing to rebuild the colossus leading the speaker to give up not only on any serious hope of completing her self-appointed task but also on life in general. In general, these last few lines underscore the risks of placing too much extended exclusive focus on any one individual.

Jo Gill notes, “‘The Colossus’ has been read variously in terms of mythology, autobiography, history and female creativity” (93). For a major poem of a major poet, this critical overdetermination is unsurprising. According to Gill, “Steven Gould Axelrod reads ‘The Colossus’ as an allegory of patriarchal domination of female creativity where the metaphors of
destruction and incomprehension exemplified by the incoherent animal voices of stanza one lament the oppressed, silenced voice of the woman poet. Crucially, though, Axelrod finds that the poem demonstrates the undermining of male dominance” (94). She adds, “Elisabeth Bronfen, thinking about the poem in psychoanalytic terms, sees in it the simultaneous possibility of self-extinction and self-creation” (94). Gill herself argues: “One might also read the poem as an allegory of Plath’s self-constitution as a poet, or as a kind of manifesto” (94). 71 What all of these readings privilege, though, is the grand, dramatic gesture, which strikes me as odd for a poem that I read as somewhat weary and dryly, though wittily, self-mocking. I do not see “self-extinction and self-creation” so much as simple persistence. While I agree with Gill that the poem addresses artistic self-fashioning, like a good deal of Plath’s work, I do not read quite the same sense of masterful optimism into the conclusion. In my own experience, poetry criticism often tries to read great significance into even seemingly mundane details, partly to assert the serious and significance of its own assertions, and partly to gain traction while dealing with the fragmentary and stylized nature of poetry, which poses genuine difficulty when one is trying to assemble a critical argument. That is not to say that great significance cannot exist even in the unobtrusive and the mundane; nonetheless, I think that a more mundane reading of a poem such as “The Colossus” can also be critically rich and rewarding, as well as—to put it bluntly—more convincing.

“Daddy” (222-224) is one of the most widely anthologized Plath poems, as well as one of the ones most closely tied to the mythos of her life. In a sing-song, childlike, repetitive voice, it

71 Gill writes, “One might also read the poem as an allegory of Plath’s self-constitution as a poet, or as a kind of manifesto. The merciless conditions of the first section, which show a struggle with the past, with the father and with an intractable language, are the necessary grounding for the transcendence realized in the final turn towards the stars and the sunrise. If the speaker is no longer seeking a boat to rescue her (the ‘scrape of a keel’), this is because she now recognizes that her subject, and the resources she needs to make something of it, are to hand” (94).
is a direct address from an adult daughter to her deceased father, whom she blames in part for her failed marriage. This poem brings together the various thematic concerns with respect to the father that can be found throughout Plath’s oeuvre, and it illustrates the considerable consistency in Plath’s approach to this subject, even as it demonstrates an overall movement toward greater ambivalence and greater forcefulness. The father is a figure of prestige and authority, once again associated with a statue: “Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghostly statue with one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal” (222). He stands “at the blackboard” (223). Once more, Plath equates the German ethnicity of the father with severity: “With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo. / And your neat mustache / And your Aryan eye, bright blue. / Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—” (223). Despite this almost operatic formidability, the father has died and is available only to the speaker through traces, such as a photograph of him at the blackboard, and recollections of individual body parts, such as the mustache and the blue eye in the passage above.

This absence has left the speaker with unresolved emotional difficulties. She says that the death of the father “Bit my pretty red heart in two,” which resulted in a suicide attempt: “At twenty I tried to do / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do” (224). This passage also references the idea that the father is only available to the speaker through traces, in this case bones, and I see that it as a possible instance of self-referentiality with respect to her earlier work, where the thought that “even the bones would do” might be a dismissive reference to a hope for some sort of transcendence or jouissance that one could read into her earlier, less self-consciously ironic depictions of grief and dissatisfaction. In an interesting reversal, after this suicide attempt, Plath writes, “they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue” (224). Here the speaker is being reconstructed, or simply constructed, in the ad hoc manner of the colossus. Through associative logic, this construction of self leads the
speaker to address her own emotional lack with a construction of her own. She creates a stand-in for the father: “I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look // And a love of the rack and the screw. / And I said I do, I do” (224). Shortly afterward, the speaker says, “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two— / The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year” (224). The hyperbole of this statement somewhat disguises its conditional nature—“If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two”—and the fact that the speaker failed to “kill” her father, who “died before I had time,” suggests that her attempt to “kill” her husband has been equally unsuccessful. Lastly, the speaker tells her father “you can lie back now. // There’s a stake in your fat black heart / And the villagers never liked you” (224). The stake is an ostensible reference to folklore about vampires, and the villagers are interesting counterparts to the philistine peasants in “On the Decline of Oracles”—in this instance the speaker lends much more credence to their perspective, though, as in multiple places throughout this poem, particularly with respect to Holocaust imagery, the appropriation is problematic. The poem concludes with a petulant sendoff, as well as some regrettable wordplay: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (224). This dismissal differs from the earlier actions of the speaker, where she attempted to address her relationship to him by reflecting on it and acting accordingly; here she is abandoning such reflections and actions as ultimately fruitless. Nonetheless, the obsession displayed by the speaker calls into question whether being “through” will last long at all.

In his endnote, Hughes includes Plath’s statement about the poem for a BBC radio program. She says about “Daddy”: “Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex.

72 Ann Keniston writes, “Plath’s position as a nonwitness has led to many of the most vehement condemnations of her Holocaust imagery. Yet Plath’s speakers do no in fact pretend to be witnesses or survivors of the Holocaust. Rather than revealing proximity and immediacy, they occupy a position of distance and belatedness” (140). According to Keniston, then, the poems referencing the Holocaust “reveal Plath to be concerned not so much with capturing the essence of the Holocaust as with the ways the Holocaust resists representation” (140).
Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it” (The Collected Poems 293). Of course, one would do well to regard a poet’s account of his or her work with skepticism, and Plath’s account in this instance insists on a poem quite different than the one I encounter when I read it. Notable in her explanation is her insistence on literalness: the daughter actually believes her father to be God, she might really be part Jewish, and yet she is working through an allegory. This explanation demonstrates an awareness of the childishness, hyperbole, and petulance of the voice, which Plath’s explanation seeks to contain through the convention of character, and it also demonstrates an awareness of the problematic appropriation of the Holocaust and Nazi imagery, which Plath’s explanation seeks to contain through an insistence on their narrative truth.

Of course, as scholars such as Nina Baym and Stanley Fish point out, a reader participates in the creation of a text, especially when one is arguing for the continued relevance of a canonical poet such as Plath. Furthermore, it is accepted wisdom that writers have a tendency to obfuscate, misdirect, and romanticize when speaking about their own work. In this case, for me the inaccuracy of Plath’s statement seems obvious because of both factual inconsistency (a “girl” in her thirties) and its apologetic attempt to gain credibility through modish psychoanalytic terminology. However, I must remind myself that I am in part creating the poem that I am trying to find, which for my project is a self-aware poem that is dramatizing the instability of self and affect in the very particular context of a daughter obsessively revisiting the emotional wounds initiated, if not entirely caused by, the loss of her father during childhood. I do agree with Plath that the speaker is working through her emotional situation, inasmuch as
the imagery of constructedness, applied to the speaker, father and husband, demonstrates an awareness of self as a process. Nevertheless, I diverge from Plath insofar as I do not see the speaker as a child achieving catharsis through an “awful little allegory.” Rather, I see the childishness and macabre abandon performing a function similar to the satirical tone of “The Colossus”; they dramatize an emotional register, even more extreme and ironic than in the “The Colossus,” of frustration with the speaker’s own obsessiveness. The extreme statements, e.g. “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two,” are at once both self-parody and a serious expression of anger only thinly mediated by the dark playfulness. The childishness poses what is meant to be a disturbing contrast with the content of the poem, and that childishness parodies the subordinate and cutesy role expected of women and daughters. It is a protest not of refusal but of revelation; the speaker performs as expected but undercuts that performance by revealing unpleasant and ostensibly unexpected complements to that performance. Ultimately, like “The Colossus,” this poem is an exploration of obsession as a catalyst to and a form of creation. However, whereas “The Colossus” adds a layer of resigned satire, “Daddy” achieves an unsettling abandon that moves beyond the implicit reverence and focus on stylized psychological representation of the former poem toward a focus on the process of creation itself, along with the inherent instability of that process.

With respect to parents, Plath focuses more on the speaker-father relationship than the speaker-mother one. One possible reason is that Plath pays more attention to being a mother instead of being the daughter of a mother. Moreover, the relational focus in her poetry tends to be the relations between men and women, instead of women and women. However, the explanation I find most compelling is that the father represents exceptionalism and unattainable
ideals, whereas motherhood often appears a form of servitude, as in poems such as “I Want, I Want” (106), where “the baby god / Immense, bald, though baby-headed, / Cried out for the mother’s dug.” “Three Women” (176-187) is an Eliotic poem in three voices centered on a maternity ward, and it examines three women who give birth. The first voice gives birth to a son. The second has a stillbirth. The third voice belongs to college woman who gives birth to a daughter, whom she puts up for adoption. Toward the end, the college woman says, “It is so beautiful to have no attachments! / I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss? / Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?” (186). While the poems shows her as having some lingering unease, the expression of freedom and possibility in this passage suggests that the decision not to assume the role of a mother has ensured fewer constraints on her. On the other hand, the first woman, the one who gives birth to her son, says:

I do not will him to be exceptional.

It is the exception that interests the devil.

It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill

Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother’s heart.

I will him to be common,

To love me as I love him,

And to marry what he wants and where he will. (186)

The mother is willing a child to be unexceptional in the oeuvre of a poet driven by exceptionalism. It is telling that, in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” the father exists as a capable, commanding figure, who inspires his daughter to dream of a “queenship that no mother can

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Of course, Plath also does portray being a mother in a more positive light, as in “Child” (265), where the speaker tells the child, “Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing. / I want to fill it with color and ducks, / The zoo of the new” (265).
contest,” as if she must not only model herself on the father but also reject the attempts of the mother to limit her.

One poem addressing the mother-speaker relationship at length is “The Disquieting Muses” (74-76), which resembles a fairy tale, accentuated by a loose, careening tetrameter. The poem opens by assigning blame to the mother for the presence of the disquieting muses: “Mother, mother, what illbred aunt / Or what disfigured and unsightly / Cousin did you so unwisely keep / Unasked to my christening” (74). Ostensibly wishing to maintain a sense of decorum or propriety, the mother has attempted to keep what she considers unpleasant realities from her daughter, only to attract inadvertently these disquieting women. Again illustrating the inefficacy of the mother, the speaker reflects on her storytelling: “Mother, who made to order short stories / Of Mixie Blackshort, the heroic bear, / Mother, whose witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread” (75). This reminiscence might otherwise appear sweet and nostalgic, but it points to the mother’s lack of engagement with unpleasant realities in favor of escapism and a dualistic worldview where problems always get resolved through heroism. The daughter does admit for the possibility that her mother might have attempted to deal with the disquieting muses, although her tone sounds like a rebuke as much as it does a concession: “I wonder / Whether you saw them, whether you said / Words to rid me of those three ladies” (75). This passage suggests that, here, language has some power to shape reality, though only if that language actually addresses reality and does not studiously avoid it.

The third, fourth, and fifth stanzas describe the mayhem wrought by the muses. In the third stanza, the speaker recounts living through a hurricane at the age of twelve, which lashes

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74 In his endnote, Hughes quotes a comment from a BBC radio program by Plath herself on this poem: “It borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico—The Disquieting Muses. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting—three terrible faceless dressmaker’s dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long shadows characteristic of de Chirico’s early work” (The Collected Poems 276).
the windows of the father’s study while the mother “fed / My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine / And helped the two of us to choir” (75). Once more, the mother is attempting to maintain a facade of normalcy amid chaos. Significantly, the windows assailed by the winds are those of the father’s study—the father is not mentioned elsewhere in the poem, so presumably he is absent for one reason or another. The study, the site of accomplishment, is the scene where the muses intrude, while the mother shuttles the children off to the choir, a scene of inoffensive purity, but the muses prevail: “But those ladies broke the panes” (75). In the fourth stanza, the muses interfere with a dance recital in which the speaker chokes and cannot perform. The speaker is thwarted by “my dismal-headed / Godmothers,” and her mother “cried and cried” (75). The mother is disappointed at the public failure of her daughter to perform femininity. In the fifth stanza, the mother sends her daughter to piano lessons and praises her, “Although each teacher found my touch / Oddly wooden in spite of scales / And the hours of practicing, my ear / Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable” (75). The mother offers encouragement not rooted in reality. Explaining the choice of the term “muses,” the last two lines of the stanza state: “I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired by you, dear mother” (75). Fairly unambiguous, these lines posit adversity as a catalyst for growth and the praise and coddling of the mother as an impediment. The phrase “dear mother” has a tart edge.

In the surreal penultimate stanza, the speaker sees her mother floating above her “On a green balloon bright with a million / Flowers and bluebirds that never were / Never, never, found anywhere” (76). The improbable world pictured on the balloon underscores the unreality and escapism of the vision of existence advocated by the mother, a vision ultimately rejected by the speaker in favor of the disquieting muses: “But the little planet bobbed away / Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here! / And I faced my traveling companions” (76). In the final
stanza, Plath writes of how the disquieting muses remain with the speaker to the present. She concludes, “And this is the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother. But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep” (76). This passage emphasizes speaker’s perception of the lack of awareness of the mother, though that does not absolve her. In fact, her lack of awareness is the problem. The result is subterfuge on the part of the speaker, who performs the socially acceptable role of the unfrowning daughter while continuing to learn from the disquieting muses, presumably so that she will become less like her mother and more like someone who belongs in her father’s study.

Sharon Olds

Of all widely read contemporary American poets, Sharon Olds is the one most associated with the subject of parents, particularly the father in the collection entitled, appropriately enough, *The Father*. Olds writes a conventional first-person lyric poem with heavy enjambment, a technique Olds credits for leading her to successful artistry.75 Olds’s style tends toward the descriptive, and, as such, it makes sense that she would appropriate enjambment as a strategy for avoiding monotony, a strategy seen first and perhaps most notably in Modernist poets. That is not to say the subject matter of Olds is pedestrian; indeed, her poems explore sex and excrement with abandon. However, what appears monotonous—the sustained, prolonged attention to details and to the concerns of daily life, throughout not only individual poems but also her work as a

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75 Christina Patterson writes, “The serious poetry also started with a vow. It was after collecting her PhD, on the prosody of Emerson's poems, that she stood on the steps of the library at Columbia University and ‘gave up poetry.’ ‘I said to free will,’ she remembers ‘or the pagan god of making things, or whoever, let me write my own stuff. I'll give up everything I've learned, anything, if you'll let me write my poems. They don't have to be any good, but just mine. And that,’ she says, ‘is when my weird line came about. What happened was enjambment. Writing over the end of the line and having a noun starting each line - it had some psychological meaning to me, like I was protecting things by hiding them. Poems started pouring out of me and Satan was in a lot of them. Also,’ she adds, more surprisingly, ‘toilets. An emphasis on the earth being shit, the body being shit, the human being being worthless shit unless they're one of the elect.’”
whole—showcases an artistic commitment toward making a space for the “personal.” As much as a poet such as Plath has become synonymous with writing about her parents, only a small percentage of her poems do so. In fact, by comparison, in light of their reputation the so-called Confessional poets wrote surprisingly little in relation to recognizable everyday life. Olds is trying to create a space for such writing. While she occasionally employs biblical language or uses archetypal resonances in the manner of the Confessional poets, she primarily attempts to document quotidian existence. To put it bluntly, Olds seems to studiously avoid trying to sound profound except for when she attempts to depict overwhelming experience, what some have called the incommensurate. She has the plainspokenness of Frost, the jagged energy of Creeley, and the commitment to documenting the events of life of Ginsberg, to whom she pays tribute in “The Language of the Brag” (44) in Satan Says.

Olds’s subject matter tends to be deal primarily with interpersonal relationships in three categories: with the speaker’s parents, with her husband and former lovers, and with her children. The only real exceptions to this tendency are poems dealing with matters of social justice, and especially matters of race, such as “Japanese-American Farmhouse, California, 1942” (The Wellspring, 7), although even this particular poem also concerns the speaker’s parents: “I was born, that day, near there / in wartime, of ignorant people.” Essentially, an abundance of poems belonging to each of the three categories appears in every book of hers except for The Father, which, unsurprisingly, focuses on the father to the exclusion of almost everyone else, with the speaker’s husband making a brief appearance. This insistent, career-long, and arguably obsessive focus on these relationships, particularly with respect to parents, opens Olds up to criticism. One could argue that she focuses to too great an extent on that which has historically defined women, their relationship to others, in a way that has subordinated them. One could also argue that Olds
does not undertake a radical critique of the roles she plays as daughter, wife, and mother. The possible aesthetic critique here is that she possesses limited range. At the same time, as I have argued above, it is this attention and commitment to her subject matter that has allowed Olds to create a space for her discourse. Moreover, her oeuvre is performing the sort of obsessiveness that Plath only writes about. While I do not think that her project or her craft is beyond reproach, I have come to believe that her work rewards a reading in its entirety, which makes her intervention in creating a space for her subject matter seem all the more insistent, and which also shows that, while her focus on primary relationships remains constant, each volume brings a different emphasis to that focus.

The parents in Olds’s work are two college-educated white Calvinists who gave birth to the speaker while living in San Francisco near the middle of the twentieth century. The mother had singing aspirations at one point, and the father works as a salesman. Together they have three children: two daughters, including the speaker, and a son. However, the household is filled with acrimony and abuse, particularly as a result of the father’s drinking, which leads his wife to divorce him. At some point each parent remarries. It is when the speaker herself heads off to college that she begins to experience a vision of existence different from the cold and critical atmosphere of her youth. Although the speaker is able to move on at least somewhat, her brother descends into substance abuse, and her sister eventually abandons her own daughter. Still, first through marriage, and then through the birth of her own daughter and son, the speaker essentially refashions a family with a sense of resolution not to perpetuate the conditions of her own childhood. Gradually, as time passes, and as she grows in confidence, she reestablishes a relationship with each of her parents that, though imperfect and still marred by the emotional damage of her childhood, provides her with what one might call a sense of closure, along with at
least some semblance of connectedness to her parents that, in Olds’s work, is a nearly elemental need. The speaker continues to work through her ambivalence, and she seems to accept that ambivalence. While she does achieve closure insofar as she reconciles with each parent to a degree, that closure is not a transcendent one. Also, the act of observation, and the act of writing itself gain increasing prominence in the chronology of the work.

Olds’s first collection, Satan Says, opens with the eponymous poem (3–4). Olds describes “The pain of the locked past...where / self-loathing gazed at sorrow” (3), in some ways as a thoroughly conventional narrative of survivor-hood, where the survivor addresses traumatic past events in order to move beyond the lingering pain. Crucial to a narrative such as this one is either shame or cognitive dissonance: shame that the victim herself is somehow to blame or that she has been demeaned by the circumstances of her trauma, or cognitive dissonance insofar as those who have harmed her are people with whom conventional society expects that she should have a positive relationship. Also crucial to a narrative such as this one is the idea that articulating a vocabulary for these hidden experiences is helpful and necessary in order to process the trauma, as well as to de-stigmatize it for those who share it. In that regard, this poem, as well as much of Olds’s work, carries out a major political task of second-wave feminism, which is to establish an unashamed vocabulary for experience, both traumatic and also more benignly personal, particularly for the speaker as a woman.

This poem opens by describing the speaker “locked in a little cedar box” with a gold, heart-shaped lock / and no key” (3). The speaker intends to “try to write my / way out of the closed box” (3). Just as in the work of Plath, one sees artistry, and particularly writing, as a means of working against the emotional claims of parents, here and elsewhere represented as physical confinement. Soon, the character of Satan appears and offers to free her if she says foul
and angry things about her parents. These utterances begin to free her, but then she says that she loves them too. She adds, “I love them but / I’m trying to say what happened to us / in the lost past” (4). When she realizes that she cannot say everything Satan wants her to, he leaves her there, with a parting comment of “It’s your coffin now” (4). Settling back into the cedar box, she reflects on “the suddenly discovered knowledge of love” (4). It is clear that she finds herself unable to let go, although the reasoning behind this decision and the alternatives to it are somewhat unclear. Perhaps the metaphorical logic of the poem is that distance from the parents—cutting off or reducing contact, as well as rejecting the legitimacy of their hurtful actions—would enable to the speaker to heal, but she chooses to remain in contact with them and not to address the past fully, which stymies her. The speaker wants to hold onto that relationship, but she recognizes that it is at a cost. The speaker also already seems to be aware prior to the narrative present that she loves her parents, so perhaps the “suddenly discovered knowledge of love” is not so much an outburst of filial piety as recognition that the speaker’s own emotions are tying her to a potentially harmful situation and preventing her, at least immediately, from moving forward. The risk is that this sort of poetry naturalizes the notion of filial piety and therefore subordination, as well as reinforces the notion that the desire for parental love is a virtually ineluctable force, even in the presence of abuse. Nonetheless, the fact that the speaker remains entrapped even as she attempts to find a new way to conceptualize her relationship to her parents suggests that the poem attempts to illustrate those risks.76

Throughout her work, Olds details the abuse and unhappiness that would lead her speaker to experience such conflictedness. She makes numerous mentions of corporal punishment, as in poems such as “Geography”: “the child hit in the face over and over” (Satan Says 67). In “The

76 In “Possessed” (The Dead and the Living 33), Olds echoes this theme of inescapability: “You think I left—I was the child who got away, thousands of miles, but not a day goes past that I am not turning someone into you. Never having had you, I cannot let you go.”
Ideal Father” (The Dead and the Living 38-39), Olds writes of a father who “slapped the glasses off a / small girl’s head.” In “7 a.m.,” Olds makes a particularly disconcerting juxtaposition of her mother’s violence and her feminine glamour: “This is the woman who / hit me—she was always a great kisser, / swoonlike and intense” (The Unswept Room 104). In general, she describes a cold and critical living environment; in “Coming Home after Vacation” (Satan Says 69) she describes home as follows: “This was her place, the one of all the others / where she feared to walk, where someone had always / arrived first, and would hold it against her / at any cost” (69). In poems such as “History: 13” (The Gold Cell 26) and “Home Theater, 1955” (One Secret Thing 40-41), Olds describes the speaker witnessing the father bloodied after getting into a fight. The former poem signals her distress at the sight of the father, even as she compares him to a Fascist: “how could anything be good / in such a world, I turned my back / on happiness, at 13, I entered / a life of mourning, of mourning for the Fascist.” In addition to this event, presumably a result of the father’s drinking, Olds also writes about the family driving with the father after he’s been drinking, as in “The Opening” (Satan Says 9), where the father almost hits a young man on the road at night.

A few poems discuss the speaker being tied to a chair as punishment for pouring ink on her parents’ bed, a highly symbolic act of transgression. In “A Chair by the Fire” (The Unswept Room 11-12), the speaker muses on the simultaneously absurd and dangerous aspects of the experience. She wonders whether, if there had been a fire, her parents would have untied her first or carried her out while strapped to the chair. She also imagines being carried outside to be seen by her neighbors, and pictures herself feeling a sense of liberation: “I might have felt like a child who had never been / allowed outside, now looking around / through my own eyes, as who I was...where that home had been” (12). A disastrous event offers the possibility of liberation, both
through the possibility of the destruction of the home where abuse occurs and through bringing the abuse to light. “The Day They Tied Me Up” (*Blood, Tin, Straw* 41-42) describes a sense of considerable calm, and even defiant happiness, while being tied to the chair: “That day, no one touched me, / it was a formal day, the nerves lay easy / in their planched grooves” (41). Despite being told she would need to apologize before she could eat, she refuses to do. Eventually, her mother brings her alphabet soup. The speaker envisions this scene of the punishment as empowerment: “and she was almost kneeling to me / and I wasn’t sorry. She was feeding the one / who wasn’t sorry, the way you lay food / at the foot of an image” (42). The poem concludes, “she dipped into my mouth the mild / discordant fuel—she wanted me to thrive, and decipher” (42). The confusion of the various letters in the soup reflects the mixed emotions of the speaker, the confusion of the mother-daughter hierarchy, and the mother’s own inconsistency. Present, too, is the notion that this incapacitation and discomfort has formed the foundation for the compensation of art. In “The Quest” (*The Gold Cell* 70-71) the speaker recalls that “I looked up / into their beautiful faces” and “I / gazed as deep as I could into their eyes / and all I saw was goodness, I could not get past it” (70-71). The parents have taught the speaker that appearances can be deceiving, and particularly that displays of conformity and rectitude can mask cruelty and malice. This poem illustrates the helplessness of the speaker as child, unable not only to prevent her parents from harming her, but also even to recognize that what they were doing was fundamentally wrong, a situation that can and does lead to the internalization of guilt.

Focusing on the lasting impact of having been tied to the chair, “Forty Years Later” (*The Unswept Room* 65-66), Olds describes the speaker as an older woman reenacting the imposition of confinement on herself. This poem is representative of the work Olds’s poetry does in complicating her description of the parents’ hurtful acts by portraying nominally incongruous
reactions—I say nominally insofar as the complex psychological state depicted refuses a one-dimensional narrative of victimization, although the incongruous emotions, especially dissociative ones, are common and well-documented features of the experiences Olds describes. With a broken rubber band, the speaker ties her right wrist to a chair. Olds writes, “I felt as calm as I had not felt / for forty years, since the day my folks / sashed me to a chair—dead calm / and at home” (65). The speaker experiences this immobilization as a tremendous sense of release: “There was nothing I should be doing, / nothing I could be doing. It was reassuring, / as if I were being touched, deeply, as / who I am” (65). When she goes to remove the rubber band, though, she “could not do it fast enough,” and she tossed it away “as if a condom full of living / seed could swim on its own” (65). The arguably erotic sensation of being bound becomes a sort of sexual revulsion, and, perhaps out of a sense of shame or a lingering fear of being surveilled, looks around the apartment to see if anyone is present, despite knowing that she is alone. The speaker then thinks of “my parents, whose / bodies had seemed sacrosanct” (65), and she concludes, “Whatever ugliness / was in that house, whatever meanness, / it could not fit in them, they could not contain it” (65-66). Though ambiguous, perhaps these final lines imply that the meanness was so overwhelming that it could not be contained by the speaker’s parents and they had to let it out by taking it out on their children.

Some of Olds’s poetry does explore fondness for the parents that existed in the speaker’s childhood despite their mistreatment of her. In “Reading You” (Satan Says 70), Olds writes of the father as being the archetypal object of her desire: “Man, male, his cock that I have loved / beyond the others, beyond goodness, so far beyond / pleasure I have loved his hatred, coldness, / indifference, solid blackness.” Similarly, in “Visiting My Mother’s College” (The Wellspring 3), she says of her mother: “it / makes me sick with something like desire to think of her, / my first
love.” Often these passages of fondness, though, are still intermingled with ambivalence, which seemingly suggests a burden, perhaps of accuracy, not to gloss over unpleasantness. If one is to apply this passage to Olds’ more broadly, then it is possible to see her focus on small, individual details as a strategy for working through and compartmentalizing ambivalence. In “The Swimming Race” (The Wellspring 16), the speaker describes a girlhood swimming race with two other girls, a race that she loses handily. The girls’ fathers are standing at the other end of the pool, and the speaker smiles as she swims, in part because she is happy to be approaching her father. When the speaker finally arrives, he pulls her out and raises her arm. Her sister skeptically asks why he did so. Olds writes, “and he smiled, a smile almost / without meanness, one of the last / times we saw him smile, he said / I thought she was the winner of the next race.” Perhaps the father takes pleasure in having taught the speaker something, or maybe he takes pleasure in her joy to be approaching him. Of course, the meanness is not entirely absent even in this generally pleasant memory. In “Parents’ Day” (The Wellspring 17), speaker talks about the great joy and pride she has when her mother comes to school for parents’ day. Almost this entire poem is an outpouring of praise for the beauty of the mother, whom she compares to the other mothers: “I / pitied the other girls for having mothers / who looked like mothers, who did not blush.” She talks dismissively about her own looks even as she lays claim to some trace of the mother’s beauty: “sometimes I thought she could / sense a few genes of hers / dotted here and there in my body / like bits of undissolved sugar / in a recipe that did not quite work out.” The speaker frames this memory as a cherished instance of being able “to know she was mine” in an otherwise negative recollection of her relationship with her mother:

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77 As Olds writes in “Little Things” (The Gold Cell 68): “I think I learned to / love the little things about him / bed cause [sic] of all the big things / I could not love, no one could, it would be wrong to.”
However, even as Olds’s poems do not entirely escape awareness of the wrongs of the parents, they also point out that the parents themselves were shaped by mistreatment, especially by their own parents. That theme of perpetuation is important in her work, as well as the difficult but necessary work of breaking the cycle, which neither the speaker’s parents nor her siblings manage to do. Olds’s speaker serves as a beacon of hope by not perpetuating the cycle of harm, neglect, and self-destructiveness, though the poetry demonstrates the improbability of having done so, as well as the necessity of conscious effort and the difficult-to-realize awareness that there are other, better ways of existing in the world. In “Time-Travel” (Satan Says 61-62), Olds describes the speaker returning to a childhood scene from “the last summer the family was together” (61). The undetected speaker wanders around the vacation house and sees the father sleeping off inebriation in a chair with the newspaper comics lying across his stomach, the mother weeping upstairs, the brother reading the speaker’s diary, and the sister in a car with a boyfriend. The speaker finds her younger self down by the lake: “She does not know / any of this will ever stop. / She does not know she is the one / survivor” (62). This conclusion rather effectively captures the claustrophobia and oppressiveness of an unhappy childhood, though it also communicates the hope that things can get better.

As for the father, Olds writes about his own father’s own alcoholism and mistreatment of him, which seems to be the primary cause of his maladjustment. She strongly implies that the father drank with his own father. In “Late Poem to My Father” (The Gold Cell 40), Olds describes the father as “helpless, smart” and calls the grandfather “the mold by which you were made.” The speaker reflects that while the father caused her own emotional damage, he was not as bad as his own father, and thus she transfers her lingering affection for him to her idea of him as a child: “I always thought the / point was what you did to us / as a grown man, but then I
remembered that / child being formed in front of the fire.” She compares the emotional damage inflicted on him to the fracturing of bones, which very well might be meant in a literal sense. Concluding the poem, Olds writes, “And what they did to you / you did not do to me. When I love you now, / I like to think I am giving my love / directly to that boy in the fiery room, / as if it could reach him in time.” A few other poems in The Dead and the Living also deal with this theme. “The Guild” (17) describes the father learning to drink from his own father. As a young college student, he was already learning “the craft of oblivion.” As opposed to “Late Poem to My Father,” the father here is depicted as being worse than the grandfather: “the apprentice / who would pass his master in cruelty and oblivion.” In “The Eye” (19), Olds writes of the speaker’s own experience with her father’s father, who refused to feed his grandchildren and turned off the lights when they tried to read. In “Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once” (21), the speaker reflects on “That cabin where he taught my father / how to do what he did to me.” She concludes: “No. I said Let this one be dead.” The grandfather is one of the darkest figures in Olds’s work, and the speaker does not seem to hold out hope for some sort of redemption. He seems to be a source of almost elemental meanness, and as such he provides a reason for her suffering at the hands of her own father, which lessens some of the culpability she considers him to bear and makes it easier to experience her affection for him.

As for the mother of the speaker, Olds tends to write more obliquely about her own unhappy childhood, but she does allude to it. Moreover, when she does so, she writes more about the harm wrought by the mother’s mother, instead of her mother’s father. In the eponymous section eight (82-83) of the “Cassiopeia” sequence (71-83) in One Secret Thing, Olds writes, “She was not meant to be a mother, / she never got to be a child until now—” (82). “For My Mother” (The Wellspring 11) echoes that sentiment when the speaker talks about being seven
years old and having her mother start crawling into bed with her when the mother couldn’t sleep:
“You were my first child, really.” In “Her List” (The Unswept Room 82-83), the speaker
describes sitting down to breakfast with her presumably adult daughter to read a list of personal
details to share that she thought of during the night before. He mother tells her that she “did not
cry at her mother’s funeral” and “wasn’t sorry when her mother died.” The poem explores a
number of cruelties visited on the mother by her own mother, such as throwing her term paper
into the rain, visiting her fifth grade class to call her a liar in front of her classmates, making her
sit on a toilet till she became stuck, and arriving with her and her siblings at a party in her honor
and refusing to let them eat or drink “because / the party was in her honor, / not their honor”
(82). The mother flashes a look of anger as she recounts these memories. She adds that as
punishment for biting her nails, her mother tied her to a bed and wouldn’t free her so she could
urinate. The speaker asks how many times this occurred, and her mother says once. Olds writes,
“You know what this is called now, I / say, Mom? You were a little abused— / not badly, but
a little abused.” The mother responds: “She / laughs without pleasure, she looks at me with- / out
delight or sorrow, she says, I never thought of that” (82). At that point the speaker puts her arms
around her mother, ostensibly a comforting gesture, although one marred by a flash of distrust,
anxiety, and presumably a passing moment of rage: “but / if she tries anything, I think wildly, it
would / not be hard to break her wrist. I / pet her cartilaginous hump, / she was a child, she
arrived without having harmed anyone.” The conclusion of the poem is a reflection on the
mother forming in the womb, detached from everything that was bound to follow, even largely
detached from own mother.

“Visiting My Mother’s College” (The Wellsping 3) looks at the mother after the damage
of her childhood occurred but before she became the woman she did. The speaker feels affection
for her mother as she imagines her at a younger age, before she was defined by the relationships that came to define her for the speaker, “no children, no husband, and her mother was dead, / no one was far weaker or far / stronger than she.” Interesting is the assertion that “no one was far weaker or far / stronger than she,” as if both weakness could fill her with rage and strength could give her the capacity to inflict that rage on others. Also implicit in this passage is the idea the rage carried by the mother, to the extent it might have been inflicted by others, was already present as she herself entered adulthood. The speaker longs for an uncomplicated relationship with her: “I want to / love her when she has not hurt anyone yet, / when all that had been done to her / she held, still, in her fresh body.” The poem concludes with the image of the mother washing her hair with lemon for a dance, and shaking her hair so that “the interior of her / tiny room was flecked with sour bright citrus.” The notion of erotic possibility, extremely important in Olds’s oeuvre, seems to serve as a point of identification and affection with the speaker’s imagined version of the young mother, although arguably it also strikes an ominous note, insofar as the marriage and nuclear family that follows become the site of the speaker’s own pain.

Olds also compares the toll that the childhood in the household of such parents has taken on the speaker’s sister, who abandons her own child with the child’s father, and the speaker’s brother, who has descended into serious substance abuse.78 In “Barometer” (Satan Says 52), Olds writes, “Being a woman whose elder sister / abandoned a child—dropped her mid-journey, / left her like a husband—I am not like other mothers.” The rest of this brief poem details the solicitousness of the speaker toward her own children, so it seems to be suggesting that the two divergent paths are capable of emerging from a shared origin. Olds describes such a shared

78 See “The Derelict” (The Dead and the Living 46) and “Late Speech with My Brother” (The Dead and the Living 47). Midway through the latter poem, the speaker links her brother’s self-destructiveness to the actions of her parents: “I can see you / sending your body to hell as they sent us to / bed without supper.” She implores him: “Please, don’t / do their work for them.”
origin in “The Elder Sister” (The Dead and the Living 48). The speaker reevaluates her sometimes acrimonious relationship with her older speaker in the realization that she absorbed “the blows that did not reach me.” She writes: “She protected me, not as a mother / protects a child, with love, but as a / hostage protects the one who makes her / escape as I made my escape.” “The Pact” (The Dead and the Living 45) adopts a more accusatory tone. It, too, explores the shared origin of the two sisters. The speaker says that she and her sister played attentively with the dolls but chose not to discuss the “woman like a gaping wound / weeping on the stairs, the man like a stuck / buffalo, baffled, stunned, dragging / arrows in his side.” As a result of the chaos two sisters “swore to be protectors,” as symbolized by their taking care of their dolls. For that reason, the speaker has not been able to forgive her for “giving your / daughter away, letting her go at / eight,” which she compares to taking the dolls “Molly Ann or / Tiny Tears” and drowning them or throwing them in the fire. Frankly, while Olds often takes risks with her metaphors—and perhaps metaphor is always a risk to a certain extent—the comparison between damaging dolls and the sister deciding she no longer wants to be the primary caretaker of her own daughter seems a bit strained (although, to be fair, dolls play an important cultural role in socializing girls to assume a maternal role). Still, the point here, as elsewhere, is that it often takes a resolve and determination not to repeat the ills of one’s own upbringing.

The speaker offers an alternative vision of the possibilities for adults who endured abuse as a child. Olds looks at two primary vehicles for overcoming this background: sexual relationships and motherhood. The poison becomes the remedy, so to speak. Olds does not reject the heterosexual relationships and nuclear family structure that served as the site of the speaker’s unhappiness. Instead, she reclaims them. Even though these poems dealing with lovers—mostly the speaker’s husband, though—and children have dark moments, they strike a notably different
tone from many of the poems about the parents. In fact, at times the emotional register in them is so upbeat, enthusiastic, and adulatory that it seems excessive—one might use a term such as “sappy” to describe them. However, to be fair, this problem—if it even is a problem—requires that one read the poems as discrete units instead of as parts of a much more varied whole. Even though they might have appeared individually in literary journals, they nonetheless do maintain a great deal of narrative and thematic continuity, not only within individual books but also throughout Olds’s entire oeuvre.

During the speaker’s youth, she has casual sexual experiences and some relationships that awaken her to a sense of herself as desirable and able to make her own decisions. In “First Boyfriend” (The Gold Cell 48-49), the speaker reminisces about making out with her boyfriend in his car. The speaker compares his closeness to closeness with her father: “I / returned to you as if to the breast of my father” (48). She compares the brass-scented air in the car to a pawnshop, “as if I had come / back to a pawnshop to claim what was mine—” (49). Extending the pawnshop metaphor, the poem concludes with the speaker feeling as if “all the saxophones began to play / hot riffs of scat for the return of their rightful owners” (48-49). This notion of “rightful owners” suggests that this closeness is something the speaker had been deprived of, and part of that deprivation had been that of affection or validation from her father. In “The Sisters of Sexual Treasure” (Satan Says 24), Olds writes: “As soon as my sister and I got out of our / mother’s house, all we wanted to / do was fuck, obliterate / her tiny sparrow body and narrow / grasshopper legs.” The speaker implies that a repressive home life led to sexual curiosity and a lack of sexual fulfillment that drove her and her sister to seek out varied experiences, and to do so with a sense of curiosity and wonder. In fact, this erotic adventurism is in part a rebuke to the mother, and a powerful one at that, which Olds describes as to “obliterate.” Stating that the joy of
the sisters is like that of explorers discovering a new city, she concludes the poem by saying that undressing men is like “uncovering buried artifacts that / proved our theory of the lost culture: / that if Mother said it wasn’t there, / it was there.” These last three lines are clever enough. They show a willful and thorough rejection of the mother’s worldview. However, there is perhaps something fundamentally reactionary about them, in the sense that the speaker and her sister’s actions are determined in part as a reaction to the mother’s strictures. In “19” (*Blood, Tin, Straw* 38-39), Olds describes the speaker’s experience taking LSD and having sex with a 6’6” married decathlete, while she was presumably nineteen-years-old. She enjoys this encounter, in part because each participant is somewhat detached: “I was / not in love with him, so his beauty made me / happy” (38). He catalogues the many things he likes about her body and declares, in appraising seriousness, that the best “way to make love to me / would be from behind” (39). She says, “he gazed at my body and un- / saw my parents’ loathing, pore by / pore on my skin he closed that old couple’s eyes” (39). By counteracting the disapproval of the parents, the erotic appreciation bestowed on her that night made her feel desired, and gave her reason to believe in her own worth.

While these early sexual experiences provide a sense of validation and excitement, Olds presents the speaker’s marriage as a great achievement in terms of both sexuality and companionship. The marriage represents her ability to overcome, reshape, and reclaim the family. In “Poem to My Husband from My Father’s Daughter” (*The Dead and the Living* 56), the speaker pays homage to her husband for loving and accepting her despite the flaws she sees in herself, namely the negative traits she shares with her father. Olds frames the husband’s role as bravery. This poem suggests that the father has caused the speaker lasting emotional harm, and that part of that harm has been self-identificatory self-loathing. Olds writes: “I have always
admired your courage. As I see you / embracing me, in the mirror, I see I am / my father as a woman.” Shecatalogues the body parts of hers, his hair, eyes, and lips that she shares with her father. Praising the husband’s courage, she says, “You are fearless, you / enter him as a woman, my sex like a / wound in his body.” She compares his courage to that of someone entering a lion’s cage, and she compares herself to the lion pawing and licking him. She says, “I have never seen a / happier man.” Despite the gratitude of the speaker toward her husband, as well as her self-deprecation, there is another thread in this poem. She sees her flaws as those of her father, but she also sees both of them as having power, a sort of seductive danger, hence the lion metaphor. In that way, the bravery of the husband is in part the bravery of the thrill-seeker. He would confront a more powerful and dangerous being, the speaker, whose affection is similar to a predator savoring its prey. Also, as much as Olds writes of the speaker desiring her father, here is an instance of her seeing his qualities in her as desirable to her husband.

In “Fish Oil” (The Unswept Room 70), the speaker describes coming home from work late at night to the lingering smell from her husband cooking fish, and then taking steps to eliminate the odor by cleaning the plates and ventilating the area. Making a pun, Olds describes complaining about this situation to a friend, who puts it in perspective: “The next / day I fishwifed to a friend, and she said, / Someone might live with that, and come to / savor the smell of a fry.” This sentiment leads her to look at her husband affectionately: Acting on this tender impulse, she decides to cook a similar dish herself: “I filled the rooms with / swirls of finny perfume, the outlines / in the sand the early Christians drew, / the loop meaning safety, meaning me too.” This experience leads her to reflect on the way that her initial disapproval of her smell mirrors the disapproval of her parents, and the way in which her marriage has led her to see that a less critical and more accepting attitude is possible in human relationships. She says, “I had not
known that one / could approve of someone entirely—one could / wake to the pungent day, one could awake / from the dream of judgment.” It might seem that one should be able to imagine, and expect for oneself, a daily life in which the people in one’s life are fundamentally decent and respectful toward one, but the point of this poem is that, for someone raised in deeply critical circumstances, it’s not only difficult to imagine another way of being, but it’s also difficult even to realize that one could try to imagine such a thing.

Just as Olds’s poetry posits sexual relationships as a means of counteracting the emotional wounds of bad parenting, she also discusses the speaker parenting her own children as a means of dealing with and overcoming that psychological damage. In this way, Olds criticizes parenting as a potential site of harm, but she does not reject it as a social institution. In fact, she not only rehabilitates it in terms of showing that it can be done well, but she also advocates it as healing in and of itself. This situation evokes the notion of trauma victims attempting to recreate the situation in which the trauma occurred so as to somehow master and overcome it, perhaps in part to overcome a sense of helplessness and to feel the hope that at least some progress toward healing is achievable. It is possible to read that sort of narrative into these poems.

In “The Borders” (The Unswept Room 39), the speaker reflects on the nature of gestation and birth, and she plays around with language to explore at the same time the possibility of figuratively giving birth to her mother, which is to say passing along the traits of her mother she disapproves of. Olds concludes the poem with the speaker hearing her infant daughter cry and then making a “wild grab at a vow”: “I will take care of you, I will / put you first. I will not, ever, / have a daughter as I was had.” The borders in the title of the poem allude to what separates the self from others, both in a material and an emotional sense, as well as the way in which the self

79 The dedication of The Wellspring reads: “For our daughter and son.”
absorbs the influence of others. This concept of borders also evokes the border that the speaker herself establishes: the border of acceptable conduct toward her daughter, which she vows to maintain. In the immediately following poem, “First Weeks” (*The Unswept Room* 40-41), Olds describes feeling uncertainty about motherhood after giving birth for the first time. The poem opens, “Those first weeks, I don’t know if I knew / how to love our daughter” (40). After the speaker takes her daughter home, the infant cries horrifically, “like a dream of a burn victim” (40), and even when she lies quietly she has a faint look of unease. The speaker notes, “I didn’t blame her, / she’d been born to my mother’s daughter” (40). The speaker sees the low self-esteem of her childhood, along with her fear about repeating the mistakes of her mother, projected on the newborn. However, soon she experiences mother-daughter bonding, and the experience is redemptive. After spending most of the day tending to her daughter, nursing her, walking her, and just gazing at her, she says, “And then, / one day, she looked at me, as if / she knew me” (40-41). The speaker feels as though the daughter is regaining her memory, a metaphor that posits the mother-child bond as elemental and timeless. Conversely, the recognition, and validation, by the daughter proves transformative: “When she smiled at me, / delicate rictus like a birth-pain coming, / I fell in love, I became human” (41). It is affection that gives the speaker a sense of self, though fortunately in this instance it is the presence of affection instead of its absence.

A few poems express more ambivalence toward motherhood, though the ambivalence appears tied to echoes of the past in the present. In “The Sign of Saturn” (*The Dead and the Living* 73), the speaker sees characteristics of her father in her own daughter, and she feels an obligation to prevent the development of those traits at the same time as she feels somewhat powerless to do so. Olds writes, “Sometimes my daughter looks at me with an / amber black look,
like my father / about to pass out from disgust.” When the daughter speaks to her brother, the speaker sometimes detects “that coldness that passed for reason in him, / that anger hardened by will.” The speaker attempts to overcome these tendencies by talking to her daughter, but she worries that she cannot get through. In an enduring way the father has made the speaker insecure and sensitive to the coldness she saw in him. The zodiac imagery—“she was born under the sign of Saturn, / the father who ate his children”—makes this coldness seem like a force of nature, bound to recur, though at least in this instance a sufficiently aware and motivated person can struggle against it. In “Physics” (The Wellspring 63), the speaker displays a more ambivalent attitude toward motherhood. The central conceit of the poem is the daughter solving puzzles, which have grown in complexity as she became older. In the narrative present, the daughter describes relativity to her and uses the example of a fifty-foot ladder moving at nearly the speed of light, entering a twenty-foot barn, and for a moment being entirely inside of the barn. She reflects, “I have thought her life was inside my life / like that.” However, she realizes, “I have not grown up / yet, I have lived as my daughter’s mother / the way I had lived as my mother’s daughter, / inside her life. I have not been born yet.” Here she wonders if motherhood has determined her identity perhaps more than it should have, just as her own childhood deeply influenced her self. Still, it is possible that the sense of not having been born leaves open future possibilities for the realization of a selfhood less mediated and defined by others.

A common theme in these poems about the redemptive power of motherhood and sexual relationships is that passage of time lessens old psychological wounds and brings new possibilities for wholeness and connection. Similarly, Olds explores the passage of time as a vehicle for some measure of reconciliation between the parents and the daughter, or at least a reevaluation, as well as a lessening of hurt and resentment. This reconciliation is not absolute,
and the daughter herself remains tentative, deferential and even seemingly cowed in the presence of her parents. A key impulse driving this reconciliation is the need for affection and validation, an impulse that reinforces heteronormative ideas about the parent as a source of affection. At times these poems do display an ironic distance from these norms, and in certain instances they reflect openly about the parents as poetic subject matter. Some of these poems are set during the lives of the parents, and some are set after their deaths.

In Olds’s first collection, “Love Between Us” (Satan Says 17) explores a thawing in the relationship between the speaker and her father; the imagery of birth evokes the metaphors of Plath. Olds writes, “That love between us I called a stillborn / hung by the feet—lately I have seen it / move, Father.” She describes it as pendant, dark, wounded, chrysalis-like, and bat-like. The poem concludes, “love between us, this blind love / that feeds itself well, never bumps into anything, / and nurses its young.” The imagery is slightly grotesque, but the last few lines suggest health and the potential for growth. This poem is different from Olds’s later work, which tends not to engage in direct address, even though it retains the nature of monologue. In “Directly” (The Unswept Room 54-55), Olds opens the poem, “Then, one late afternoon, / I understand: the harm my father / did us is receding.” The speaker remarks, “But he had not been hated, so he did not hate us, / just scorned us, and it is wearing off.” This observation lessens the severity of the father’s actions, and it also performs the speaker’s own action of shifting her perspective. Then, she refers to her own children: “My son and daughter are grown, they are well / as if by some miracle.” (54). The fact that her children have thrived is more evidence that the harm inflicted by the father has not been absolute, which provides hope for her, and it also allows her attitude toward him to soften. She thinks, “Then, / I think that he would be glad to hear it / directly from me” (55), so she visits the forest where his ashes were scattered. Not only
does the speaker feel the harm of the father has lessened, but she also feels that he would like to
hear that, even though earlier in the poem she had talked about his lack of seeing, of paying
attention to others. Perhaps this impulse reflects a reconciliation that had started in the later years
of the father’s life, or perhaps it is the projection of the wishes of the speaker. In any case, the
poem does not explicitly explain why the father would be glad to hear this news. Olds concludes
with the image of the father’s body returning to nature: “your done-with body / broken back
down into earth, holding / its solemn incapable beauty” (55). This imagery serves a metaphor for
the speaker’s own emotional recovery and renewal.

The reconciliation of the speaker with her mother is deeper than with the father. In “The
Learner” (The Unswept Room 97-98), Olds describes the speaker interacting with her mother
after her mother’s husband has died. The speaker’s mother has placed her late husband’s flag
over her front door for a party: “her voice on the phone is steady with the truth / of yearning, she
sounds like a soldier who has known / no other life. For a moment I forget / the fierce one who
raised me” (97). The speaker is able to have a moment, though only a moment, of overlooking
the past, and it is “yearning,” a common topic of Olds’s work, that humanizes the mother for the
speaker. Mother and daughter then speak about how the former took care of her husband, first
after strokes and then after the cancer that finally ended his life. She says the cancer was initially
black, and then it was white. Confused, the speaker asks her to clarify, and she replies that she
means it was terrible at first but later “it / took him mercifully” (97). Troubled by the racial
implications of these metaphors, the daughter, sweating and trembling, explains her concern, the
first time she has ever questioned her mother. Although the mother is defensive at first, “with
some of the rich, almost sly / pride I have heard in myself” (97), she soon yields to her
daughter’s point of view and promises never to use those terms again. Olds writes, “Oh, Mom, I
say, don't / promise me, who am I, / you're doing so well, you're an amazing learner.” The mother says, “Before, I, die, I am, learning, / things, I never, thought, I'd know, I am so / fortunate” (98). She remarks that she wouldn’t have been able to learn these things if her husband had lived, though but she cannot think of his death with gladness. This thought brings her to tears: “the sound of quiet crying, as if / I hear, near a clearing, a spirit of mourning / bathing herself, and singing” (98). The concluding imagery is that of renewal. A large part of the work of this poem is performing the speaker’s identification with mother, through desire, which is implied, and through pride, which is stated explicitly. The other major feature is the speaker redefining her relationship with her mother. She moves from physical distress at the thought of contradicting her to mother to assuming the sympathetic, instructive role associated with traditional notions of motherhood as nurturing. In that regard, sympathy becomes a source of resolve and a site of authority. Interestingly, the disappearance of a male figure allows this new emotional dynamic to emerge, which seems to suggest that the degree toward which the emotional lives of women have traditionally been oriented toward men has limited their critical exploration of their emotional relationship to other women.

Another poem that looks at a similar situation is “The Music” (The Unswept Room 107-108). The poem opens: “When I first stand up to my mother, when I am / fifty—and on a civic issue— / she changes, as if she’s been waiting for someone / to lead her” (107). The poem does not explain this incident, though; it focuses on the mother sobbing as she talks about sorting the clothes of her late husband, which she says is “better for me than church” (107). As in the previous poem, there is a moment of identification: “Now my mother sounds like me, / the way I sound to myself—one / who doesn’t know, who fails and hopes” (107). Identifying with the mother and witnessing her vulnerability, the speaker reflects on forgiveness: “And I feel, now
that I had wanted never to stop blaming her” (107). She had felt that if she forgave her mother, she would somehow lose her, and she does lose her in the sense that their relationship becomes transformed, “as if she is only a sister” (108). The feeling of grievance toward the mother had become a fundamental part of the speaker’s identity, and change, even positive change, can be disconcerting, dissatisfying, and anticlimactic.

In “After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood” (The Gold Cell 43), Olds explores a similar theme of the speaker being unsure what to do with reconciliation, and of the speaker’s identity being tied to her grievance. Anguished, the mother leans toward her daughter “like someone trying to walk through a fire” and tearfully asks, “Where else could I turn? Who else did I have?” She considers the apology sincere, as it demonstrates “true regret, the / regret of the body.” However, this sudden shift in their relationship leaves her confused. She embraces her mother and tells her “don’t cry, it’s all right,” but she thinks to herself, “I hardly knew what I / said or who I would be now that I had forgiven you.” This situation again puts the speaker in the position of comforting, of being the reasonable party. When the offending parent relinquishes authority, reconciliation and emotional connection become possible. As for the speaker, she is performing emotional generosity, which models a sort of noble selfhood. Her readiness to reach out to her mother posits a deep connection between mother and child that, underneath the tarnish of events, is waiting to emerge. Looking at sociohistorical context, this poem also examines the role of a woman and mother during the middle of the twentieth century, with the implication that this hardship contributed to the mother’s behavior.

“7 a.m.” (The Unswept Room 104-105) is an associate meditation opening with the mother waking up and then walking out to receive the gift of a “field guide to Western” birds. The mother is overjoyed: “she screams, she cannot believe she’s receiving / all these species, and
in color!” (104). The speaker continues, “she’s beginning to understand: there’s the moon / and poetry; and now there are birds / and poetry—there’s the moon, and birds, / and poetry, and Share” (104). As in *The Father*, Olds makes a pun on the ‘share’ sound contained within the name “Sharon.” Wryly, the speaker listens to the mother says that she’s proud of the daughter: “How could she know / how proud she would be? Not proud, as if it had / anything to do with her...” (104). The mother also compliments the speaker on the beauty of her mouth and chin. Then, the mother displays her own glamour: “she shows me what it was like to hit / that High C, effortlessly, in / 1934, flinging up / her arms in a victory sign” (105). The fascination with the mother’s glamour, her singing ability and good looks, is a common thread in Olds’s work. The speaker compares her medicated mother’s eyes those of a seer and says, “I watch her intently: my mother / is a seer. I’m a seer’s daughter—there is / music, and the moon, and birds, and poetry, and my mother” (105). Olds is representing a mutual journey of discovery, a re-learning on the part of both mother and speaker, where each learns a new vocabulary for existence in an almost Steinian language of play. The fact that the mother is older and medicated suggests belatedness, but the change appears meaningful nonetheless. The embrace of the label of “seer,” suggests a deeper truth lying beneath the surface, which betokens a sense of possibility and creativity.

“The Pansy Coda” (*One Secret Thing* 60) is a meditation on the flower the pansy and on the speaker’s mother, recently bereaved of her husband. The speaker adores pansies, which her mother grew. Their labial shape reminds her of the female body. In turn, that reminds her of her elderly mother calling to her from another room and approaching without clothes. The speaker attributes this behavior to a need for closeness: “She is so lonely / since her husband died, she just wants to be / naked in a room with someone, anyone.” However, sympathetic as she may be,
these encounters unsettle the speaker: “her face has something eerie in its blankness, / the eyes kept rounded—I have no idea / what she is thinking, I get that nervous feeling / I’ve had all my life around my mother.” Olds displays the mother with a good deal of pathos, but she seems to be either a little emotionally unstable or is perhaps losing some of her mental faculties. This passage echoes a similar one in The Father, although here the speaker shows less interest and more discomfort, and the mother appears to be acting less rationally than the father does. The poem concludes by returning to the imagery of pansies: “I would like / to wrap myself in a cloak of them, / a cloak of one if it were large enough. / I am tired of hating myself, tired / of loathing.” It is unclear whether the self-loathing here is actively attributed to the influence of the mother, though its proximity makes such an attribution a reasonable inference. The flowers both unsettle the speaker in their evocation of the mother, just as the imagery of them embracing her, perhaps maternally, serves to comfort.

“The Dead” (One Secret Thing 64) shows the speaker coming to terms with the mortality of her mother and even appreciating it in a spirit of detachment, a feeling as if she can hold onto her mother as memory, a situation over which she has some control, and the awareness that her mother can no longer harm her. Referring to an event Olds addresses elsewhere in her work, the speaker asks her mother if she remembers whether the speaker’s friend or the friend’s mother died first after they sprayed their Christmas tree with lead paint in a closed garage. This question makes the speaker remember that, years later, the widowed husband became furious when the speaker’s mother and her second husband beat him and his second wife in a waltz contest. The speaker describes her mother in her reminiscence: “Her voice is melodious, / she loves to win, her rival’s loss / an erotic sweet.” The simultaneous glamour and pettiness of the mother seem to fascinate the speaker, and this fascination serves to emotionally distance herself. She remembers
how her father looked after his death and imagines her mother in the same condition. She states, “Suddenly, I feel / not afraid—as if no one will hurt me. / And they’re together again, a moment—a bridal / pair of things, a tongs!” Olds is exploring the way in which death allow the bereaved child to imaginatively refashion the parents. The poem concludes, “They cannot unmake me. I can safely thank them / for my life. Thank you for my life.” Unfortunately this passage reinforces the notion that people should feel gratitude to their parents for their life. Still, it further indicates that safety and distance for the abused child can allow positive feelings to emerge, though obviously that could and should not happen in all circumstances.

In two different collections, Olds explores this rapprochement, reevaluation, and later mourning in much greater detail. The first is her book The Father, which follows the speaker from the final stages of her father’s struggle with throat cancer to her process of mourning over a year past his death. The early poems capture the long stasis of dealing with a loved one with a terminal illness. The emphasis is on recording, as this work is primarily a meditation on perception and the search for meaning. Olds describes the father’s body in great detail, and its stasis and weakness in fact make him seem almost godlike at times, which is a representation of the major role he plays in her emotional life. Still, his weakness also creates an inversion of power. She takes care of him, and he shows her flashes of appreciation and affection, which become important memories for her. The only other character in this volume of any significance beside the speaker and her father is the father’s second wife, with whom the speaker shares the work of taking care of him. I sense that the role of this wife is to humanize the father, whom Olds certainly alludes to as having been fairly cruel and indifferent at times as a father and husband, and to show that he has progressed as a person. This arc shows that a kernel of goodness is present in him, one that was hindered by circumstances earlier in his life but later
developed under better circumstances. It also validates the speaker’s affection for him as not being futile. That is to say, if he improves, then that means that she has not attached her affections to someone who will never return them. On the other hand, the wife seems to be the source of some barely discernible bitterness, as the speaker reflects on the contrast between devotion the father shows to that woman and the coldness he showed to her when she was younger. As the book progresses, two other themes of perception emerge: perception of the father’s physicality (his body, his ashes, his grave, and so forth) and perception of her own memories and emotions. As for the former, she makes frequent use of the word “matter,” which evokes the dead matter that constitutes a living person. Her existential reflection on the nature of matter is coextensive with her evaluation of her own memories and feelings. What is at stake is trying to find meaning in her relationship with her father, to accept and make meaning out of his loss, as well as to deal the complications of being aware of this attempt to find and create meaning.

“The Lifting” (The Father 15-16), a quintessential Sharon Olds poem, plays on the speaker’s oft-stated desire for her father’s “cock” by having him actually show it to her. That the father is aware of this fascination suggests a layer of self-awareness that the parents in Olds’s work do not often demonstrate, which raises the question of whether this episode should be read literally or symbolically. The poem opens, “Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I / turned my head away but he cried out / Shar!, my nickname, so I turned and looked” (15). She sees his gaunt body and folds of skin, and she compares his hips to hers and his pelvis to her daughter’s. She comments on his demeanor: “I saw / his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he / shows me his old body, he knows / I will be interested, he knows I will find him / appealing” (15). As much as Olds uses provocative language and subject matter, the speaker nonetheless exhibits surprise at
this situation and her reaction to it, “affection and uneasy wonder” (15). In the conclusion, she compares the removal of his gown to the presumably religious promise that at death “the veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything” (16). Despite her disavowal of religion, Olds uses religious language to describe moments of profundity. This theme of knowing is important, too, because it illustrates the speaker’s desire to “know” her father, to define him and her relationship with him, a task she continues to pursue throughout this collection.

In “Last Words” (23) Olds describes the speaker with her suitcases on a visit to the father, an occasion when she felt reluctant to leave, which Olds suggests is the result of a desire of emotional validation before she goes. She finally goes after he calls out, “Last kiss!” Afterward, the father’s wife calls to tell her that he had stopped speaking, and the speaker thinks, “so those are his last words to me, / the ones he is leaving me with—and it is ending with a kiss— / a command for mercy, the offer of his cracked / creator lips.” Olds paraphrases a passage from the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel: “To plead that I leave, / my father ask me for a kiss! I would not / leave till he had done so, I will not let thee go except thou beg for it.” The poignancy of this moment is heightened by the fact that these are in effect the last words addressed to the speaker by her father. One suspects that she would be glad to have wrangled this acknowledgment from him, though it also underscores the lack of demonstrativeness on his part that placed her in the position of pleading. As for the biblical language, Olds returns to the metaphor of father as god, although in this instance he is a god who can be struggled with and prevailed upon. Later in the collection, in “Beyond Harm” (52), the speaker reflects wryly on her memories of her ailing father’s affection and approval. She says, “his face would sometimes brighten when I would / enter the room.” His wife told her that once he smiled and said the speaker’s name while he was half-asleep. The speaker adds that in the final week of his life he
even told her he loved her, though it was somewhat by accident: “I walked into his room and said / ‘How are you,’ and he said, ‘I love you / too.’” She notes that after he said those words, though, she had something to lose: “with one of his old mouths of disgust he could / re-skew my life.” After he dies, that is no longer a concern: “But then, a while after he died, / I suddenly though, with amazement, he will always / love me now, and I laughed—he was dead, dead!” The grim irony is that the stability of affection she yearns for is achieved in death.

In “Waste Sonata” (76-77), Olds revisits her theme of the bodily grotesque: “I think at some point I looked at my father / and thought He’s full of shit. How did I / know fathers talked to their children, / kissed them? I knew. I saw him and judged him” (76). Still, she demonstrates some sympathy toward him, because, even though he may have been a “shit”: “I felt he hated being a shit, / he had never imagined it could happen, this drunken / sleep was a spell laid on him— / by my mother!” (76). This passage indicates self-awareness on the part of the father, albeit one that involves a shifting of blame and denial of responsibility. Modeling a different way of being, the speaker renounces such petty calculations: “Well, I left to them / the passion of who did what to whom, it was a / baby in their bed they were rolling over on, / but I could not live with hating him. / I did not see that I had to” (76). She revisits her affection for him, although she also asserts that that affection caused her self-loathing. Describing him asleep drunkenly in the living room, she says that his emotional distance made her want his affection even more: “a grail, his love the goal of a quest, / yes! He was the god of love / and I was a shit” (76). Abruptly the speaker cuts herself off: “Well, it’s fun talking about this, / I love the terms of foulness. I have learned / to get pleasure from speaking of pain” (77). However, she realizes that to do so indefinitely would be “To grow old and die / a child, lying to herself” (77). This passage presents her taking the moral high ground by renouncing part of her claim to bitterness and asserting a
form of control over her own emotions, if not entirely through forgiveness then by sympathy. She continues, “My father was not a shit. He was a man / failing at life” (77). She says, “sometimes I don’t let myself say / I loved him, anymore, but I feel / I almost love those shits that move through him...my mother, my sister, my brother, and me” (77). In this poem, the speaker is working through affection for the father, resentment of him, self-reproach, and understanding. Even as she achieves some distance from him emotionally, she tries to understand him, and she also reaffirms her affection for her mother and siblings.

In “My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead” (78-79), the father lists many things about the speaker’s (of the title) body that he loves, which could be seen as wish fulfillment on her part. He likes her feet, knees, and the long legs that he shares with her. In ostensible reciprocation of her admiration for his penis, he says, “I love your—what can I call it, / between your legs, we never named it, the / glint and purity of its curls” (78). To this he adds he loves her buttocks, and he says, “I never hated your shit—that was / your mother” (78). He continues, “Of course I love / your breasts—did you see me looking up / from within your daughter’s face, as she nursed?” (78). He says, “And I never hated your face, / I hated its eruptions” (78). Then, he says, “You know what I love? / I love your brain, its halves and silvery / folds, like a woman’s labia” (78). He adds, “I love in you / even what comes / from deep in your mother—your heart, that hard worker, / and your womb, it is a heaven to me” (78-79). The poem concludes:

I understand this life, I am matter,
your father, I made you, when I say now that I love you
I mean look down at your hand, move it,
that action is matter’s love, for human
love go elsewhere. (79).
This poem revisits the theme of “matter.” It seems to reflect Olds’s metaphysical view of a universe lacking a conventional deity, where the bodies we inhabit are who we are on the most fundamental level and the meaning we find in our lives is presumably the meaning that we make. I would extend line of argument to say that Olds’s poetry advances a view of human relations in which we can only interact with people on a material level; in other words, we can never have communications or interactions that aren’t mediated by the very real, physical distance between us as humans. We project onto others—who are one level merely “matter”—our own sense of who they are, which is a construct shaped by our own assumptions, needs, and fears. In a similar manner, the term “matter” seems also to point to human beings being governed by primal impulses more than logic. These senses of “matter” suggest that there is something irrational but virtually ineluctable about the speaker’s attachment to her father, who is in some sense both unknowable and irresistible.

“Cassiopeia” (One Secret Thing 69-83) is a long poem describing the relationship between the speaker and her mother, from the time of the mother’s husband’s death and through a period of bonding between the two women as the mother nears the end of her own life. This poem is analogous to The Father. Common themes include “matter” and meditations on mortality; the hurts of the past meeting with some measure of reconciliation; and the second spouse of the parent. This work differs insofar as there is not that the same erotic edge to talking about the mother as there is to talking about the father. Also, the fact that the mother’s husband dies before her creates much more space for her daughter to interact with her, and they certainly seem to draw closer than do the speaker and the father, possibly in part because the mother seems to be as voluble as the father is taciturn. Perhaps because there is more interaction, the mother is the same gender as the speaker, or Olds is in a different stage of life as a poet, the
poems have less of a mystical quality to them, though there are still comparisons of the mother to a god, and there is also some metaphysical and cosmic imagery. Lastly, the speaker appears to view her mother in a slightly more favorable light than she does her father. The latter seems to be the object of desire, whereas the former seems to the recipient of more affection and devotion, with the speaker displaying what are traditionally thought to be maternal traits of nurturing and patience toward her own mother.

In the first section, “He Is Taken Away” (71), Olds writes: “When they’d put her husband in the ambulance, / my mother stood beside it, looking into / its lighted window.” She continues: “I had never seen her so / still, yet she looked so alive, so vivid, / like a woman motionless at the moment of orgasm, / pure attention.” She adds, “every cell of her body was looking at him.” She draws a comparison to Homer, the reputedly blind poet who wrote of many different lands: “she looked like / Homer ready to be led around the known globe.” This poem focuses on the relationship between a married couple as an anchor of identity and personal routine, one that, when interrupted by death, leaves the bereaved partner adrift. Characteristically, Olds makes a sexual comparison, with the intensity of orgasm being reflected in the intensity of the mother’s gaze. As devastating as this loss may be, the poem ends on a note of possibility, with the mother being ready to be led.

The fifth section is “Warily, Sportsman!” (78-79), with the title taken from the Whitman poem “The Sleepers.” Olds writes: “When she talks about caring for her beloved husband / after his stroke, I hold the phone / in the crook of my shoulder, where the heads of sleeping infants have rested” (78). Olds continues: “Suddenly my mother bursts out, / And my therapist says it COULDN’T have been my / kicking him the night before, / that caused the stroke” (78). The speaker says, “of course not. You, uh, / kicked him?” (78). The mother explains that they were
fighting about a cruise the husband wanted to take to Russia, which she kicked him with her “soft sneaker” (78). The speaker agrees that the mother was not to blame, but a week later she thinks about this conversation and is troubled: “when / she married again, I thought she’d stop hitting. / Or do people hit and kick each other / a lot, does everyone do it?” (78-79). She then says that the poem itself is a retaliatory blow against her mother: “No one hit her back / until today—by-blow of this page, / coldclock to her little forehead” (79). This section undercuts some of the warmth and affection from earlier in the sequence, with the speaker noticeably shocked by the mother’s behavior. It serves to evoke an ugly period from their past, during which the speaker might really have thought that almost everyone behaved this way simply because she had experienced no different. The speaker’s observation that the mother lacks a certain amount of self-control and self-awareness suggests that personal change has its limits in some cases.

In the eighth and final section, the eponymous “Cassiopeia” (82-83), the speaker describes the mother being voluble and talking for an hour at a stretch. The two women exchange playful compliments: “Well I worship you / myself, I say, for your good work / with the young musicians, and she says in her new / voice, Well I worship you right back” (82). Abruptly, though, the mother tells her that “the tumor may be growing again” (82). The speaker reflects again on the failures of the mother’s own mother and sympathizes with her: “She was not meant to be a mother, / she never got to be a child until now—” (82). Assuming the role of caretaker herself, she says, “I feel / like an old shepherd on a hill. My lamb, / who sickened so long, my first lamb, is gamboling” (82-83). This final section hints more strongly at the mortality of the mother, but it also has a triumphant note, a truly better-late-than-never situation of the mother having an achievement of self, and the speaker experiencing joy as a result. The necessary change in dynamic is that the speaker is now the more empowered one, but the
revision of roles seems to help the speaker move beyond her past troubled relationship with the mother.

**Conclusion**

In the popular imagination Plath is synonymous with strong—overwhelming, even—emotion, often dark, and inflected by her experience as a woman. Despite this pop cultural image, within the academy she is celebrated rather than held up as a caricature of the young woman depressive. Several factors temper criticism of Plath (at least in published critical discourse, a situation I will address in the conclusion of *Excuses for Emotion*). Even though her emotional content is famously intense at times, she borrows “the stilts of an old tragedy,” which positions her as a participant in a historical tradition rather than an ahistorical voice of her own emotion. Furthermore, her early death anchors her to a particular era. By belonging to another era, a poet escapes scrutiny that contemporary poets would find themselves subject to. For example, one expects British Romantic poets to write in a different emotional register, one containing declamatory and dramatic emotion, not to mention a sense of awe and profundity arising from encounters with the sublime. This point is obvious for most historically distant writers, though I think it holds true for even more recent poets, sometimes even those who are still living. Furthermore, Plath signifies as a woman poet and intellectual who was at the very least stymied by patriarchy. To criticize her work, especially for its emotional content, is to risk being perceived as minimalizing her personal struggles and, more importantly, the struggles of women.

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80 I do think belonging to the past is possible a poet during his or her lifetime. Ginsberg is one such example. While he continued to write up until to his death in the late 1990s, he remained most closely associated with the poetic production and persona of the 1950s and 1960s.
under patriarchy that she has come to symbolize. 81 Lastly, she is a highly canonical poet, widely respected for her artistic skill. It does not even matter if this praise is justified (though I think it is); the perception alone shapes her reception. To paraphrase the remark about Hamlet: you don’t read Plath, Plath reads you. Instances of “bad” writing are thus more likely to be viewed as intentional irony, amenable to sophisticated analysis. Similarly, stylistic qualities that seem outdated are read as markers of a historical era that the poet has come to define in a significant way. One might react against these markers, but they are open to revision and reclamation, and even when criticized they are put in the context of a narrative of artistic development over time rather than dismissed as the mere artistic failings of an individual.

Poets more recent and less renowned than Plath have less of an excuse for their emotion. Moreover, Alicia Ostriker notes, “In our own time, too, in the wake of the ‘confessional’ poets, there seems to be a backlash of critical opinion emphatically preferring the abstract to the sensuous, the cerebral to the emotional” (39). According to Ostriker, Olds is a frequent target of this backlash, both in print and at academic conferences. She says, “[T]he detractors never, of course say that Olds’s poetry hits too close to home or is too emotive or too sexual for their taste; they never say that it makes them uncomfortable. Certainly not; the disparagement is always on purely aesthetic grounds” (40). She adds, “Aesthetics: one notices that those who invoke the term most loftily from the comfort of the citadel can seldom say what they mean by it. It is the

81 Plath the poet and Plath the icon overlap in important ways, but they are hardly the same. Plath the poet is not an uncomplicated voice of feminism. On the one hand, she articulates desire and other strong emotion, and she also decries patriarchy insofar as it permits male disloyalty and callousness toward women. On the other hand, her poetry posits other women as rivals. It does not interrogate patriarchy as a systematic social force, and it does not speak out on behalf of women in general. Rather, the speaker has merit insofar as she herself (has a self to recover) is exceptional. One could argue that she is laying claim to this ability to be exceptional on behalf of women in general. While that is certainly possible, I do not think the poems themselves robustly support that reading. Moreover, even her criticism of patriarchy is coterminous with her real albeit conflicted desire for patriarchs. As such, Plath has value in part for articulating women’s experience and laying claim to an impassioned mode of discourse. Perhaps even more so, though, she signifies as a martyr. The actual personal details of her life aside, she represents a talented woman with a husband whose conduct was flawed and who suffered from the pressures of domestic life in a social system that failed to provide adequate support and equal opportunities.
outsiders swarming the barricades who are forced to formulate definitions” (40). While I would slightly disagree with Ostriker insofar as I think detractors such as Shivani do target her for being too “emotive,” albeit with a display of emotion they consider inauthentic, exaggerated, cliché, or so forth, I do agree that these criticisms and the criticisms of her work in general do appeal to some abstract sense of aesthetics, some ill-defined hostility to the “easy” emotions Robert Hass is praised for avoiding.

Arguing from a feminist perspective, Ostriker critiques the work of Vernon Shetley in his volume After the Death of Poetry: “My own view is that Shetley’s elaborate discussion of Bishop is skewed toward the erasure of eros in her poetry, that his snippy dismissal of Olds derives from a horror of eros in hers, that he misreads them both, and that his misreadings are entirely typical of academic criticism” (40). Ostriker contends, “Nobody would say Sharon Olds disguises the erotic in her poems. The erotic in her work is ubiquitous” (48), an assertion with which I would readily agree. In further support of the merit of Olds’s poetry, Ostriker notes the complexities of both the erotic elements and the familial dysfunction. Olds plays with gender norms: “Cross-gendered imagery recurs throughout her work, as she invokes ‘my father’s breasts’ or speculates that her mother made her deliberately in the image of her powerful father” (49). Similarly, as is abundantly evident, she complicates the family dysfunction through the speaker’s powerful attachment to her parents: “Olds’s critics complain at times that she sensationalizes the dysfunction of her natal family—cold, alcoholic, grandfather and father, searingly clinging anorexic mother—overlooking the complication of the daughter’s insistently expressed desire for, worship of, and identification with her father’s body” (50). Overall, Ostriker’s argument is that critics are misrepresenting and oversimplifying Olds’s poetry, largely because of anxiety about female experience and strong female emotion, an argument that strikes me as reasonable.
However, even Ostriker feels a need to point to the poetry’s “complexity” and transgression, which leaves me to wonder to what extent she, too demands that poetry adhere to certain agreed-upon emotional conventions—to what extent that she too demands “difficulty” and an excuse for emotion.

Olds herself addresses the criticisms leveled against her work in a few poems. In “Calvinist Parents” (One Secret Thing 27), she explores the discourse of speaking about having suffered child abuse, as well as dismissive rhetoric directed toward that discourse. The poem has two epigraphs, one of which comes from an unattributed review of The Unswept Room:

“Sometime during the Truman Administration, Sharon Olds’s parents tied her to a chair, and she is still writing about it.” This line trivializes the abuse described by saying it happened during the “Truman Administration,” and it seeks to discredit Olds for exploring such a theme beyond the time and extent to which the speaker presumably considers it valid to do so. In “Take the I Out” (Blood, Tin, Straw 43), Olds plays with the common workshop advice of “taking the I out,” which is to say, recasting a first-person poem as a third-person one, focusing more on description or others instead of the sensations, thoughts, and experiences of the speaker, and so forth. As I have discussed elsewhere, while this criticism can point to other valid concerns about craft, this criticism as such reflects uneasiness with emotions and with certain types of un-privileged discourse. This poem celebrate the “I.” Associative in nature, it resembles a Hass poem in its conceptual orientation, insofar as it explores the speaker’s relationship to the parents as it juggles other metaphors and also explore the conventions of its own composition. The poem concludes, “The I is a pine, / resinous, flammable root to crown, / which throws its cones as far as it can in a fire.” Describing flammability, this metaphor would seem to suggest not only that the use of the

82 The second epigraph is a quote from “Prescott Sheldon Bush, brother to a president and uncle to another”: “My father was a gentleman, and he expected us to be gentlemen. If we did not observe the niceties of etiquette he whopped us with his belt. He had a strong arm, and boy did we feel it.”
first-person heightens the intensity of emotion within poems, but also increases their ability to connect with readers.

That is not to say all critics are hostile to Olds’s work. For example, a review of her first collection, Satan Says, G. E. Murray praises her “impressive debut” and presciently states, “Lacking any exact science of emotions, it should be noted that Olds's harsh and shockingly truthful poems, often wrought in a strident pitch, will attract a sizeable following. The style also may rally detractors, for to an extent Olds makes poetry as if she were lancing boils and enjoying it” (158). However, even while praising her, Murray continues to anticipate and address attacks against her work. Murray compares her to Plath while also wondering if she is a bit too narrow in some regards: “Mainly in the fashion of Sylvia Plath and Ai, which is to say passionately lyrical and driven, she confronts her terrors two-fisted, focusing—perhaps too narrowly—a raw, primal eye on life” (158). Murray also notes the prevalence of her subject matter in contemporary poetry, which others would call overabundance: “The failure of parents, first love, and disillusionment are perennial favorites among ‘poetical’ topics. But on these accounts, Olds seldom falters, as she combines the serious and the absurd, anger and remorse, apathy and desire, spirit and gut-instinct” (158-159). Also, Murray anticipates that others would see the poetry as sensational: “This is not to imply that Olds is altogether unforgiving, though the preliminary flashes of her poetry may lead casual readers to assume that shock value is the governing principle of this work” (159). This praise is rife with apology and qualification, which suggests that at the time of the review’s publication in 1981, the criticism that Murray anticipates was already in widespread circulation. Incidentally, Plath’s The Collected Poems was published posthumously in 1981 and received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982.
The work of Olds can rally a prominent and respected defender such as Alicia Ostriker on the basis that the strong representations of emotion lay claim to women’s ability to articulate experiences that challenge patriarchal expectations of female demureness and unobtrusiveness. But Robert Hass is a straight white male. What is he to do with his emotions? Aside from a sort of resigned, self-critical wisdom with flashes of passion, his only other options are irony and jokiness, lest he attract considerable suspicion. Sharon Olds and Robert Hass were born one year apart in San Francisco. Both attended Stanford, Olds as an undergraduate, Hass as a graduate student. Both wrote poetry about an alcoholic parent. Both are widely anthologized. However, imagine Hass writing about his passionate desire for his mother and railing against her cruelty.

As discussed in chapter one, in “My Mother’s Nipples” (*Sun under Wood* 12-22) seeing the nipples of his mother is presented as an unpleasant experience that the speaker seemingly doesn’t even want to remember, let alone talk about. In “Dragonflies Mating” (*Sun under Wood* 6-11), he describes dribbling a basketball while feeling humiliated by his drunken mother watching with the other spectators in the gymnasium. Preparing to take a shot with the ball was “almost like killing her” (9). Although a strong expression of emotion, it describes the thought of an embarrassed child, and, especially in the context of the rest of the volume in which it appears, I take it to be a statement couched in self-awareness and some degree of retrospective self-reproach. However, if Hass did write more like Olds, imagine the critical reception of that work. Who would publish him? Who would rush to his defense, and on what grounds? Who would hire him and give him awards? I want to engage in a thought experiment and assume gender (and race, class, and so forth) were not an issue—would thinkers such as Baym and Ostriker still defend the emotional content of such poetry, and, if so, on what grounds would they do so?

83 I address this question in the conclusion.
Those grounds could be aesthetic in nature. One could argue for the value of artistic diversity, of challenging accepted standards of what counts as intellectual value and excellent craft. In that way, poets might discover new effects, and reinvigorate old forms and styles. Furthermore, one could lay claim to the joy of strong, unsophisticated, sentimental, or otherwise “unserious” emotion as elements that could exist as a vital part of poetry. On political grounds, one could argue that regulation of our lives, our modes of expression, is always-already political, regardless of what axes of difference, if any, such regulation operates along. Also, one might point to the fundamental satisfaction in representing and reading about strong emotion. People might criticize that as “easy,” but surely a posture of above-the-fray composure and only slightly anguished magnanimity can be equally formulaic, equally facile. Others might criticize strong emotion as self-aggrandizing, but surely displays of humility—or virtually anything else—can be equally self-aggrandizing and self-congratulatory.

Ostriker might defend a certain style of women’s poetry, but if it is defended as women’s poetry, and if it is de facto acceptable only for women to write in that manner, then it limits the range of expression available to male poets, and it associates women more strongly with particular forms of expression. That is not to say that the poetry should not be defended as women’s writing, or that any feminist claim must always be couched in a more universal ethical or intellectual principle. In fact, to always to do that would be to downplay the role of gender in a deeply problematic way. Still, if no one articulates that underlying principle, unexamined essentialism and stereotyping can—and probably does—fester. Rare is the published poet nowadays who doesn’t have some form of higher education, usually at least a master’s degree. These degrees are usually in creative writing, English literature, or a closely related field. As such, these poets have almost certainly had exposure to theory, and in particular to ideas about
feminism and gender essentialism. Nonetheless, one could probably pick a major literary journal or anthology and identify certain styles of voice and subject matter which skew overwhelmingly toward one gender, even if one eliminated all explicit references to gender in the poems in question. For example, I would imagine if a dramatic poem addresses a current or former sexual partner as “you,” is perhaps fraught with complications or at least full of sexual provocativeness, and has sensual or dark imagery, it is probably going to be the work of a woman. Similarly, if a poem is either jokey or surreal, has flashes of sensitivity and beauty to balance things out, and is perhaps mildly self-deprecatory in a way that nonetheless points to the speaker’s depth of feeling, it is probably going to be the work of a man. In theory there is absolutely no reason why the gender of the authors shouldn’t be reversed—no reason why a man shouldn’t be able to publish the former style of poetry and a woman should be able to publish the latter—but these gender norms remain entrenched in a way that has yet to be fully addressed. I’m not advocating some vision of gender-neutral poetry that would necessarily bracket people’s gender identity and experiences (although, as I mention in the introduction, I’m interested in creating the possibility of poetic drag), but I do see the range of acceptable expression of emotion to be tied to gender in problematic way. The way it limits women is significant, though that has received some prominent scholarly attention. The way it limits men is also significant, but that has attracted far less, if any, sustained scholarly attention. Both are very real concerns, worthy of further discussion.

84 This brief passage, up through and including the next two footnotes, also appears in the introduction to Excuses for Emotion.
85 See “‘What Do Women Want?,’” by Kim Addonizio; “Perfect,” by Erin Belieu (8-9); “All the Aphrodisiacs,” by Cathy Park Hong; and “She Wishes Her Beloved Were Dead,” by Cate Marvin (9-10).
86 See “Jet,” by Tony Hoagland; “Scary, No Scary,” by Zachary Schomburg; “A Song Called Aperture,” by Joshua Marie Wilkinson; “Scarecrow on Fire,” by Dean Young; and “Schwinn” and “As I Cross the Helipause at Midnight, I Think of My Mission,” by Matthew Zapruder.
DISPLACED CHILDREN

Naomi Shihab Nye is the daughter of a Palestinian man and an American woman. Rafael Campo is the son of a Cuban man and an American woman. Li-Young Lee was born in Indonesia to Chinese parents who had already fled their homeland for political reasons and who would have to flee again to America while he was still a small child. Consequently, they all write about being the children of immigrants. Their primary focus tends to be the father. For Campo and Nye, the father is the only immigrant, but even Lee, with two Chinese parents, chooses to write mostly about the father. All of these poets express more ambivalence about the father than the mother, whom they tend to discuss affectionately and sympathetically, and who triggers meditations about meaningful human connections and the nature of existence. As such, this preference for the father as a subject reflects the literary convention that complexity, ambivalence, and pronounced cultural difference are more “serious” matters.

In many ways, the cultural difference of the non-native parents dominates the ways in which the speakers understand their relationship with them. On the positive side, it connects them with a rich world of food, folktale, and traditions, as well as access to another language. It gives them a personal investment in current events, which, while at times painful, makes them more sensitive to the struggles of distant peoples than they might be otherwise. They admire the ways in which their parents have adapted to and even thrived in a new culture. Moreover, their ethnic origin lends a sense of romance to their own identity. On the other hand, they all carry an at-times awkward self-consciousness about their difference. Moreover, the parents’ sense of longing for their homeland or the pain of exile seems to bring an element of sadness into their

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87 Wenying Xu writes, “Foodways nevertheless continue to be the bloodline that keeps alive ethnic identity and the bittersweet longing for home. Yet the foodways also set the exile apart as an ‘alien,’ an abject and threatening presence in the midst of ‘natives’” (101).
own lives. For Lee and especially Campo, this physical distance becomes a metaphor, and
possibly partial cause of, the emotional distance between them and their fathers. According to
Said, “an imaginative geography and history” allows “the mind to intensify its own sense of
itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (55). These
fathers certainly derive part of the sense of themselves from the lands they left, but, especially in
Campo’s poetry, the father seems to do so to the detriment of his relationship with his son.

Overall, these poets demonstrate a fundamental affection and need for connectedness
with and possibly even approval from their parents. They can all be critical of their parents, but
in general the level of criticism is inversely proportional to how strongly they identify the parent
with a political cause. Concerned with Palestinian issues, Nye is by far the least critical. Lee
points out the father’s faults, although he softens that criticism with some element of sympathy
or remembrance of the father’s considerable kindness. Campo tends to be critical of the father,
and sometimes even of the mother, but the subtext there is often that the speaker fears that they
disapprove of his sexuality as a gay man, so in that sense the criticism itself has a political
dimension.

Immigrant experience—or diaspora, as it has been called in recent years—is remarkably
diverse. Immigrants leave their countries of origin for various reasons: political exile, economic
opportunity, personal relationships, a sense of adventure, and so forth. Even within groups of
people immigrating for different reasons, other axes of difference—class, ethnicity, gender,
sexuality, politics, religion, and so forth—stratify them. Recent scholarship has looked for
recurrent features of the immigrant experience, though much debate has occurred over how to

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88 Said rejects “diaspora” as a term for describing the Palestinian condition, and prefers a term such as
“dispossession.” He sees problems with the traditionally Jewish sense of the term “diaspora,” and he perceives it as
insufficiently evocative of the removal, occupation, and exile of Palestinians (Patrick Williams 83-84).
meaningfully categorize different forms of diaspora. For example, William Safran defines members of a diaspora in part as people emerging from a common origin to at least two new locations; his definition stresses the ongoing practical and imaginative significance of the perceived homeland in their lives (Berns-McGown 4). Robin Cohen “distinguishes between victim, labour, imperial, and trade diasporas,” whereas “Michele Reis distinguishes between classical (Jewish and Armenian, among others), modern (slave and colonial), and contemporary diasporas” (Berns-McGown 4). Providing an overview of recent scholarship engaging in this definitional work, Rima Berns-McGown writes, “David Carment and David Bercuson, in their recent edited *The World in Canada*, argue that members of a diaspora may include ethnic migrants, first, second, or even third-generation immigrants, as well as expatriates, students, guest workers, and refugees” (6). According to her, these “truly transnational populations...can be thought of as almost literally living in two places, playing an active role in two communities simultaneously” (6). She adds that Carment and Bercuson note that technology has played a role in increasing a global sense of interconnectedness, even among dispersed populations. Her own definition is similarly broad, more functional than essential: “To be in the diaspora is to perceive oneself as linked to multiple places and to hold a complex identity that balances one’s understanding of those places and the way one fits into each of them” (8).

Nikos Papastergiadis focuses on the concept of turbulence in understanding migration: “Turbulence is not just a useful noun for describing the unsettling effect of an unexpected force that alters your course of movement; it is also a metaphor for the broader levels of interconnection and interdependency

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Berns-McGown writes, “To be in the diaspora is to perceive oneself as linked to multiple places and to hold a complex identity that balances one's understanding of those places and the way one fits into each of them. It can be deeply nostalgic, and it raises questions about the nature of ‘home’ and belonging. Diaspora, then, is best defined as a space of connections—connections in two dimensions, to be precise. The first is the tension between elsewhere—let's call it the 'mythic' homeland, and here—the adoptive country. The second lies in the connection to the wider—‘mainstream’—society, which may or may not be fraught. The nature of both of these connections is critical to questions of social harmony, tension, or cohesion, and they have immense implications for security, social policy, and foreign policy” (8).
between the various forces that are at play in the modern world. The flows of migration across the globe are not explicable by any general theory” (4). This heterogeneity and unpredictability of immigrant experience/diaspora/migration is intellectually refreshing, insofar as it invites a sense of play and surprise, and it is also consonant with other recent intellectual trends such as intersectionality and gender performativity, which engage with identity as a fluid process. Furthermore, this heterogeneity creates a space for—and even requires—thoughtful personal perspectives, the sort offered by the poets under discussion in this chapter.

Being an immigrant or a member of an immigrant community can give rise to a number of problematic emotions, on the part of both those inside and outside the immigrant community. One might be regarded as an object of suspicion, or as an object of curiosity, regarded with varying degrees of condescension and willful incomprehension. One might face different forms of isolation and exclusion, which could exacerbate feelings of homesickness or feelings of simply being lost. Also, one might encounter the expectation that he or she make displays of gratitude toward the nation of residence and its dominant population. Sara Ahmed calls that the “happiness duty,” which she sees as “continuous with the happiness duty of the natives in the colonial mission” (*The Promise of Happiness* 130). She notes that “Happiness can thus involve a

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90 Writing about feminist thought on the domestic, Roberta Rubenstein argues that homesickness and nostalgia are problematic but also potentially productive, an argument that could also apply to diaspora, and could also link the domestic and diaspora in familial narratives of diaspora as discussed in this chapter: “In the chapters that follow I argue that, in contrast to the conventional view of homesickness and nostalgia as sentimental if not also psychologically regressive modes of feeling, both may have compensatory and even liberating dimensions within the frame of narrative. Several writers evoke nostalgia or the longing for home to enable their characters (and, imaginatively, their readers) to confront, mourn, and figuratively revise their relation to something that has been lost, whether in the world or in themselves. Through it, they may move beyond nostalgia’s initially regressive pull to override, neutralize, or transmute loss and achieve a new level of awareness. Narratives that engage notions of home, loss, and/or nostalgia confront the past in order to ‘fix’ it, a process that may be understood in two complementary figurative senses. To ‘fix’ something is to *secure* it more firmly in the imagination and also to *correct*—as in *revise* or *repair*—it. Even though one cannot literally go home again (at least, not to the home of childhood that has been embellished by time and imagination), it may be recoverable in narrative terms. Thought their characters, authors may (figuratively) reconstruct and thus restore or repair the emotional architecture of that multivalent space. Excavating the meaning of the yearning for re/union that overlays the reality of loss and the related process of mourning, they may mediate—and traverse—the gap between longing and belonging” (6)
project of social description: to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force” (132).91

As for members of the immigrant community, a sense of pride or defiance can lead to questionable allegiances and dubious practices; for example, gender norms subordinating women in daily life could be supported, or at least rationalized, by those who might even otherwise have a strong commitment to gender equality if they view the matter as one of cultural loyalty, or of misguided resistance to dominant culture. One might unrealistically romanticize the homeland or ancestral land. Safran notes that members of the diaspora might idealize their putative homeland to the extent that they alienate themselves from the society they currently inhabit (Berns-McGown 4) Similarly, one might experience one’s own form of unexamined nationalism. One might also be criticized for assimilation or unsanctioned social mixing as a perceived act of betrayal.

However, being a member of an immigrant community can also have positive emotional dimensions, in terms of both one’s self-conception and one’s connection with others. Immigrant identity can carry a feeling of pride and uniqueness. It can give one a sense of connection to broader social and political issues, which can bring distress but also a sense of purpose and motivation to raise awareness within society at large. Especially in poetry, it can permit a certain amount of romance and drama that is not couched in the usual personal and familial tropes of shame or self-criticism. And even though one might encounter prejudice outside the immigrant community, one might also encounter outsiders with a commitment to hospitality and a serious, sincere interest in other cultures.

Papastergiadis views migration as productive from a socially critical perspective:

“Increased recognition and negotiation of cultural difference has challenged the very foundations

91 Ahmed adds, “It is important to note that the melancholic migrant’s fixation with injury is read as an obstacle not only to his own happiness but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and even to national happiness” (144).
of almost every institution or practice that shapes the contours of social life” (6). Gloria Anzaldúa sees a similar benefit, which she articulates on the personal level: “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity...She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish even sees benefits in exile, as a “paradoxical form of liberation” (Patrick Williams 96-97). Darwish himself says, “Exile has been very generous and educational, providing culture, enlarging my human scope, and the scope of my language, and enabling my poetic phrases to include dialogue between peoples and cultures” (qtd in Patrick Williams 97). At its best, then, immigration provides a sense of openness, new possibilities, and greater self-awareness and appreciation of nuance. It fosters many connections, for good and for ill, which both complicate and enrich the relationships between the speakers and their parents in the work of Nye, Campo, and Lee.\(^\text{92}\)

**Naomi Shihab Nye**

Naomi Shihab Nye writes poetry that focuses on personal experience, though often that experience has a multicultural or political element. She writes about motherhood, along with home life in general. Like Sharon Olds, Nye has a conversational free verse that focuses on physical details and human relationships in diction that values clarity over verbal pyrotechnics, with the occasional line that sounds especially “poetic” or full of awe. As the American daughter of a Palestinian man and an American woman, she demonstrates concern with ethnicity and

\(^{\text{92}}\) As Ahmed notes, “Migrant memoirs and fiction give texture and complexity to the migrant experience, to the different ways in which hope, fear, anxiety, longing, and desire shape the decisions to leave one’s country as well as the experience of arriving and becoming familiar with a new country” (*The Promise of Happiness* 154).
place. Unique among poets discussed this chapter, she actually lived in her father’s homeland; although growing up in America, she moved with her family to Jerusalem when she was fourteen and attended high school for a year before returning to the United States (Darraj 87). Most obviously this concern appears in poetry about the father’s homeland, Arab culture, and the rights and dignity of the Palestinian people. Especially in earlier work, Nye discusses the Latino community surrounding her in Texas. She writes about travel to other places as well, such as Japan. As much as the experience of travel can be mystified for the sake of poetry, she focuses on the quotidian aspects of it, with poems about time on planes and in airports, including the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport. Exotic and prosaic, personal and political, matter-of-fact and playful: Nye’s poetry is a quietly thoughtful exercise in intersection.93

Compared to the other poets in this project, Nye writes some of the least fraught poetry about parents and family. In her essay, “Doing What We Can,” she describes her deep attachment to her parents: “Fixated as I was on my parents...I never moved out when I went to college, so they finally had to move out and leave me” (90). The author of several collections of poetry for children, she celebrates the presence of children in a domestic setting. In “Where Children Live” (Hugging the Jukebox 8), she writes, “Homes where children live exude a pleasant rumpledness, / like a bed made by a child, or a yard littered with balloons.” Another poem, “Music” (You & Yours 76-77), does present a darker side of home life. In this second-person poem, speaker reflects on the time “you” wanted a piano, but the other family members wanted new things as well. She calls awareness of these competing wants “the first lesson” (76).

93 Lisa Suhair Majaj makes a similar point about Nye, and situates her among other contemporary Arab American writers: “Contemporary Arab American writing in general suggests that the future articulation of Arab American identity lies in precisely this kind of engagement across borders. The intercultural connections that emerge in the work of Williams, Nye, and others suggests that ethnicity cannot be understood as a singular cultural essence invoked through nostalgia but must be explored at sites of multiple border crossings, where exclusionary divisions between Arab and American, Old World and New World, male and female roles, give way to a far more fluid, tentative, and potentially transformative interaction” (286-287).
Unable to obtain the piano she desires, the “you” makes a piano keyboard out of paper and plays it in secret. Nye writes: “Your father found the keyboard / and slapped you for wasting paper. // The second lesson was long” (77). In this uncharacteristic poem, the second person “you” of the poem creates a distancing effect. Either Nye is trying to avoid undermining the figure of the speaker’s father she has crafted over the years, or perhaps this poem does indeed represent a separate central character. In any case, it also seems clear that she is laying claim poetically to the father’s experiences, identity, and displacement, and becoming too negative or too ambivalent about him might undermine that project.

Nye’s poems about the father often center on his ethnicity and his past in Palestine. In this way, the father shapes the speaker’s conception of her own mixed ethnicity, and he gives her a sense of connection to Arab culture and current events, particularly those involving social justice. Both whimsical and sober, “Blood” (Yellow Glove 31) 94 explores all of these concerns.

The father regales the speaker with what a “true Arab” does, such as catching a fly in his hands or believing that watermelon has fifty healing properties. He tells the young speaker that their surname, Shihab, means “shooting star,” “a good name, borrowed from the sky.” She asks, “When we die, we give it back?” He tells her that’s what a true Arab would say. In the narrative present, the speaker says, “Today the headlines clot in my blood. / A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.” She calls her father to talk about the news, but, she says, “It is too much for him, / neither of his two languages can reach it.” The poem concludes, “What does a true Arab do now?” In the scenes from childhood the playful exchanges between father and daughter foster an emotional bond, and they also serve as a means of affirming their identity in a neighborhood where a girl comes to their house and asks to see “the Arab.” As elsewhere, the

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94 Majaj notes the poem was “Written in the context of Israeli and Lebanese Phalangist massacres of Palestinians during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and its aftermath” (283).
father has an enthusiastic, slightly theatrical personality. He is kind, and he has a sense of playfulness, as well as what one might call a poetic sensibility. Telling the speaker about his culture of origin, he expresses his own nostalgia and pride. Instructing his daughter not only perpetuates this culture but also gives him someone with whom to share his feelings. Depicting Arab culture as whimsical, the poem challenges cultural narratives about the violence, fundamentalism, and oppressiveness to be found in Palestine and elsewhere, which exist in the sort of media accounts the speaker encounters and serves to distract from the humanity and the very real suffering of Arabs. Still, this charming and colorful language does not help either the speaker or her father to process fully the tragic events in Palestine. The father can provide his daughter a sense of cultural identity and tradition, but he cannot help her overcome the grief and sense of powerlessness that he himself cannot overcome. Just as the ties of culture offer benefits, they also create vulnerability and responsibility.\(^{95}\)

Another poem combining whimsy and witness, “Jerusalem” (Red Suitcase 21-22) opens, “I’m not interested in / who suffered the most. / I’m interested in / people getting over it” (21). When the speaker’s father was younger, a friend hit his head with a rock, and hair never grew in that spot again. Examining the nature of excuse, the speaker says, “Later his friend who threw the stone / says he was aiming at a bird. / And my father starts growing wings” (21). The lesson from this incident is: “Each carries a tender spot: / something our lives forget to give us” (21). Whimsy\(^6\) and witness occur elsewhere in literature, particularly in magical realism. Whether or

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\(^{95}\) Majaj reads “Blood” as follows: “In the poem ‘Blood,’ Nye offers a nuanced meditation on the notion of cultural ‘blood inheritance,’ moving from a lightly humorous consideration of the possibilities of being a ‘true Arab’ offered by her father’s folk tales to a deeply troubled questioning of the implications and responsibilities of this identity. The poem deconstructs the naturalization of an Arab cultural ‘essence,’ while simultaneously foregrounding the politicized overdetermination of Palestinian identity” (282-283).

\(^{96}\) In her essay “Doing What We Can,” Nye writes: “The lilt of my Palestinian father’s tales blessed every bedside. His gracious old country accent from his first world in the mysterious city of Jerusalem, the funny quotes and sceneries of his tales, donkeys, apricots, and wisdoms, cobbled, curling back alleyways in the Old City where he had
not they succeed, the non-realistic elements seek to convey what mere description purportedly fails to capture. They too provide a sense of cultural specificity and otherness. In this particular case, the speaker narrates the personal history of the father like a folktale of the sort he might tell.

Other poems depict the father as more of a romantic figure, evoking for the Palestinians themselves a sense of nostalgia and loss. In “Puff” (Fuel 75-76) the speaker remembers being overseas, where a shopkeeper calls out to her, “Your father was the most handsome man / in Jerusalem when he left!” (76). In “Brushing Lives” (Red Suitcase 91-92) the speaker visits Alexandria with her father, and they meet at a cafe. Slouching on a barstool, an old man tells the father, “You talk like the men who lived in the world / when I was young.” (91). He falls silent, but when the father mentions Palestine, the other man stands up with tears in his eyes and says, “I have stopped saying it. So many years” (91). Nye writes, “My father held him there, held Palestine, in the dark, / at the corner of two honking streets” (91). In these poems, the speaker sees her father as a kind figure, and she also sees him as a living embodiment of an ideal, specifically an ideal of nationhood. He emphasizes the idea of nationhood as a powerful ideal, but he also represents the way that life goes on without it. These poems praise the father through the words of others. They also authenticate the connection of the speaker to Palestine by showing that her own father, the source of that connection, remains a recognizably authentic and memorable member of their culture for the Palestinians themselves.

In “What People Do” (Different Ways to Pray 50-51), the speaker visits her father in the hospital after a heart attack. She says, “My father is writing me the story of his village” (50). One story is of his best friend being buried alive and surviving for two days in the ground. The other is of the father being lowered into a well, where he discovered thousand-year-old clay jars filled grown up. He never dwelled too long on troubled politics, since the inequities and losses hurt too much for one in exile. But he created, though language, a place of playful characters and ancient, spicy traditions” (90).
with seeds, which they keep secret from the British, who might otherwise have destroyed the town with archaeological excavations. Again, his stories connect the speaker to events of historical significance and colonial oppression, and they demonstrate his own personality as a raconteur with a penchant for the outlandish. In this poem, though, the cultural connections are not as significant as the personal ones, presumably because of the father’s illness and the speaker’s confrontation with his mortality. Reflecting on her relationship with her father, the speaker says, “I would tell my father / I cannot move one block without you / I will never recover from your love” (51). She takes this opportunity to tell him things she has never told him before, and they have a conversation: “we go on this way / smoothing the silences / nothing can heal” (51). Much of Nye’s work is distinct from the other poets under consideration in this project, but, stylistically and content-wise those concluding lines could have come from several of the other poets. “What People Do” shows that, even later in life and even in a period of sickness, the father wishes to share stories from his culture with the speaker, and she wants to hear them, but, as important as those stories might be both personally and politically, they nonetheless want to and believe they can interact on a more elemental level as parent and child.

Food and drink are often used to evoke ethnic identity, otherness, travel, and so forth: various displacements celebrated through the evocation of sensual enjoyment. For the immigrant, food and drink can be both a reminder of home and a marker of displacement, and the place where they are bought and consumed can serve as sites of gathering. Assimilated children might view these items with nostalgia and pride, but perhaps also with self-consciousness. “Arabic Coffee” (Yellow Glove 40) opens, “It was never too strong for us: / make it blacker, Papa.” The speaker says he’d let the coffee boil up twice, with “No sugar in his pot.” These remarks show the speaker embracing this beverage wholeheartedly. Describing an egalitarian meeting space
created by the father, the speaker says, “And the place where men and women / break off from one another / was not present in that room.” She notes, “And none was / more important than the others, / and all were guests.” She talks about “The hundred disappointments” that got discussed at those gatherings, a line that suggests the frustrations and frustrated ideals of immigrants, and might also imply those assembled there did not feel comfortable or consider it prudent to voice their concerns with outsiders. It is not clear, though, to what extent the speaker herself participates in these meetings, but she evidently observes them and thereby becomes a participant in her father’s culture. Also, “Arabic Coffee” praises the father insofar as it shows him as an egalitarian leader and a hospitable host.

In “My Father and the Fig Tree” (Different Ways to Pray 24-25), the father has a passion for the fig, a food that connects him to his heritage. The speaker says that at night he would sit next to her bed and be “weaving folktales like vivid little scarves” (24). Even if there weren’t a fig tree in the story, he’d add one: “Once Joha was walking down the road and he saw a figtree. / Or, he tied his camel to a figtree and went to sleep. / Or, later when they caught and arrested him, / his pockets were full of figs” (24). Once more, Nye presents the father and his culture as whimsical; this poem also suggests that the father is a romantic. As for the young speaker, she is underwhelmed after trying a dried fig at the age of six, but the father excitedly tells her that that isn’t the fruit he knows: “I’m talking about a fig straight from the earth— / gift of Allah!—on a branch so heavy it touches the ground” (24). Although the mother tells him to plant a fig tree, he never does, and instead cultivates the plants they do grow ineffectively, with too little watering and trimming. The mother remarks, “What a dreamer he is. Look how many things he starts / and doesn’t finish.” (24). However, when the speaker moves to Dallas later in life, he calls his daughter and sings a song in Arabic she doesn’t understand and he refuses to translate until she
comes to visit. In the middle of his new backyard is a fig tree. As for what he was saying in
Arabic, Nye writes: “‘It’s a figtree song!’ he said, / plucking his fruits like ripe tokens, / emblems,
assurance / of a world that was always his own” (25). Nye explicitly links this fruit to his identity
and to his sense of security in the world. The tree symbolizes rootedness, but it also grows in
Dallas, an incongruous place. Although the father romanticizes it, he certainly waits long enough
to find one, so in that regard it seems most important to him on an imaginative level instead of a
practical one, as a symbol and an ideal of home. Incidentally, this poem is rare insofar as it
discusses, however briefly, the actual relationship of the parents. The mother appears
exasperated with him being a “dreamer,” although in general Nye presents that quality as part of
his appeal.

In “For Mohammed on the Mountain” (Different Ways to Pray 43-45), the speaker talks
about her reclusive paternal uncle, which leads her to think about her father as well. Twenty-five
years beforehand, Mohammed, eldest brother in his family, sequestered himself on a mountain,
and no one is aware of him having gone anywhere else. He fascinates the speaker, more than any
other relative on that side of the family. When the speaker was in elementary school, her friends’
uncles did conventional things, such as riding motorcycles, grilling steaks, and paying for the
movies, but the speaker says, “I preferred you, in all your silence. / In my mind you were like a
god, living close to clouds, / fearless and strong, with no one to sing you to sleep” (43). She
wants to encounter him and to receive his approval: “And I wanted to know you, to touch hands,
to have you look at me / and recognize your blood, a small offspring / who did not find you in
the least bit / nuts” (43). In her enthusiasm, she would ask her father about his motivation and
what happened to him, but father would simply say, “Who knows?” (43). The speaker then
wonders if Mohammed knows about facts about his own family such as “That my father edits
one of the largest newspapers in America / but keeps an Arabic inscription above his door, *Ahlan Wa Sahlan*, / a door you will never enter” (44). She and her family lived in his country for a year, but Mohammed never came to see them. She says, “I think that hurt my father, though he never said so. / It hurt me, scanning the mountains for sight of your hut, / quizzing the relatives and learning nothing” (44). She also wonders if her uncle believes that her father forget him when he moved overseas, and she says, “Believe me, Uncle, my father is close to you / than the brothers who never left” (44). She says that her father remembers the call to prayer, and that eating his native food in America makes him even more aware of his identity, and probably more consciously proud of and invested in his culture than he would be otherwise. Then the speaker begins to wonder if the uncle had more spiritual and noble purposes for his hermitage, and she says that she feels an urge similar to what he might have felt: “It says, Teach me how little I need to live / and I can’t tell if it is me talking, or you, / or the walls of the room” (45). In this respect, the mysteries of her father’s homeland become linked with the mysteries of her self. On another level, Mohammed symbolizes connectedness to the land, which enables the speaker to meditate on her own emigrant father’s lingering sense of connectedness to his homeland. He also speaks to the possibility of truth in otherness, and, like the father, he has chosen a type of exile.

Nye looks at the ways in which others view the speaker as a result of her mixed ancestry. She shows that people tend to round up or down, so to speak, and expect that someone fit into an already established category of identity. “Grandfather’s Heaven” (*Different Ways to Pray* 20) opens, “My grandfather told me I had a choice. / Up or down, he said. Up or down. / He never mentioned east or west.” She says that she liked her grandmother, who baked her cookies and let her listen to a shell, and her grandmother liked her too, “even though my daddy was a Moslem.” She reflects on her grandfather: “I think Grandpa liked me too / though he wasn’t sure what to do
with it.” Shortly before he died, he wrote her a letter saying that he heard she was studying
religion: “That’s how people get confused. / Keep it simple. Down or up.” Nye uses humor to
paint a picture of the speaker’s maternal grandparents that is amusing but also faintly critical
with respect to their limited cultural frame of reference, as well as the grandfather’s rigidity.

In “Half-and-Half” (Fuel 60), Nye writes about a boy selling blue pitchers on the Via
Dolorosa: “You can’t be, says a Palestinian Christian / on the first feast day after Ramadan.” She
says, “He sells glass. He knows about broken bits, / chips. If you love Jesus you can’t love /
anyone else. Says he.” She describes lighting votive candles that morning in a church where the
priests often bicker over where to sit, though they didn’t that day. She says, “As a boy, my father
listened to them fight. / This is partly why he prays in no language / but his own. Why I press my
lips / to every exception.” This passage links language with the erotic and also with affection.
The notion that the father only prays in his own language suggests that language represents
power structures and struggles he wishes to distance himself from, and it also shows the
possibility of defining oneself on one’s own terms. In language reminiscent of that of Adrienne
Rich, the poem concludes by talking about a woman making soup “from what she had left / in
the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean. / She is leaving nothing out.” It is unclear what this
woman’s connection to the action of the poem is, but the thematic connection is that she does not
see a need to observe strict categories. Of the three settings—commercial, religious, and
domestic—the domestic is the site most conducive to new possibilities.

In one poem, “Genetics” (Fuel 17-18) the speaker discusses her parents in roughly equal
measure, and she catalogues the personality traits she shares with each of them: “From my father
I have inherited the ability / to stand in a field and stare. // Look, look at that gray dot by the
fence. / It’s his donkey” (17). She explains, “My father doesn’t have / a deep interest in donkeys,
more a figurative one. / To know it’s out there nuzzling the ground” (17). She sees his interest reflected in her: “That’s how I feel about my life. / I like to skirt the edges” (17). To “skirt the edges” suggests traits that also lend themselves to poetry, unconventionality and ironic distance, as well as marginalization, the condition of the immigrant and the minority, at least to some extent. As for her mother, the speaker says, “From my mother, an obsession about the stove / and correct spelling” (17). Noting a difference between herself and her mother, she adds, “My mother does crosswords, which I will never do. / But a word spelled wrongly anywhere / prickles my skin” (17). Again, this focus on language relates to poetry. She then looks at her family dynamic, which has a decidedly intellectual bent: “We had family discussions / about a preference for the British grey” (17). Here Nye links heterogeneity with creativity, art, and language itself. The anecdotes are lighthearted and humorous, and the tone is both affectionate and proud, with pride in her parents and in their traits she sees in herself.

When speaking about the mother, Nye tends to focus on emotional and existential concerns, as in “Long Distance” (Different Ways to Pray 32-33), which is dedicated to Nye’s mother. The speaker’s mother says, “I’ve been having visions of infinity” (32). The speaker asks her about these visions, but she is hesitant and unsure. Nye writes, “Tell me where you go in these silences / and I will say if I have been there” (32). This statement posits an openness between mother and daughter to talk about things that others might consider bizarre or laughable, and to perhaps transcend the rational itself. She then says, “I had a vision of infinity” (33). When she was ten, the family went on a trip to a farm where a sow was in labor. While most of the family was watching the pig, the speaker wandered back to the house. The television was on, and the speaker watched it. She says, “For a moment between programs / the screen swirled an outer-space landscape, / stars and galaxies, dazzling miracles of light” (33). This sight triggers her first
awareness of her own mortality, and she falls into a vision of existing before she “became someone knowing herself as someone” in “that endless black beyond the stars.” She asks, “Listen, did you recognize me later, in the barn, / kneeling over the squealing pigs? / If so, tell me now, as I have told you, / how far you journey, how strange it is to come back” (33). Whereas the poems about the father often have a whimsical quality, this piece has a mystical, even haunting one. The mother and daughter are one another’s confidante for these discussions of these visions concerning the nature of their own existence. Poems of this nature assert an elemental connection between mother and child. They tend to be more affectionate than poems by the same poet about fathers, but on the other hand the mother also appears as a less-developed character.

One poem about the mother that is more social and less existential is “Our Principal” (Fuel 108). The poem opens by stating the principal “beat his wife. / We did not know it then.” The speaker describes saying good morning “in our cleanest voices” and knowing he was in the office where their report cards were made. She says that this new knowledge has seeped “along the gutters, / chilly stream / of autumn rain.” Staring out the window, the mother sits on the couch with the newspaper lying beside her and, “All those years I told you / pay good attention to / what he says.” The new awareness of the mother makes her reflect on how she heedlessly observed the customs of authority and encouraged her daughter to do the same. It’s actually a quite effective poem even being as simple as it is. The theme is, of course, that things are often not as they appear, that authority often hides injustice and violence behind a facade of decorum, and that one should not either practice or encourage too unreflexive an allegiance to authority figures.
Rafael Campo

Rafael Campo has a fairly unique constellation of identities: gay man, Cuban-American, Harvard-educated practicing doctor, member of the medical faculty at Harvard, observant Catholic, and formalist poet. Traditional form\(^97\) lends a measured, thoughtful tone to his work. Although a bit stuffy at times, in general Campo can capably move between intellectual and conversational diction. As with other New Formalists, his work is frequently either narrative or very self-consciously meditative. This focus on narrative and meditation is particularly effective for a poet who wishes to explore identity—the title of his first collection is *The Other Was Me*, after all. He pays homage to other LGBT writers, first and foremost fellow formalist Marilyn Hacker, as well as Richard Howard, Audre Lourde, and June Jordan. He also celebrates pioneering queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,\(^98\) author of *Epistemology of the Closet*, with work that, among other things, represents the speaker as a boy enchanted by the clothes in his mother’s closet. He writes a good deal about his lover Jorge, as well, and their long-term, monogamous relationship. Addressing the AIDS epidemic, he brings the perspective of a physician, and in that regard he channels William Carlos Williams, another poet-physician of Latin American descent (through his Puerto Rican mother, although in my experience he is often not addressed as such). In addition, he describes at length the process of adopting an infant son, and later an older African daughter.\(^99\) As for his racial and ethnic identity, he describes having a Cuban refugee father and an Italian-American mother. Cuba is a central theme in his poetry, and it represents the losses of his father, who was wealthy and had servants, on both a material and

\(^{97}\) S.W. Henderson writes, “Campo explains the sonnet form’s particular aptness for his narrative struggles with identity. He delights in using the sonnet for the sonnet’s own ‘identity,’ appreciating it as that form that ‘has always stood at the imagined intersection of the romance languages and English’ that thus appeals to his own linguistic heritage and mirrors his own dual identity in language and culture” (265).

\(^{98}\) Joanne Rendell writes, “As a student at Amherst College, Campo was under the tutelage of, and became a friend to, the influential queer/feminist scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick” (206).

\(^{99}\) These accounts are fictitious (Ortíz 241).
an emotional level. Partly in response to that loss, the parents project considerable hope onto their son. I think that for these first-generation poets and poets who immigrated at a very early age, the homeland of their parents becomes a metaphor (self-consciously or otherwise) for the emotional distance between child and parent. It becomes something they try to understand, a cipher for their own otherness, as well as for the lack of understanding (and perhaps of guilt for the same) of the parent from another culture.

Despite his maternal Italian-American ancestry, Campo focuses almost exclusively on the paternal Cuban side of his ethnicity; Ricardo L. Ortiz writes that, as a result, an interview with Campo published in 2004 erroneously states that both his parents were Cuban exiles (241). Campo’s work participates in a general profusion of Cuban-American literature, starting in the 1980s, and with several anthologies emerging in the 1990s. Campo and others in the 1990s represent an emergence of “the literature of the Cuban-American children of the first exile generation” (Borland 51). Isabel Alvarez Borland notes, “The intellectual and political atmosphere in the United States made Cuban Americans more introspective, leading them to examine their own history and culture” (51). With respect to Cuban-American gay and lesbian authors in particular, Borland say they “bring out ideas that are intimately bound to issues of ethnicity and the histories of their communities” (107). Campo is also read by critics as a gay writer, though interestingly his sexuality is often connected to his profession as a doctor. Part of the reason for that is Campo’s extensive work with and poetry about the AIDS epidemic; the poetry is fairly unique insofar as it approaches AIDS from the dual perspective of a gay man and a physician. In addition, critics note that in his poetry and nonfiction Campo brings a queer

100 Gustavo Pérez Firmat writes, “Since its emergence in the 1980s, Cuban-American literature has occupied an ambiguous place within the canon of imaginative writing by U.S. Latinos. As the only segment of this canon produced by political exiles and their children [Note: I don’t think that assertion is accurate], this literature exhibits a nostalgic streak not shared—at least, not in the same degree—by Chicano, Dominican American, or U.S. Puerto Rican writers” (15).
theoretical perspective to medicine itself, insofar as he explores the taboo role of sexual desire in the patient-physician relationship and considers it as emotional energy that can be harnessed as compassion.  

S. W. Henderson likens the concealment of this desire to the closet. Joanne Rendell also considers Campo’s discussion of a white coat as a means he has used both to closet himself, to obscure his gay identity, and to pass on an ethnic level as someone who is “white.”

“After the Weekly Telephone Call” (Landscape with Human Figure 71) describes the relationship of the adult speaker to his parents in a way that nicely encapsulates the general attitude toward them displayed throughout Campo’s work: affection, need, and even gratitude, mingled with a degree of ambivalence. He writes, “To say I love them seems too obvious, / and not exactly what I think I feel.” During his youth he told them he hated them, but he wants to make it clear that “I spoke not knowing this day would come, / a time when distances would seem adult, / acceptable.” This distance is salubrious, but the speaker’s emotional needs remain: “I wanted to explain that I still need / them, talk to them, as if it weren’t resolved.” He

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101 Rendell writes, “Discussing his training and work as a physician, he asserts that amid the fear induced by AIDS and the increasing technologization of medical practice, it is important for physicians to recognize ‘the desire inherent in the patient-doctor relationship.’ For Campo, the acknowledgment of this desire and the intimacy in this relationship can lead to empathy and healing” (205).

102 Henderson writes, “In exploring his relationship with this patient, Campo’s narrating doctor works to reconcile his own feelings of compassion, distaste, and desire with the belief that the feelings themselves are, on a certain level, inherently deviant, transgressive. In addition to this, there is an external double-bind that demands of the physician both a disclosure or acceptance of these feelings (as one model of the compassionate doctor or, metatextually, as a physician trying to express his feelings in writing) and an erasure of these feelings as demanded of an objective scientific physician, ‘the model physician, for whom desire was forbidden and in fact repellant.’ This situation is reminiscent of the closet, with the always potentially stigmatic invisibility of what is being hidden and the risks associated with either disclosure or denial, in terms of the doctor/patient relationship or the physician’s place within the medical community (274-275)

103 Rendell writes, “It is perhaps Campo’s passing both in popular culture and in the medical domain that is the most radical or ‘queering’ element of his work and life. Passing is something that Campo himself discusses. In The Desire to Heal, for instance, he confesses to having once hoped that his ‘white coat’ would cover for his ‘non-white skin’ and that his ‘learning medical jargon’ might help him dodge any questions about what his ‘first language has been.’ Elsewhere he admits that he initially intended to use his doctor’s role and the medical sphere to ‘hide’ his homosexuality. In his eagerness to pass, he even persuaded himself that his colleagues’ ‘casual homophobic and racist jokes’ were ‘funny’ and ‘well deserved.’ With maturity, Campo realized the implications of this kind of passing, and in his writing he has come to celebrate his homosexuality and foreignness, his hybridity and difference. However, despite being a gay Cuban American man who troubles some of the fundamental dichotomies of popular culture and biomedical thinking and who startles his colleagues by acknowledging how desire circulates in the medical encounter, Campo still passes as an acclaimed writer and a successful physician” (226).
remembers “love, the love of then, // so unconditional I can’t recall / just how it was expressed.”

As examples of this love, he cites his father hoisting him up to get a better view at a baseball game, and his mother watching over him as he gathered leaves for a science project. On the other hand, the speaker has also received from his parents “the terrible / desire to be whole.” This brief, somewhat puzzling phrase suggests that they have left him with some unfulfilled need, either simply by virtue of giving birth to him, by not showing him a tenable way to live his emotional life, or by inflicting some hurt for which he still requires solace. It might also indicate they have somehow passed the discontents from their own lives onto him. In any case, this poem explores his ambivalence, whereas in other poems he can often sound either loving or embittered. Taken alone, those poems would give a narrower view of the speaker’s attitude toward his parents. However, as a whole they demonstrate that Campo is willing to present strong emotion without automatically questioning or qualifying it, and to let poems represent a moment in the speaker’s emotional life rather than standing as a definite statement. In general, New Formalists publish persona poems frequently, so perhaps they, and he, are somewhat comfortable with the idea of a poem as a performance of a persona and not a statement emerging more directly from the author.

For the father in Campo’s poetry, exile from Cuba serves as the central theme, setting in motion events from his arrival in America to the raising of his children, and fostering emotions such as bitterness, nostalgia, and the resolve to thrive despite considerable adversity. For the speaker himself, Cuba is a great mystery. In many ways it defines his father, but it does so as an absence rather than a presence, and he encounters it only indirectly. He tends to focus on it as what his father has lost. In two poems from The Other Was Me, “Their Long Vacations in Hawaii” (51) and “Advice for the New World” (52), the speaker refers to the father’s slide shows of his previous life in Cuba. He shows pictures of farms “He said belonged to us before the trick
Of history had happened and we lost / It all” (51). In particular the father laments losing “My family’s wealth, the ruby of my health” (52). In the voice of the father, “My Father’s View of Poetry” (The Other Was Me 54) demonstrates that the experience of revolution and exile has colored his attitude toward other parts of life, such as his son’s writing. He asserts that poetry won’t earn money and that one cannot “say with it / Important histories and truths.” Comparing the ostensible frivolity of poetry to his own experiences, he says, “When you die— / I’ve seen a revolution, so I know— / You’re never counting syllables. You know / The murderers will drain your throat of sighs.” In these poems, the father expresses genuine and understandable dismay at his circumstances, and it seems appropriate that one should be able to do so in a family environment. Nonetheless, focusing on these losses as if they had destroyed him seems insensitive toward his family in America. In addition, he appears to be dramatizing his past. While his past appears to have been legitimately dramatic, his statements suggest he is trying to establish his own importance and authority in relation to others who do not share his experiences. Still, these criticisms aside, Campo’s poems do generally take a sympathetic view toward the father’s exile.

However, Campo does not overlook the problems in the old system that supported the family’s considerable privilege. “The Repeating Island” (Diva 4-5) describes Cuba in 1949. Numerous plantations make their owners wealthy at the expense of the laborers. The speaker describes “Plantations where a kind of slavery / Made sweetness from the blackest sin, / Made bitterness from the sweat of men” (4). Ominously, rebels who steal eggs and kill cattle live in the Cuban jungle, where the children play. Ostensibly writing about an episode in the father’s life, Campo describes him beating a mixed race girl accused of stealing: “One story goes / There was a little boy, a boy who was / As lonely as a lonely star, / The boy who beat a young mulatto girl”
This incident implies that the young father already felt fear and anger about the threat of the rebels who would eventually displace him, as well as that he himself represented problems of the old order. In this concluding passage, Campo explicitly compares his emotional distance from his father to his father’s loss of the Cuba of his youth. The reference to the father being a boy serves to lessen his culpability and to increase sympathy toward him for this formative event.

One way the father deals with the losses of his exile is by projecting hopes onto his son. In “Planning a Family” (*The Other Was Me* 49), the father says he wants a son “Of numerous abilities, a true / American, the way I could salute / The country that had rescued me.” This son would want to please him, speak English well, speak respectfully to him, tell the truth, and become a doctor. The father openly acknowledges that he wishes the son to accomplish what he couldn’t. The poem concludes: “Because I ached to climb beyond, I ached / To have a son to love what I can’t hate, / To teach me my own life, to share my grief.” It is not just the father’s ambition or gratitude that finds expression in these desires, but also his own desire for emotional completeness, which places a burden on the son. At the same time, this ambition does create opportunities for the son, and he receives parental attention and support.

In “Gods, Gays, and Guns” (*The Enemy* 15-16), the speaker acknowledges these ambitions but shows ambivalence toward them, or at least toward the vision of America that they are predicated on. Referring to his parents, he says, “America, to them, was safe and free. / Its generosity still baffles me” (15). The difference between their view of society and his experience leads to cognitive dissonance: “Inventing memories I’ve never had, / I think about the church that kept me safe, / kind neighbors who invited me to supper, / the garden where my grandparents grew squash” (15). In reality, he says that he didn’t feel safe; instead, he felt confined and marginal. Despite his ambivalence, though, the speaker holds out some possibility
for going to “that place of the possible, / kind neighbors invite us now to supper, / we who exist to ask how we yet might / invent the memories I never had” (16). Despite obvious skepticism, the speaker of Campo’s poems does demonstrate an emotional investment in his parents’ beliefs about America as a land of opportunity and acceptance. He seems to believe genuinely in some version of these possibilities, partly as a result of his own successes, and partly as a result of his own beliefs, particularly those inspired by queer theory, which hold open the possibility of meaningful social change.

The speaker describes emotional distance from his father that he compares, and perhaps attributes, to the father’s exile. In “San Fernando” (The Other Was Me 24-25), with Olds-like erotic undertones, the speaker addresses his father: “it was like I’d been to Cuba. / The dark men. The inaccessible island, / Like the parts of you I couldn’t see // Beneath your towel” (24). He says that, as far as he knew, Cuba was cold and Cubans were non-Christians who ate horsemeat. Implying that he has listened to his father many times, but also that he feels disconnected from his father emotionally, he says, “I know / Almost the knife of your exile” (24). The speaker views the past as a happier time in his father’s life: “In your smile, // That relic of happiness, I see // A businessman, my dad, a broken Catholic man / Who had servants once” (24). This fragmentation of the father affects the son: “I save the parts of you / You let me have, like shards of pottery, // Like fragments of my own puzzle” (24-25). He connects poetry with trying to deal with his father: “I scratched / Over this page, until your eyes stopped me” (25). Similarly, “Suicidal Ideation (Diva 11)104 describes depression on a dangerously hot day in Miami,105 and it seems that the inaccessible myth of Cuba represents the emotional distance between the father

104 The poem is dedicated “for Rafael Fernando Campo, d. 1993.”
105 Campo himself grew up not in Miami but in what he calls the “northern part of Cuba known as Elizabeth, New Jersey” (qtd in Ortiz 235).
and his son. From Miami, he thinks about seeing “Cuba’s razor edge.” The speaker says, “What else is there to understand of him: / For years I thought he was the Cuban town // I never would inhabit, that his names / were metonyms I never would decode.” He compares his own mental distress to this unknown island: “If suicidal ideation is / A nation that’s both tropical and bleak // I know I’ve been there: long before the wars / Of shame, I razed the island that he was” (11). In these poems, the speaker demonstrates awareness that the father’s exile does not fully explain his emotional distance. Rather, the speaker at one point attributed that distance to the exile, a view that the father does not seem to have contradicted and perhaps might have even encouraged. Again, that is not to say that the father’s expulsion from his home country did not affect him in a profound way, but the speaker recognizes that focusing on that alone would not fully explain who his father is.

In “The Return” (Diva 7), the speaker imagines that by returning his father to a free Cuba he will be able to earn his approval and lessen this emotional distance. As the father lies snoring, the speaker envisions taking him back to a free Cuba in 2023, after Castro has died and his family has been removed from power. He imagines his father’s gratitude: “he sees he’s needed me for all these years. / He doesn’t understand it yet, but when / I give him Cuba, he will love me then.” In this poem and elsewhere, the speaker presents the need for parental approval as strong. He does not explore why this approval ought to matter, though, which leaves one to assume that it is a fairly intrinsic desire, at least for the speaker. Wanting to earn the approval in a way that he is virtually powerless to achieve, though, suggests that that approval is elusive.

“Opposites Attract” (Diva 65) explores the disconnect between the father and the speaker, but reflecting on this condition leads the speaker to realize their similarity. The poem uses the second person, and it opens with the speaker asking the “you” to imagine being bored and
surfing the Internet when “you realize you never understood / your father’s grief.” Pointing out the negative side of the father, he says, “You can’t / believe you put up with your father’s rage.” Seemingly in a cantankerous mood, the addressee realizes he hates the Internet because it has “no memory, no true imagination,” and he even dislikes the ease of finding pornography, “those utterly so disembodied men,” who strike him as sad. This thought leads to a sudden realization: “That’s when you realize you loved him, that / unhappy bastard who was never home. / You realize you lack imagination, / like he did; just like him, you hardly spoke.” One of the most openly critical poems about the father, this poem frames that criticism as self-reproach and identification, which lessens its harshness. Moreover, the criticism is the catalyst for the recognition of love.

Like many other poets writing about parents, Campo describes the father stricken by serious illness, and the period of convalescence proves to be a time for reflection and reevaluation. “My Patient’s Heart Attack” (The Other Was Me 55), describes the father in the hospital as he recovers from a heart attack. The speaker wants to feel pity or to cry out, but ostensibly he doesn’t at that moment, perhaps out of numbness. He confronts his critical feelings toward his father: “The wounds of sixty-seven years. I see / The disappointment on his wedding day, / The deep resentment of his son who’s gay— / They look alike.” However, he also admires “the undeniably / Successful way he made careers unfold.” In “On Vacation from Medical School” (56), the speaker reflects, “I try to think of times I wished him dead.” However, seeing his father in this condition causes a strong reaction: “My blood, his EKG is mine, his heart / Was touched by me, I swallowed him in dreams / Of Cuban soldier, hate, and curing heart disease. / His EKG. My love seizes me in bursts.” In “I Imagine He Is Ill” (The Other Was Me 60), the speaker says, “Until / Today, when I saw the tubing taped to him, / I didn’t understand how
much I’m him.” The illness of the father does not resolve the complicated feelings of the speaker, nor does it resolve his resentment. Still, both empathy and identification occur, which implies a deeper connection, or at least an underlying need, strong enough to change the emotional dynamic.

A few poems discuss the relationship between the father and mother. “Keats and Shakespeare” (48) describes the father and mother meeting in a college English course, where working together on homework leads to romance. For the young father the mother represents integration into American. Campo explores their navigation of ethnic difference: “My mother thought his accent made him hers / To teach; my father thought his accent turned / A different shade of red with hers, not the blush / Of shame, but the rose of love.” For the father, this relationship symbolizes achieving assimilation and understanding in his adopted country, “what he’d dream he might have never found.” In “What My Mother Says” (57), the speaker explores the impact his father’s later illness has on the mother: “She gazes at him, pure, an urgent light. / My mother’s still in love. I fear for her, / Since so much love’s impossible.” She worries that she’s grown less desirable, and he suggests that there are problems in “the fragile package that their marriage is.” The poem concludes with a comparison of her reaction and his: “The stars were bathing her in tears. Tonight / I think of how she loves him, but I can’t.” “Keats and Shakespeare” demonstrates sympathy toward the father in his struggle to integrate into America, and it also takes an affectionate tone with regard to the mother, eager to help her future husband, possibly in order to feel needed. “What My Mother Says” also portrays the mother sympathetically; she has enduring love and deep insecurity. On the other hand, the father appears to be emotionally distant toward her too, and the depth of her feelings toward him only heightens the contrast with the son’s feelings.
As with the work of other poets under discussion, the mother is brought up considerably less, and when she appears, she does so in more of an existential and emotional capacity. In *What the Body Told*, the sequence, “Song Before Dying,” dedicated to Marilyn Hacker, describes the speaker’s diagnosis with cancer in his arm and a scheduled amputation that is eventually called off, presumably because the diagnosis had been inaccurate. In the penultimate poem, number XV, “Lilacs for My Mother” (91), he seeks comfort in thoughts of her affection: “I’m resting on her pillow. In the breeze, / She sings to me: she says I’m handsome, strong; / I’m all she ever dreamed of, perfect, loved. / It never matters that I’m gay.” This thought of unconditional acceptance makes him conclude that the loss of his arm doesn’t ultimately matter. This emotional dynamic is similar to the poems about the father’s illness insofar as confrontations with ill health trigger a need for closeness and acceptance. In “My Mother, Painting Her Nails Red” (*What the Body Told* 40), the speaker reminisces about the physical feminine beauty of his mother, “So beautiful, so tall.” He says, “my mother’s oiled skin / Was infinite as dropping down a well, / And just as soft as whispering.” However, his recollection has a somber element: "I’d cry / When she’d confess her misery to me; / I couldn’t understand. She wasn’t free.” Like many other poets, Campo writes about the discontentment and sense of confinement of the speaker’s mother as a source of confusion and, later, of sympathy.

The parents inform the speaker’s sense of his identity, not only his ethnicity but also his sexuality. He associates the father strongly with Spanish and Cuban identity. In “Café Pamplona” (*The Other Was Me* 23), the speaker imagines being in a Spanish cafe in the earlier part of the twentieth century, with German spies and literati reading Lorca. Despite having Spanish ancestry, the father isn’t there: “He says he never trusted poets. All / These people reading Lorca would disgust him. / Communists and homosexuals, he’d say.” The speaker relates that political
situation to the present: “My father hates the Fascists, but he hates / The Communists much more.” The poem concludes on a note of ethnic self-consciousness: “You’d think they’d guess / I’m Spanish, since it’s clear I can’t forget” (23). On one hand, the Spanish and Cuban heritage of his father fascinates the speaker and brings an element of romance to the way he thinks about himself, but it also ties him to complicated political situations and makes him aware of his own otherness.

Some poems look at the fluidity and heterogeneity of identity. In “Untitled” (*The Other Was Me* 61), the speaker says that he was named after his father; he was called Ralph in school but Rafael in college. He says that his name didn’t bother him: “But what did / Was changing his on me, while changing him / To me. (The surgery shall now begin.).” He qualifies his statement, “I don’t deny the right to change the grid / One plots one’s life along. I know it killed / My grandfather, that island like a fang.” The speaker recognizes that identity is fluid and can be changed for good reason, but he is honest about his own discomfort with the father ever-so-slightly Americanizing his own identity, which might make the speaker update the way he thinks about him and his relationship with him. Changes in people, even positive ones, can cause discomfort in those close to them as they are faced with reevaluating them. The third section of *Landscape with Human Figure* is the long poem “Afraid of the Dark” (39-48). The poem meditates on race, and it is largely a meditation that explores various Black people the speaker has encountered. In a later stanza, Campo writes about the speaker and his father at a birthday party for the aunt, “My father, black and white, / is smoking as he speaks mestizo thoughts.” Campo writes, “He tells me we are made every race, / that in our blood the constellations pulse” (42). He adds, “I, yoruba, am never alone, / among the many kingdoms in my bones” (42). Once
more, his heritage gives him a richer sense of self, as well as a sense of connection with distant peoples. The cosmic language serves to heighten this effect.

Two other poems look at identity as an aggregation of details. “Cuban Poetry” (The Other Was Me 42), is a somewhat random series of facts about the speaker’s family, as if to suggest that family is important in Cuban culture, and that this family gives the speaker his sense of being Cuban. “Song for my Father” (The Other Was Me 47-62) is a lengthy biographical sequence about the father, from his youth to his marriage and his later illness. Section sixteen, the final one in the sequence, “Sonnet for My Father” (The Other Was Me 62), is a fragmentary assortment of lines from the previous poems, as if to suggest that the speaker is still working through his feelings toward his father and that each element carries some portion of an incomplete truth. The poem concludes, “That he’s alive today—my father wished / To give me continents of love—is clear.” Again, the love is linked with continents, which shows that the speaker understands his father’s emotions to be mediated by his exile.

In addition to ethnic identity, the speaker looks at his parents as a factor in his sexual identity. In “Canción de las Mujeres,” a sequence in What the Body Told, the second poem is “My Mother’s Closet” (22), which explores the influence of the mother’s feminine gender identity on his developing sexuality. The speaker remembers gazing up the belts, pumps, hats, and scarves in his mother’s closet: “I wandered, wishing I could wear it all— / Except my mom was tall and thin, while I / Was built more like a man.” He describes dresses with rhapsodic

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106 Isabel Alvarez Borland and Lynette M. F. Bosch write, “Because of the ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of the groups who came or were brought to the island, cultural pluralism is a marker of Cuban and Cuban-American identity. Afro-Cubans and Chinese Cubans were two groups that influenced Cuban culture, alongside the immigrants from Spain and other European countries. Cuba also had a significant Jewish population. As these groups met and mixed to differing degrees, their individual and group contributions to Cuban culture were brought to the United States by exiles and immigrants from the island. Since the nineteenth century new arrivals from Cuba continue to change the tenor and meaning of the cultural synthesis that defines lo cubano-american, an ever-shifting concept of identity defined by time, place, class, race, and ethnicity within an American matrix” (2).
wonder in order to suggest the mystique they possessed: “The red one was a wound that never healed; / The blue one was a river that might drown / Us both; the gold lamé was like a cloud / Of fairy dust.” “Diva” (Diva 32-33) also explores the speaker’s emerging sexual identity, as well as the dawning awareness of his parents about it. The speaker reflects on being young and listening to Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul, and the woman whose "lyrics turned me on the most," Madonna (32). He admires “the strength / of throbbing synthesizers, pulsing lights, // the power of the rhythm to command / the heart" (33). He sees a disconnect between his desires and the model of heteronormative fulfillment surrounding him. He says, "Pretending I was ‘radical’ instead, // I judged she was too chic for them" (32). This taste in music develops alongside other changes, as he starts to dance in front of the bathroom mirror, wear tight jeans, and style his hair with mousse and a blow-dryer. (33). He remarks, "By then, I knew my parents thought // I was a queer" (33). He realized "the melody / would never really set me free” (33), but the voices of the women singers makes him feel less alone. “I Dream I’m Him” (The Other Was Me 59), describes a misfire in gender-related birth ritual, similar to one found in the poetry of Li-Young Lee. The speaker’s “superstitious aunt” tells him that his father slaughtered a goat when he was born, but she says, “The goat / Was wrongly sexed. It was a lamb. It fought. / This means your eldest son shall never speak / Your native tongue, and love you like a wife.” At this point she stubs out a cigar. He reflects, “I’ve grown to be / a gorgeous man.” These three poems suggest that, in the absence of a gay role model, the speaker’s sexuality identity developed partly as an emulation of the feminine elements in his environment and partly as a reaction against the heteronormative elements. They also approach the topic with gentle humor, which in a way normalizes these experiences as just part of growing up.
In his adulthood, the speaker thinks about his parents’ attitude toward his sexuality, which seems to range from veiled disapproval to awkward acceptance. “Madonna and Child” (Diva 15) looks at the mother’s possible disapproval, although it also implies that her feelings might be part of a larger disappointment with life: “By menopause, it’s not just estrogen / my mother lacks. She’s lost her eldest son— / that’s me, the one who’s queer—the doctor who / once made her very proud.” Without providing details, the speaker says she is “Enraged / because she’s lost so much.” She believes things such as estrogen pills and homosexuality violate both divine will and natural order. At the end of the poem, the speaker finishes a batch of cookies and says he'll make another, "though she won’t touch them: given up for Lent. / My mother’s love. I wonder where it went.” The voluntary abnegation of Lent fits in the mother’s worldview, but outside of that frame of reference refusing the cookies would just seem petty. Just like Cuba for the father, the mother’s sense of what is natural and appropriate becomes a means of displacing underlying emotional realities. Seeming to recognize as much, the son nonetheless avoids confronting them as such, presumably in part because he seeks approval and in part because he acknowledges the legitimate sorrows faced by his parents.

As for the father, “Honest” (The Other Was Me 53), explores his attitude toward his son’s sexuality: The speaker says, “I was in love with him when I was young; / I was afraid he’d be ashamed of his son, / On whom he’d practiced so much strength, was gay.” He adds that he worries about his own honesty causing them pain. He writes, “My father is a gentle, private man. / I know he loves me.” The speaker concludes by looking at poetry as a means of both expressing himself and navigating his emotional relationship with his father: “My pretty verse, / So fearful, shameful—honest, yet perverse— / I offer him, as though it were a gift.” “Love Poem” (The Other Was Me 58), compares the speaker’s father and his lover. He says, “My father is / A man
who loves his parents, wife, and kids. / I am his son.” He continues, “The other man I love / Is someone very much like him, a man / Of honest words. And strong commitment.” Somewhat wryly, he notes, “Love / As deep as his. Except it’s mine to have.” These poems gesture toward problems with the father, but they also show him as a man of principle, admired to the point that the speaker reacts fondly to those qualities of the father he sees in his own partner. Also, it is perhaps the speakers own fears of disapproval that cause him distress more than anything the father has actually done or said.

Lastly, Campo explores what it means to be a parent as a gay man, and the ways in which the speaker’s parents have shaped his own parenting. As he says in “Adoption” (The Other Was Me 80): “It means, especially for us, the state / Decides if we deserve what we’re denied.” In “His College Education” (The Other Was Me 86), Campo writes, “My father once had said / The most important legacy he had / To leave his sons, beside his love, was sense,” meaning education. The earnest and practical ambition of the father has impressed the son favorably enough for him to want to adopt at least part of it himself and give his own son “one seed to cultivate.” Similarly, the description of the father’s own intellectual attainment and refinement can be read as the speaker praising him for these qualities. In “Rice and Beans” (What the Body Told 46) the speaker and his daughter are cooking: “We’re cooking rice and beans. It’s women’s work. / My mother married, learned the recipe— / Got angry chopping onions, gossiping / And hissing over quickly frying pork." He says, "I try to teach it to my daughter, but / It isn’t women’s work to her." He explains that his daughter does not feel a connection to the Cuban culture from which the dish originates. For his Cuban grandmother, the desire to cook this dish for her husband “was more like starving.” In her zeal to continue this culinary tradition, he notes, “She almost made my mother Cuban.” The poem concludes with the speaker signaling his awareness that he too is
limited and defined by his culture in terms of his parenting: "My daughter is a vegetarian, / Or so she claims. I want to feed her beans / To fatten her. I know this single way." As a poet concerned with culture and identity, Campo looks at parenting, even the speaker’s own parenting, as a means of perpetuating cultural practices. He sees richness in tradition, and it can serve a means of bonding, but it can also serve as a mechanism for manipulating others and perpetuating inequitable power relations. The speaker has greater self-awareness than most, but he still finds himself limited to a large degree by his existing cultural vocabulary.

**Li-Young Lee**

Li-Young Lee is a free verse poet notable for his spareness and lyricism. It is easy to see the influence of a figure such as Rilke, and perhaps more recently of Robert Bly and James Wright. The tone is hushed, tender, and searching, but not without a sense of humor and moments of wryness. Parents, and particularly the father, are central figures and metaphors in his work; even when he isn’t writing about the speaker’s parents in depth, he often invokes them with existential overtones—as sources of identity, meaning, and emotional longing and fulfillment. He writes in a similar way about God, and again the comparison to Rilke is apt. Of course, he also writes about the speaker’s parents and Chinese ethnicity, as well as immigrant experience, in more direct and descriptive terms. The central narrative of his work is his family’s escape from Indonesia when he was young.\(^{107}\) Wenying Xu writes, “In the case of Sukarno’s

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\(^{107}\) Guiyou Huang writes, “Indonesian-Chinese American poet Lee represents the most typical Asian diasporic experience in a global sense. He was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, to Chinese parents who had left the mainland to escape communism. The overwhelmingly dominant figure in Lee’s life was his father, who served as private physician to two very powerful political figures in the Asian/Pacific region of the twentieth century—Chairman Mao Zedong of China and President Sukarno of Indonesia—though in the latter country he was imprisoned for allegedly conspiring with the CIA. After a few years living in Indonesia, Lee’s father took the family on travels throughout Indonesia, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan to avoid race-based persecution. In 1964 they finally arrived and settled in Pennsylvania, the United States, where Lee’s father became a Presbyterian minister. His
regime, it was the anti-West campaign that resulted in the imprisonment and exile of the senior Lee, whose only guilt was having taught Shakespeare and Kierkegaard” (99). The family’s arrival in America occurs early that the speaker has been able to acculturate more or less fully, while remaining cognizant of his otherness, as evidenced by certain culinary habits and habits of speaking. Writing about the speaker’s own family, Lee occasionally describes the speaker’s children, though without going into too much detail. He also writes about the speaker’s wife Donna, sometimes in awe and sometimes with affectionate familiarity. He describes things such as them attending college together, him braiding her hair, and, in one amusing poem, him speaking at length in a soothing rambling monologue to help her go to sleep, a monologue that reaches into both the absurd and the profound, an amusingly self-aware project.

In two long poems, the speaker visits the home of his mother and deceased father, where nature inspires him to meditate on serious matters, such as identity and memory, as well as to remember episodes from his family’s life. In “Furious Versions” (The City in Which I Love You 13-29), the adult speaker sleeps in the home of his widowed mother. He hears a noise and goes to investigate, but it turns out to be only the loose backdoor slamming against the house in the wind. While he’s downstairs, though, he observes the dark, tumultuous landscape—“a world of forms convulses” (18)—and he views this tumult as representative of “furious versions of the here and now...” (19). The landscape is a metaphor for the interplay of memory and meaning, changeable and contingent but no less real for that fact. This meditation forms a frame, and he remembers

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108 Youngusk Chae writes, “For the second and third generation of Asian immigrants, those who were born in the United States and grew up in the American educational system, acculturation to American society has taken place naturally and rapidly over time” (3). This statement does not apply directly to Lee, insofar he himself is an immigrant, but it points toward broader cultural forces that lead to Asian-American assimilation.

109 Lee himself speaks fluent, unaccented English, which I heard both at a poetry reading and afterward when I drove him to the airport on May 14th, 2010 after he delivered the 2009-10 Taft Annual Symposium Keynote at the Taft Research Center in Cincinnati.
that he was born in Bandung in 1958,¹¹⁰ and as a child he had to flee with his family. Noises from the windy evening remind him of interrogation, and he recalls that his mother hid his father in a closet before they fled. The father tells the young speaker to remember this experience: “My father holds my hand, he says, / Don’t forget any of this” (18). They encounter a brutal soldier: “A short, bony-faced corporal / asks politely, deferring to class, / What color suit, Professor, would you like / to be buried in? Brown or blue?” (18). The corporal proceeds to pistol-whip the father. This poem performs an act of witness, and it attests to the formative violence inflicted upon the young speaker and his entire family. The father, whom Lee often associates with memory, recognizes the importance of this witness, which suggests a sort of wisdom on his part that is alluded to elsewhere.

Another significant incident the speaker remembers happens after the family has fled to America. While the father and son are out walking, they encounter a man who touches the arm of the father: “[He] said, Kuo Yuan? / The way he stared and spoke my father’s name, / I thought he meant to ask, Are you a dream?” (23). The speaker observes, “Here was the sadness of ten thousand miles” (23). He says that his father helped a blind man in Nanjing bury his wife as bombs fell around them, and he implies that the man recognized his father twenty years later by the sound of his footsteps. (It is not clear whether the interlocutor is in fact the blind man.) The speaker sees the two men as archetypal, almost mythical amid the landscape of Little Chinatown in Chicago: “who should I see / on the corner of Argyle and Broadway / but Li Bai and Du Fu, those two / poets of the wanderer’s heart” (23). He continues, “Gold-toothed, cigarettes rolled in their sleeves, / they noted my dumb surprise: / What did you expect? Where else should we be?” (24). This encounter attests to the kindness and bravery of the father—past and present—and it also shows that he represents China and Chinese culture not only to his son but also to other

¹¹⁰ Lee was in fact born in 1957 (Huang 195).
immigrant Chinese. In addition, the reference to Li Bai and Du Fu suggests that, in some indirect way, the father has brought an element of the poetic into the speaker’s life.

In the second long poem, “Always a Rose” (Rose 37-45), the titular rose appears in two literal senses. First, the speaker returns to the overgrown yard of his deceased father’s house. Among dead and dying trees and flowers, he finds a rose, “left for dead, heaped with the hopeless dead, / its petals still supple” (37). Second, he is born with a birthmark “the color of old blood” (39) extending from his navel to his pubic region. The father interprets it as a sign that the speaker was “born half girl” (39), so he has his son eat rose as a medicine. Addressing the flower, the speaker says, “Little, bitter / body, I eat you / to understand my grave father” (40). Eating a rose sounds like a metaphor, so, for a poet such as Lee concerned with the mystical and the metaphorical, it fits comfortably into his poetics. Partly for this reason he takes it seriously. Nevertheless, he recognizes its strangeness as a folk remedy. It gives him a sense of his father’s cultural difference, and at the same time it becomes something he revisits in order to attempt to understand his “grave father.” Of course, cultural difference cannot account for all of the puzzling aspects of the father, which is where the metaphor comes into play. For Lee, extended metaphor often represents and even dramatizes an imperfect struggle toward understanding and meaning. Explaining the symbolism of the rose as it relates to him and various family members, he connects it most strongly with his father and his complex personality: “My father among the roses and thorns. / My father rose, my father thorn” (42). On the one hand, he praises his father as “my lover of roses and of God, / who taught me to love the rose, and fed me roses, under whose windows / I planted roses, for whose tables I harvested roses” (41). On the other hand, he points out the darker aspects of the father, “who said, Get out! You’re no longer my son! / who never said, Forgive me. Why do I die? Hold me, hold me” (42). Like the rose the father has both
beauty and danger, and he is mortal. Also like the rose, he perplexes the speaker. In the conclusion he addresses the rose: “It was I who saw you withered and discarded, / I, who taught my father patience, and dulled the blade of his anger” (45). He prides himself on the fact that he was able to salvage both the rose and his father, although only temporarily. Eating the rose is like memory, an experience that is both immediate and yet distant, which also serves as a metaphor for his relationship with his complex father.

Despite some representations of harshness, the father in Lee’s poetry is capable of considerable care and gentleness. In “This Hour and What Is Dead” (The City in Which I Love You 35-36), the speaker remembers his father mending his pants at night in preparation for travel. He says, “His love for me is like his sewing: / various colors and too much thread, / the stitching uneven. But the needle pierces / clean through with each stroke of his hand” (35). This passage suggests that, despite the father’s missteps, the speaker associates him not only with actual love but also with a certain kind of worldly effectiveness he seems to admire. That could be said of all of the poets in this chapter, who present the achievements of their immigrant parents, with the subtext that those achievements occurred despite considerable adversity. In another poem conflating competence and kindness, “The Gift” (Rose 15-16), the father removes a splinter from the young speaker’s hand when he is seven years old. To distract the son, the father gently tells him a story as he works: “I watched his lovely face and not the blade. / Before the story ended, he’d removed / the iron sliver I thought I’d die from” (15). The details of the story escape the present-day speaker, but he remembers his father’s voice, “a well / of dark water, a prayer,” and his hands: “two measures of tenderness / he laid against my face, / the flames of discipline / he raised above my head” (15). The speaker imagines what the scene would have looked like to an observer: “Had you entered this afternoon / you would have thought you saw a man / planting
something in a boy’s palm, / a silver tear, a tiny flame” (15). As an adult, the speaker does the same thing for his wife: “Look how I shave her thumbnail down / so carefully she feels no pain. / Watch as I lift the splinter out” (15). The whimsy of the poem evokes childhood, as well as the straightforward and elemental affection of the son, though the poem complicates this tenderness with an allusion to the father’s violence. Even so, the speaker clearly cherishes this memory, and he views the father as having had a positive influence on his own role as a partner, which he references in other poems as well.

Lee describes tending to his father in his later years of physical decay and blindness. As he says in “The Weepers” (Rose 55-56): “I am the father who comforts / his son, and I am the son / who returns in later years to give succor / to his father” (56). In “Persimmons” (Rose 17-19), one of Lee’s more anthologized poems, the speaker visits his elderly father, who is now blind. He says, “He’s so happy that I’ve come home. / I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question. / All gone, he answers.” (18-19). Searching through the basement for his father, he finds a box with three scrolls painted by his father; one depicts “Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth” (19). The speaker shares these with his father: “He raises both hands to touch the cloth, / asks, Which is this? // This is persimmons, Father” (19). The father says that he had painted this fruit hundreds of times, and this scroll he painted while blind. He says, “Some things never leave a person: / scent of the hair of one you love, / the texture of persimmons, / in your palm, the ripe weight” (19). Lee presents the pathos of the father in his weakened condition, and he also shows his warmth toward the son. The father demonstrates his commitment to memory. In addition, the poem advances an admiring view of the father, for his artistry, his perseverance,

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111 Chinese monk Mu Qi painted his famous work Six Persimmons in 1279 CE. (Sherman Lee 380). This painting reflects the qualities of Chan Buddhism insofar as it is “intuitive, brusque, enigmatic” (Sherman Lee 379). Arthur Waley describes this work as “passion...congealed into a stupendous calm” (qtd in Sherman Lee 379). As such, it seems possible that Lee is to at least some extent connecting the speaker’s father to a broader Chinese cultural and artistic tradition.
and his depth of feeling. Also, the persimmon connects the father to his Chinese past, and as such it represents nostalgia and a sense of his own identity.\footnote{Earlier in the poem, the persimmon represents the speaker’s own position between Chinese and American culture. In sixth grade the speaker’s teacher slaps the back of his head for not knowing the difference between “precision” and “persimmon.” One day the teacher brings a “Chinese apple” to class, and the speaker, having known it wasn’t ripe, says: “I didn’t eat / but watched the other faces.” (18). Xu writes, “In a close reading of Lee’s most anthologized poem, [Stephen] Yao makes the case that ‘Lee achieves only a superficial integration, or ‘hybridization,’ of Chinese and American culture’ and “grafting” offers a more exact term than hybridity for understanding Lee’s accomplishment in “Persimmons”’ (19-20). To him, Lee is more American than Asian American because Lee’s knowledge of China is so meager that the Chinese culture he represents offers only a ‘voyeuristic appeal’ (6)” (111).

Several poems detail the poet mourning for his father, with consistent emphasis on his simultaneous absence and presence in the speaker’s life. “Little Father” (Book of My Nights 38) looks at the persistence of the father in the speaker’s mind, as if he has assumed, so to speak, a life of his own. The speaker describes the places he buried the father in surreal terms: in the sky, where the birds take care of him; in the ground, which has turned the whole earth into a house; and “in my heart. / Now he grows in me, my strange son.” “Visions and Interpretations” (Rose 68-69) makes a similar point about the father’s lingering influence, and it also conflates this relationship with the speaker’s relationship with his own son. The speaker rests on a hill as he walks up to his father’s grave, and he encounters his late father, with whom he climbs to the top. He says, “He cradled the bouquet I’d bought, / and I, a good son, never mentioned his grave, / erect like a door behind him” (68). He admits, “Truth is, I’ve not seen my father / since he died, and, no, the dead / do not walk arm in arm with me” (68). He then claims that he in fact came with his own son, and, while resting against a tree, they both dreamed the same mysterious dream. He qualifies this statement too: “Even this is not accurate. / Let me begin again: // Between two griefs, a tree. / Between my hands, white chrysanthemums, yellow chrysanthemums” (69). The figure of the father continually recedes in this poem, as does the descriptive power of language, until all that remains is the power of metaphor, which situates the
speaker with respect to emotion and the operations of nature but does not bring him much closer to resolving his feelings toward his father.

Two other poems use the weather as a metaphor for the presence and absence of the mourned father. In “Rain Diary” (*Rose* 59-62), the speaker wakes in his mother’s house and hears her humming, which has a comforting effect and grounds him in the here and now. However, Lee develops the theme of rain as something like the passage of time and mortality and distance, in the background of even of a pleasant domestic scene: “Where does the rain go? Where are my dead?” (59). As elsewhere, he gives his father names: “Father of the thousand-mile-sadness, the rocking ship, / and the melancholy of trains. / Father of fatigue and / the bitter bowl” (60). He says, “I asked once, Where are we going? / My question could have been, In what country / will your pillow finally come to rest / and the rain call you home?” (60). He concludes, “His answer would have been the same, / my father of this American and a divided tongue” (60). He describes trying to feel connected to the father by trying on his shoes, shirts, and pants: “but a dead man’s things are / no one’s, and this house screams out for you” (61). He wants the rain to affect him, to be broken, eroded, and consumed by the rain, “to be reduced to water / and a little light” (61). He concludes by saying the rain is always moving toward him: “Perhaps it is my father, arriving / on legs of rain, arriving, / this dream, the rain, my father” (62). The movement of the rain evokes not only the passage of time but also exile. It is timeless and temporary, pervasive and insubstantial. Still seeking something in relation to his father, the speaker acknowledges his need. Both mother and son mourn, and the speaker acknowledges the hardships in his father’s life.

In “Have You Prayed” (*Behind My Eyes* 23-24), instead of rain, wind reminds the speaker of his father: “the wind / turns and asks, in my father’s voice, / Have you prayed?” (23).
He thinks, “I’m never finished answering to the dead” (23). He says the wind reminds him of three things. The first is a father’s love, which he says is “milk and sugar, / two-thirds worry, two-thirds grief” (23). The other two are patience and wisdom: “And patience? That’s to endure / the terrible leavening and kneading. // And wisdom? That’s my father’s face in sleep” (24). He again realizes that these questions and meditations emerge from him, even though he projects them onto the world: “When the wind / asks, Have you prayed? / I know it’s only me” (24). He says, “It’s just me // in the gowns of the wind, / or my father through me, asking, / Have you found your refuge yet? / asking, Are you happy?” (24). The poem concludes, “Strange. A troubled father. A happy son. / The wind with a voice. And me talking to no one” (24). As elsewhere, the speaker feels the presence of the father, but he realizes that that presence is a projection of his own feelings and memories. This poem looks at the troubled nature of the father, but it implies that he has not had a major, permanent negative impact on the son. It also suggests the father cared about his son, and that the son carries positive thoughts of his father with him to a significant degree. Also, like rain, the wind suggests movement, both exile and the passage of time.

The mother plays a less central role in Lee’s poetics, but she tends to be less fraught of a figure, toward whom the speaker expresses more straightforward sympathy and affection. Another poem that plays with language and phrases, “Mother Deluxe” (Behind My Eyes 19-20) explores her life through the conceit of a card game: “her deluxe edition of ‘Memories / from the 20th Century’” (19). The rules include: “Seven cards apiece and the object is not to die” (19); “Every player begins in bondage” (19); and “Everybody plays / whether they know or don’t know they’re playing” (19). The cards include “Dead Baby,” “Mystery Bundles,” “Cleansing by Sacrifice,” “Exodus,” “Eyes Snatched Away,” and “Superstition at the Side of the Road” (19).
The speaker wonders, “Maybe this isn’t a game. / Maybe it’s the World Evening News” (19). A card game is certainly an incongruous metaphor to use for hardships of the mother’s life, but it is perhaps this incongruousness that puts those hardships into even sharper relief. The game-like description of these events also fosters a sense of despair, as it makes them seem all the more impersonal and meaningless. In addition, the card game evokes a sense of the domestic, which relates to the narrative present, and ties it to the difficult past.

“I Ask My Mother to Sing” (Rose 50) celebrates the mother’s artistic expressiveness, and it also connects her to her homeland of China, with a poignant note of exile. The poem opens, “She begins, and my grandmother joins her. / Mother and daughter sign like young girls. / If my father were alive, he would play / his accordion and sway like a boat.” The speaker has never been to the places in China connected to these songs, but the music gives him a sense of connectedness: “But I love to hear it sung; / how the waterlilies [sic] fill with rain until / they overturn, spilling water into water, / then rock back, and fill with more.” This connectedness saddens the women: “Both women have begun to cry. / But neither stops her song.” Their art channels memory, with both sorrow and joy. The similarity to Lee’s poetics is fairly obvious, and perhaps the poem attributes influence to the family.

“The Eternal Son” (Book of My Nights 49-51) also talks about the mother in an existential sense. Maybe it is because the mothers are less fraught figures (and perhaps more loved) that they signify in some sort of cosmic sense rather than as the site of noteworthy emotional turbulence. The poem opens, “Someone’s thinking about his mother tonight” (49). This person is “The wakeful son / of a parent who hardly sleeps, // the sleepless father of his own / restless child” (49). He mentions rain again: “My mother’s eternal son, / I can’t hear the rain without thinking / it’s her in the next room / folding our clothes to lay inside a suitcase” (50).
This memory leads to thoughts of his mother counting money, from more than one country, on the bed at night in order to pay for safe passage. He says, “Anyway, // she has too much to carry, she who knows / night must tell the rest of every story” (50). He says, “And if she’s weeping, / it’s because she’s misplaced / both of our childhoods” (51). The poem concludes by calling the mother “one who gave up / ever looking back” (51). This last line suggests both loss and resolution. It contrasts her with the father, who places a great deal of emphasis on memory. Then again, there is other evidence in Lee’s oeuvre to contradict this assessment of the mother. In any case, the poem takes a sympathetic view toward her and her losses, and it implies gratitude for her role in delivering the family from danger.

Lastly, Lee’s poetry connects the parents to his own status as a refugee and immigrant. “Self-Help for Fellow Refugees” (Behind My Eyes 16-18) again revisits the early stages of the speaker’s life, along with a more self-conscious reflection on them and some intellectual distance, as evidenced by the use of the second person. The poem opens with a recommendation to erase signs of cultural difference as an immigrant by wearing plain clothes and speaking with a soft voice. The speaker makes a wry comment about bridging cultural difference and feeling connected to others. If an immigrant encounters someone from the new country whose face looks like “an open sky, some promise of a new beginning, / it probably means you’re standing too far” (16). If the immigrant sees in the other “the story of your own birthplace, / a country twice erased, / once by fire, once by forgetfulness, / it probably means you’re standing too close” (17). This poem also recounts events from the speaker’s parents’ lives that he describes elsewhere, but with more of an explicit emotional attitude in this instance. When armed men beat and abduct the father in front of his family, the mother hides the son’s face in her skirt to keep him from seeing. The speaker says, “try not to judge your mother too harshly” (16). Displaying bravery and
defiance, the father calls out, “Let the boy see!” (18). This anecdote is particularly positive toward the father, who has the presence of mind to understand the importance of witness and memory.

“Immigrant Blues” (Behind My Eyes 28-29) again plays with language. It also conflates the father’s lessons with the erotic life of the speaker and his wife. The poem opens, “People have been trying to kill me since I was born, / a man tells his son, trying to explain / the wisdom of learning a second tongue” (28). The speaker explains, “It’s an old story from the previous century / about my father and me” (28). He compares that situation to his own as a father: “The same old story from yesterday morning / about me and my son” (28). He gives the story various names: “Survival Strategies / and the Melancholy of Racial Assimilation,” “Psychological Paradigms of Displaced Persons,” and “The Child Who’d Rather Play than Study.”” (28). He turns to the erotic in a scene that is both mystical and funny. Over the telephone he asks a woman if he’s inside her. She replies: “You’re always inside me, a woman answered, / at peace with the body’s finitude, / at peace with the soul’s disregard / of space and time” (28-29). Lying between her legs, he asks her the same question, and she says, “If you don’t believe you’re inside me, you’re not, / she answered, at peace with the body’s greed, / at peace with the heart’s bewilderment” (29). He gives this situation even more names, which connect it with his own displacement: “Patterns of Love in Peoples of Diaspora,” “Loss of the Homeplace / and the Defilement of the Beloved,” and “I want to Sing but I Don’t Know Any Songs” (29). On one level it is problematic to bring this layer of immigrant experience to a sexual relationship, insofar as it partially reduces his partner to a representation of her own culture. However, being an immigrant has the potential to make one aware of one’s own bodily difference, and to understand one’s potential, or lack thereof, for establishing personal relationships. And people’s attitudes
toward the culture of a cultural other, even or perhaps especially in an intimate partner, can influence emotions toward the person, through exoticism, admiration, condescension, defensiveness, isolation, and so forth.

“Cuckoo Flower on the Witness Stand” (Behind My Eyes 64-65) looks at the experience of being a refugee and the habit of reticence that it has brought to the speaker. The speaker discusses his degree of connectedness to different wars: “I sang in a church choir during one war / American TV made famous” (64). He adds, “I fled a burning archipelago in the rain, / on my mother’s back, in another war / nobody televised” (64). He says, “In the midst of wars worldwide, many / in places whose names I can’t pronounce, / my father taught me, “When asked / about your knowledge of politics, answer, “None.’” (64). In a rather effective line, he says, “Most of my life, I’ve answered politely / to questions put to me, speaking only when spoken to, // a sign of weakness / unbefitting of any human being” (64). In his typical stylized language, he continues, “And so, speaking as one of the flowers, / I’ll seek rest in falling” (65). Here the stylized, symbolic, surreal language suggests a connection with his own relationship to language, formed by immigration and exile. The poem concludes, “I’ll seek asylum in the final word, / an exile from the first word, / and refugee of an illegible past” (65). The speaker’s experiences have created difficulties in his relationship to language, but at the same time they have made him more aware of it. Linking exile, the father, memory, and language, this poem, especially its conclusion, could serve as an ars poetica of sorts.

Conclusion

Wenying Xu notes that Li-Young Lee lacks connections to his ancestral homeland of China on many levels: he didn’t grow up there, he cannot speak his native language fluently, and
he does not have a strong tie to any immigrant community (94). However, Xu sees this experience itself as productive: “His condition of exile, however, has proved to be immensely productive of emotional intensity and imagination, and his poetics derives largely from his ontological condition as an exile, driven by his desire to transcend time and space by appealing to the metaphysical at the exclusion of the cultural and material” (94). In this sort of transcendentalism, Xu perceives the influence of American culture, particularly the work of Emerson. Xu notes that critics have tended to read Lee through the lens of his ethnicity in a way that fails to properly account for this transcendental leaning: “Few of Lee’s critics take into account his transcendentalist yearnings as part of his social living. They either want to rescue him from ethnic determinism or fault him for not being sufficiently ethnic” (111). Xiaojing Zhou contends that reading Lee with a dominant emphasis on his ethnicity leads critics to overlook “the rich cross-cultural sources of influence on Lee’s work and of the creative experiment in his poetry” (qtd in Xu 111). Another scholar, Youngsuk Chae, calls for greater social and political context, along with more active social criticism, in Asian-American writing. She notes that the texts of Asian-American writers “tend to decontextualize political and economic circumstances and the structural inequality that racial minorities and immigrants have faced by focusing mainly on issues of cultural conflict, generational gaps within their parent generation, or identity crisis” (4). Lee does focus on personal, and transcendental, matters to a large extent, although some poems do have a stronger focus on what could be called the conventionally political, which is to say the circumstances of the family’s exile, along with the immigrant experience. Presumably, though, Chae would find fault with the balance of these concerns in his work. 

Xu notes that Lee has tended to distance himself from being read as an “ethnic” writer, though she also remarks, “His polemical disavowals of ethnic identification on the ground of
transcendentalism, however, are in dialectic tension with his frequent use of ethnic signifiers in his poetry and memoir” (94). In a 2004 interview with Earl G. Ingersoll, Lee himself notes that early in his career, interviews tended to focus on his personal life: “In the beginning there were a lot of questions about my biography, and now I’ve resisted talking about that so much” (Breaking the Alabaster Jar 173). He adds, “For a while that was the primary topic. I lost interest” (173). About his resistance to being called an Asian-American poet and insisting instead he is an American poet, he says, “You know, I don’t know whether that was such a good thing to do. I have friends who write about ethnicity and race, and they’re very angry with me. They say that somehow I don’t own up to my Asian identity, and part of me says, ‘But I do it on a day-to-day basis. I do it everyday with my life.’” (173). He notes that he wants to explore something “that can’t be accounted for by my gender, my race, my ethnicity, my class, my historical moment. Those all figure into it. But the math isn’t what we think it is. It isn’t like, Oh, you’re this gender, you’re this race, so you should write this kind of poetry” (173). He expresses his belief that pondering his ethnicity could lead him to “a firmer grasp of the nature of reality...up to a point” (173), but that it has definite limitations.

The criticism I have found about these poets tends to focus on their ethnic identity, and, in the case of Campo, on his sexuality and his fairly unique (for a poet, though also in general) position as medical doctor who taught on the faculty of Harvard. Although poetry of poets born after Plath has attracted comparatively little critical attention from literary scholars, much of that criticism has related to matters of identity. In a very real sense, that focus on identity is a

\[\text{113} \text{ Much, too, has related to matters of “postmodernism,” especially in relation to the work of Ashbery—a gay poet not primarily read as such—though I suspect that the sort of Marjorie Perloff work has lost currency, insofar as it tends to posit a spurious spectrum where the opaqueness of the language of a poem corresponds almost directly to the intellectual and social power of the work. Deeply problematic, this value system not only enshrines the demand for excuses for emotion, but it also reinforces problematic assumptions that in other contexts have been used to trivialize the literary productions of members of marginalized groups. I speculate about the motivations and cultural forces underlying this emphasis on the “complex” in the conclusion of Excuses for Emotion.}\]
logical outgrowth of the expansion of theory, also concerned with identity. It also represents the
efforts of scholars in various fields—women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, race and ethnic
studies, postcolonial studies, area studies, and so forth—to enrich the canon, the undo the erasure
of non-dominant groups from the canon, and to interrogate and subvert aesthetic standards of
judgment, which historically have been invested in the concerns of dominant groups and
traditionally canonical authors to a significant degree.

However, as positive as theory and canon revision may be from a social perspective, Lee
has expressed annoyance that he is read through the lens of his ethnicity, potentially to the
exclusion of other, more “personal” and philosophical concerns in his work. That is certainly
understandable, insofar as he might feel it oversimplifies his poetry, as well as limits the
expressive potential of his work. Presumably, too, he is wary of being read as “only” an “ethnic”
writer, someone whose work would be of little interest otherwise. I don’t think that is true of
Lee’s work, but it’s surely a suspicion that exists in academia, even if it’s verboten to articulate it
as such. This lens might exoticize Lee. And, paradoxically, despite efforts to be more inclusive
of diverse writers, this emphasis on his “diversity” might on some level reinforce the otherness
of a poet who himself has expressed the desire to be identified as “American.”

So, what poetic emotional content does being a member of an immigrant community
enable, and what does it complicate? Most obviously, membership in an immigrant community
becomes a vehicle for expressing pride, and it brings an element of romance, of widely
unfamiliar customs and expressions that one then has the opportunity to explain. Similarly, one
can write about the triumphs of one’s parents with less suspicion of “boasting,” or of bourgeois
quietism or triumphalism; the economic or social success of such parents is read as a triumph
against dominant culture. The poets in this chapter are also able to talk about the extraordinary
lives of their parents, though, to be fair, their parents in real life do seem to have had genuinely extraordinary lives. On the other hand, these poets face questions of loyalty that they would not have to contend with otherwise. That said, neither can they get away with unexamined nationalism. Moreover, insofar as the parent is identified with the parent culture, they must carefully navigate criticism of the parent in order to avoid accusations of criticizing that culture, or of overlooking cultural context that might explain or even justify the qualities of the parent in question. Campo criticizes the speaker’s Cuban father, though often that criticism appears to relate to the father’s ambivalence toward the speaker’s sexuality, another axis of identity.

Lee describes his friends writing about ethnicity and race as “very angry” with him, for insisting on being read as an American writer, not an Asian-American one (I am very skeptical Robert Hass would be subject to similar accusations). Perhaps they felt his stated position trivialized the influence of race and ethnicity, as if one could transcend them through an act of will. Maybe they felt they his disavowal of his status as an “ethnic” writer reinforced the stigmatization of such writing as inferior. Their concerns have some validity, but so does his desire to shape the reception of his work. I do not think that saying one wants to be read without, or with less, connection to one’s ethnicity is the same as saying that race and ethnicity are not very real factors in identity and in the actual conditions of people’s lives. Lee is justified in reacting against de facto restrictions, however well-intentioned, on the range of expressive and interpretive possibilities of his work. Similarly, in a critical age in which gender and sexuality have been read through the lens of performativity, the work on race and ethnicity that I have encountered retain (if only slightly) more essentialism, insofar as there isn’t a robust and sustained discussion of race and identity as constructs that could be performed, or not performed, or performed differently—in a way that could be positive or emancipatory. Plus, Lee might
simply experience his ethnicity differently than the manner envisioned by those who would have him write as an “Asian-American.”

What struck me about the poetry in this chapter was the centrality of the ethnicity and national origin of the parents in the speaker’s relationship with and understanding of them. It is of course possible that that centrality is simply reflective of reality. Moreover, as discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the emotional texture of the immigrant experience is complex and varied, with competing allegiances, advantages, and disadvantages. That complexity can be an interesting addition to the characterization of the parents. Also, it makes it difficult to identify to what extent different aspects of them are a result of their experience as immigrants and which are more simply “personal.” However, this act of reading the parents through their ethnicity and status as immigrants is also a requirement, failing which they risk accusations of ethnic disloyalty or political quietism. If Li-Young Lee were a white man named Lee Young, he would have been able to write many of the same poems he has, which often lack obvious ethnic signifiers. It is possible, and probable, that he would have attracted less critical attention. However, even though his “personal” poetry might have attracted criticism for being “easy” at times, he would probably not have had “very angry” friends upset with him wanting his work to be read as broadly representative of the human condition—they might have considered him a bit naive, perhaps, but that would probably be it. It is interesting then, that, the accusations of not being sufficiently “complex” can be the same, but the stated reasons behind them can vary tremendously, which leads me to think that those reasons themselves are highly suspect.

A related issue is the question of to what extent it is possible to write about an emotional connection to a sense of identity, an ethnic group, or a country without anchoring that connection in either the self or those whom one knows personally. Is it possible to write an abstract poem
about being Cuban, for example? I think that it is possible, but even the one somewhat
experimental impressionistic poem Campo writes on the subject of Cuban identity, “Cuban
Poetry” (*The Other Was Me* 42), strongly ties this identity to family connections. Even Nye’s
“Blood” (*Yellow Glove* 31) shows that, while it is possible to care deeply about what happens to
those whom one has never met, it still is the “blood” connection that gives the speaker’s reaction
its depth. Similarly, the father’s whimsy humanizes the Palestinians and invites interest, and even
affection, for them. Of course it is impossible for a person to have a deeply personal reaction to
every instance of misfortune. In some regards, the degree of personal identification with the
victim of misfortune is as good a basis as any, though by no means a perfect one, for
experiencing sympathy. A problem occurs when one becomes too callous toward those with
whom one does not identify; barring that, however, the act of sympathy becomes a means of
enlarging one’s sympathetic reach.

These poems foreground the social forces shaping the speaker. If anything, they
challenge the private nature of emotion as a personal experience. The poets in the first two
chapters do that as well (perhaps Hass most of all—though two of the four, Plath and Ginsberg,
are also children of immigrants), but for poets writing from the position of children of
immigrants, this challenge is almost inherent. It is interesting that, when Hass contextualizes
private, personal emotion in the social and the historical in *Sun under Wood*, he does so with
references to colonization, immigration, and travel. Perhaps these are narratives to which all
poets have access. Perhaps everyone can lay claim to an ethnicity. That said, the “ethnic” identity
accessed by Olds and Plath is not one of fondness. For Olds, she is born “of ignorant people”
“Japanese-American Farmhouse, California, 1942” (*The Wellspring*, 7). For Plath, the German
ethnicity of the father gives the speaker leverage for her reproach of him. These are acceptable
narratives of condemnation. Hass is less vituperative, though his speaker’s father is held up for criticism insofar as he is connected with the gender roles of mid-twentieth century America. In discussing Naomi’s role as an immigrant, Ginsberg is perhaps closest to the poets in this chapter, though he focuses more on her Jewish ethnicity than her status as an immigrant per se, perhaps in order to avoid further othering her.

If the ethnic background of the family relates to the struggle against disempowerment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice, then the speaker can lay claim to pride and righteousness, but they must more carefully constrain criticisms against the parents. If the ethnic background is that associated with social dominance, then the speaker engages in greater self-doubt and self-questioning, but he or she is able to articulate grievances more forcefully against the parents who represent that background. These tendencies are deeply problematic, but they also reflect the poetry culture where readership is trained to read poems as social statements, and where the poets are well aware of as much. To avoid commentary on ethnicity is read as quietism and conservatism for a white poet, and disloyalty and self-hatred for other poets. Perhaps the white poet is freer from these expectations, though, if only because explicit political content and a self-conscious focus on distinctive ethnic signifiers are less common in their work, thus less expected.
The work of finding, establishing, and securing iconic figures for women has been of crucial importance in combatting essentialist claims about the limitations of women based on a supposed historical absence of evidence of their accomplishments. Similarly, iconic women have served as sources of inspiration and symbols of common participation in feminist causes. The poets in this chapter, Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn, and June Jordan, have identified, celebrated the accomplishments of, and paid witness to the struggles of historically important women, past and present. These women are women of power, whether that power be physical strength, beauty, intellect, creativity, or moral courage. To be sure, as they are associated with the very real political aims of the poets, they often appear in a positive light. However, these poems frequently highlight their own personal shortcomings, failures of imagination, personal compromises, misfortunes, bad faith, and episodes of disempowerment (for example, all three poets discussed in this chapter write about women in confinement). I read this nuance and ambivalence as evidence of the value American feminism has placed on self-awareness and self-reflection, of becoming aware of what one is dealing with in order both to struggle against it more effectively and to avoid perpetuating it. More than the others, Adrienne Rich considers forms of power in traditional notions of academic and artistic accomplishment. June Jordan looks the most at non-white and non-Western women. Judy Grahn’s work deals the most explicitly with lesbian identity and lesbian desire.

Considerations of emotion have historically been important for feminism. In part, this attention has been a response to social constructions of women as “feeling” beings, governed

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114 Jaggar writes, “Feminist theorists have pointed out that the Western tradition has not seen everyone as equally emotional. Instead, reason has been associated with members of dominant political, social, and cultural groups and
by irrational emotion as opposed to “masculine” reason. It has been important to interrogate this idea of women, both to dispense with spurious notions about how women think and experience life, as well as to call into question the notion of reason and emotion as distinct categories, with the former esteemed more than the latter. In addition, feminists, including Alison M. Jaggar, have recognized that problematic social norms and attitudes often become tied to deeply rooted, reflexive emotional responses, even among those who know better and who actively disagree with them. Furthermore, emotions play a large role in the oft-repeated dictum that the personal is political. As Jaggar notes, individuals might be confused and frightened to experience “outlaw emotions” that differ from what they think they are supposed to feel, but she says, “When certain emotions are shared or validated by others, however, the basis exists for forming a subculture defined by perceptions, norms, and values that systematically oppose the prevailing perceptions, norms, and values” (131). By accepting these emotions as legitimate and not shameful, and by further understanding them as a symptom of broader, underlying social problems that can and should be addressed through collective reflection and action, social change becomes possible.

In addition to looking at emotions as a broad category, many feminist writers have addressed particular forms or manifestation of emotion, including the erotic, love, and sympathy. Writing about the erotic, Audre Lorde says, “There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledge or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). Crucial to her advocacy of the erotic is her opposition to the often politically motivated compartmentalization of emotions: “This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all emotion with members of subordinate groups. Prominent among those subordinate groups in our society are people of color, except for supposedly ‘inscrutable orientals,’ and women” (128).
the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” (57). As such, the erotic becomes a mean of empowering oneself to argue and take action on one’s own behalf: “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (58). As Chela Sandoval notes, many theorists from diverse cultural backgrounds understand love as an emotion that accomplishes a similar critical function by disrupting established modes of thinking and creating new opportunities for change.115 A third relational emotion, sympathy, also has political potential. I discuss sympathy in Chapter One, mostly in the context of textual analysis, though feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky discusses sympathy at length with focus on its political potential. She raises far more questions about sympathy than she attempts to answer: “Why are so many of us unable to feel-with—‘the wretched of the earth’? Do contemporary modes of the transmission of information deprive us systematically of the kind of context that is integral to feeling-with?...How can the rush of normally temporary compassion brought on by reports of some current injustice be mined for progressive political ends?” (86). While she considers it possible to harness sympathy for political action, she reaches similar conclusions as the other scholars who consider it a difficult emotion to balance and to maintain in proper perspective.

115 Sandoval writes, “Third world writers such as Guevara [Note: I find the inclusion of Guevara in this list to be dubious at best and myself do not wish to participate in valorizing him], Fanon, Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Trinh Minh-ha, Cherrie Moraga, to name only a few, similarly understand love as a ‘breaking’ through whatever controls in order to find ‘understanding and community’: it is described as ‘hope’ and ‘faith’ in the potential goodness of some promised land; it is defined as Anzaldúa coyotl state, which is a ‘rupturing’ in one’s everyday world that permits crossing over to another; or as a specific moment of shock, what Emma Pérez envisions as the trauma of desire, of erotic despair. These writers who theorize social change understand ‘love’ as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement” (139).
What these emotions share in common is political efficacy, and that is rooted in their relational nature. Bartky considers it important that these emotions circulate so that activists can “infect” one another with them: “We go to demonstrations not only to get a point across to those against whom we demonstrate but precisely to allow ourselves to be emotionally ‘infected’ by one another. What infects us with the joy we feel at a good demonstration is a heightened sense of the sanity and rightness of our cause, this against the seductive ‘common sense’ of those who stayed at home” (76). Inspiration and determination are essential, especially amid the inertia of “seductive ‘common sense.’” Presumably the inverse is true, that the negative emotions of complacency, fear, and resignation can “infect” others, which makes it all the more important to keep inspiration and determination strong and circulating.

To be honest, it at first surprised me that the feminist icons discussed by the poets in this chapter almost all had some sort of failure—of courage, of imagination, of being overpowered, or of simply having bad luck. Of course, much literature involves conflict, so some sort of setback would be reasonable to expect, but at the same time, I thought I’d see more evidence of triumph, especially insofar as feminism advances an alternative vision for society. On one level, these poems are simply historically accurate, insofar as they document the very real difficulties women have faced. That said, they still seem to be more concerned with failures of power than could be justified by either literary convention or history alone. My conclusion is that, on the most obvious level, they generate a sense of urgency: the problems under discussion have not been resolved, so an erroneous sense of complacency does not dissuade readers from taking action. In other words, the feminist icons may inspire others to take action, but their own legacy does not eliminate the need for that action. Perhaps less obviously, though, these icons illustrate the need for self-critique, even as they make it more palatable. It is true in general that people do
not like to be criticized, or asked to criticize themselves, and yet that is precisely what political change requires. People need to ask how they themselves participate in and otherwise perpetuate undesirable social norms and conditions. This task is uncomfortable, and it can feel shameful, but the realization that others—even people who are considered famous, talented, and noble—have shortcomings as well can make people more willing to engage in this unpleasant but vital task.

**Adrienne Rich**

More than any other American poet of the latter half of the twentieth century, Adrienne Rich has played a prominent role in advancing feminist causes and feminist poetics. The trajectory of her career is well-known—the early success with fairly conventional poetry, the movement toward explicitly political poetry and the emergence of a poetics connected to lesbian identity. Of the three poets discussed in this chapter, Rich comes from the most conventionally privileged background, and her poems do to some degree embrace conventional notions of achievement more than those of Jordan and Grahn. Like all of them, though, she addresses a project of reclamation, of remedying the situation of “a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” (*Diving into the Wreck* 24). She writes, “Poetry never stood a chance / of standing outside of history” (277). Rich writes about the love of women, takes political stands, and gives voice to the nameless victims of history, as well as figures from the canons of high art. Her poems are often taut, with, at their best, a strong sense of timing and image, along with a talent for statement that it is often moving, memorable, and insightful, a strength that exists in her essays as well.

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116 Jan Monteifore argues that crucial to Rich’s project is the concomitant awareness that knowledge of history is always incomplete: “Rich continually emphasizes our distance from and only partial knowledge of the past: a knowledge which her poetic and critical practice seeks to retrieve and extend” (85).
Rich looks at iconic figures who can be considered more historical (Becker and Westhoff, Herschel, Curie) and relatively more recent figures (incarcerated Soviet poet Gorbanewskaya, mountaineer Shatayeva, Ethel Rosenberg, and South African pro-Apartheid secret agent Olivia Forsyth [“S. Africa Says British Woman Spied on ANC”] ). In general, the poems about the more chronologically distant poets focus on the notion of female ambition and accomplishment within the arts and sciences. Death hovers in the background, but while there is an element of tragedy it is not brutal. The latter poems focus more on oppression, and even in the case of the mountaineer, while she and her companions die as a result of freak weather, elements such as the isolation, the apprehension, the diary excerpts, and the sense of community with the others around her all serve to evoke a carceral sense.

In “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff” (The Dream of a Common Language 42-44) Rich explores female friendship and female artistic ambition around the start of the twentieth century. In the form of a letter, the poem begins with some pleasantries about the weather, with autumn being unusually summer-like. Becker abruptly says, “I didn’t want this child. / You’re the only one I’ve told. / I want a child maybe, someday, but not now” (42). Her husband Otto projects a complacent attitude toward the pregnancy, which she ruefully notes is because the burdens of motherhood fall on her, not him: “And yes, I will; this child will be mine / not his, the failures, if I fail / will be all mine” (42). However dismayed she may be by her pregnancy, though, she feels a new sense of hope and inspiration: “But lately, I feel beyond Otto or anyone. / I know now the kind of work I have to do. / It takes such energy!” (42). She says that she has a sense of what she is searching for but is not sure and continues to search for it. In a passage with erotic undertones

117 The epigraph reads: “Paula Becker 1876-1907 / Clara Westhoff 1878-1954 / became friends at Worpswede, an artists’ colony near Bremen, Germany, summer 1899. In January 1900, spent a half-year together in Paris, where Paula painted and Clara studied sculpture with Rodin. In August they returned to Worpswede, and spent the next winter together in Berlin. In 1901, Clara married the poet Rainer Maria Rilke; soon after, Paula married the painter Otto Mondersohn. She died in a hemorrhage after childbirth, murmuring, What a pity!”
she fondly recalls her time working with Westhoff: “Remember those months in the studio together, / you up to your strong forearms in wet clay, / I trying to make something of the strange impressions / assailing me?” (42-43). In another passage evoking the emotional bond of the two women and having a potentially sexual implication, she speculates about her skepticism toward Westhoff’s husband Rilke: “Maybe I was jealous / of him, to begin with, taking you from me, / maybe I married Otto to fill up / my loneliness for you” (43). Becker admits that Rilke has some progressive attitudes but that his personal conduct does not fully realize them: “he feeds on us, / like all of them. His whole life, his art / is protected by women” (43). She notes that women fill the role of supporting others but do not do enough to believe in and support themselves.

Becker refers to a sense of foreboding about her pregnancy: “Do you know: I was dreaming I had died / giving birth to the child” (43). In the dream, Rilke writes her requiem, “a long, beautiful poem, and calling me his friend. / I was your friend / but in the dream you didn’t say a word” (43). She reflects about the situation with Rilke, a man assuming a woman’s place and speaking for her, speaking as if she were not involved, which represents the broader voicelessness of women in culture. Becker wonders, “Clara, why didn’t I dream of you?” (44). By not having dreamed of Westhoff, she indicates that she had internalized social attitudes regarding the subordination of women to the point that they have shaped her imaginative life. Then, she invokes the concept of power: “And how I’ve worked since then / trying to create according to our plan / that we’d bring, against all odds, our full power / to every subject” (44). She expresses a commitment to resolution and forthrightness to “Hold back nothing” in “the struggles for truth, our old pledge against guilt” (44). Becker refers again to her sense of hope: “And now I feel dawn and the coming day. / I love waking in my studio, seeing my pictures / come alive in the light” (44). She uses birth as a metaphor for the discovery of one’s self:
“Sometimes I feel / it is myself that kicks inside me, / myself I must give suck to, love…” (44). She adds, “I wish we could have done this for each other / all our lives, but we can’t...” (44). In this poem, the work of art serves as a metaphor for advancing the cause of feminism and counteracting the social forces that keep women quiet and separate from one another, both in activism and in their sexual lives. Even intellectually sophisticated women in the company of comparatively progressive men find themselves mired in these forces. Pregnancy serves as a metaphor for women’s potential, as well as their potential downfall. The struggle to achieve new artistic work and to articulate her feelings in the letter dramatize the positive aspects of that potential. Unfortunately, though, allowing that potential to be subsumed by the desires of others, as happens with her actual pregnancy, can result in destruction and self-destruction. In that regard, the poem is a cautionary note, but the affection, love, and sense of possibility expressed by Becker serve as an inspiration for women to pursue what she only hoped for, possibly as a means of honoring the legacy of the woman who inspired them.

“Planetarium” (The Fact of a Doorframe 73-74) 118 looks at the legacy of Caroline Herschel. While not nearly as biographical as the other poems. It does list her accomplishments, an important act of bringing awareness to women’s scientific achievements. More meditative in nature, the poem uses Herschel as a starting point and then uses constellations, the sky, starlight, galaxies, and so forth as a series of metaphors exploring the role of women in society and the work of a poet and/or feminist in trying to redefine those roles. There is an implicit comparison to the work of a female scientist. Surely a female scientist helps to dispel notions about the realm of science as masculine, although I’m not so sure that the nominally scientific metaphors work. Of course, they do invoke the cosmic expanse, which conjures a sense of both isolation and possibility, surely the plight of a feminist in Rich’s position. The poem opens by invoking the

118 The epigraph is: “Thinking of Caroline Herschel (1750-1848) / astronomer, sister of William; and others.”
problematic notions of women that have historically pervaded mythology and the institutions of science: “A woman in the shape of a monster / a monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them” (73). She contrasts this outlandish vision of women with Herschel, a woman who labored with scientific instruments to discover eight comets over the course of her ninety-eight year life. The speaker lays claim to Herschel as a figure who should be inspiring for women: “she whom the moon ruled / like us / levitating into the night sky / riding the polished lenses” (73). The poem praises Herschel for possessing “An eye // ‘virile, precise and absolutely certain’” (73). Comparing Hershel’s talent for vision to the efforts of observation demanded by feminism and by social change in general, the speaker says, “What we see, we see // and seeing is changing” (74). Talking about electromagnetic radiation but also obviously about dealing with negative views of women, the speaker attests to a lifetime of being bombarded by a “direct path of a battery of signals / the most accurately transmitted most / untranslatable language in the universe” (74). The poem concludes, “I am an instrument in the shape / of a woman trying to translate pulsations / into images for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind” (74).

With a tone of resolve, the speaker affirms her seriousness of purpose. The reference to herself as an “instrument” undermines the social expectation that women be passive. Moreover, the mechanical nature of the term suggests a harder, more functional view of femininity, similar to feminists such as Grahn writing about muscle as both an attractive aesthetic feature and an important source of power.120

119 The phrase instrument calls to mind the use of a helicopter as a metaphor in the concluding section of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (Collected Early Poems 146-150): “Well, // she's long about her coming, who must be / more merciless to herself than history. / Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge / breasted and glancing through the currents, / taking the light upon her / at least as beautiful as any boy / or helicopter, / poised, still coming, / her fine blades making the air wince / but her cargo / no promise then: / delivered / palpable / ours” (150).

120 In Another Mother Tongue, Grahn describes her relation to musculature as follows: “Years later I went to bed with a woman, a feminist, who had the muscleless bloby flesh most women at the time claimed was ‘natural,’ or at least ‘appealing to men.’ She was amazed at my flesh. ‘Oh—you have a hard body,’ she exclaimed. ‘Most women are crippled,’ she said” (154).
“Power” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 3) dramatizes the tradeoffs faced by women with serious pursuits in a patriarchal society. The central figure is Marie Curie, one of the few people to win two Nobel Prizes. Einstein once said of her that she was the only scientist he knew not to have been changed or corrupted in some way by her fame (Griffin). However, the poem explores how her work with radioactive isotopes contributed to her death. The poem posits that Curie realized the source of her increasing frailty and yet denied it, as it was her research that provided her “power.” Again, this poem advances awareness of a female scientist, and it also turns the struggles of feminism into a metaphor. Power is a crucial concern of Rich and these other poets. It often comes at great costs, and it frequently requires the compromise of oneself in some way or another. The poem opens by describing, “Living in the earth-deposits of our history,” a backhoe unearthing a hundred-year-old bottle of some sort of medicine: “a tonic / for living on this earth in the winters of this climate.” Ostensibly this tonic makes the speaker think of wellness, illness, and treatment. The speaker says, “Today I was reading about Marie Curie: / she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness / her body bombarded for years by the element / she had purified.” This illness damaged her eyesight and skin, and it left her incapable of holding “a test-tube or a pencil.” The poem ends with this incredibly memorable passage: “She died a famous woman denying / her wounds / denying / her wounds came from the same source as her power.” Her search for achievement, as well as perhaps recognition, has come at the expense of her well-being, an exchange, the poem implies, that women should not have to make. Also, this poem dramatizes the speaker reading and learning about a feminist icon. That activity, as well as the metaphorical digging of the backhoe, suggests that these spectacular but also personally relevant stories await discovery in daily life.
Poems about more recent female poets tend to deal with political oppression. In two separate poems, Rich talks about a poet, Natalya Gorbanevskaya, ostensibly an acquaintance, who faces incarceration and other hardships as a result of her opposition to the Soviet government. This sort of poem showcases the ability of poetry to bring attention to oppression in other cultures, and it certainly bears witness in that regard. By making a figure such as this woman an icon, it demonstrates that women, and writers in particular, continue to take courageous and perilous political stands, and that such struggles remain urgent. This poem also describes details of the poet’s daily life, so as to humanize her, to render her experience more imaginatively accessible. Another important task it performs is promoting female literary friendship. In the political life and literary activity of second-wave feminism, a major task was bringing together female writers in an active literary community. This task was and is necessary to counteract the effect of canon erasure, as well as to build an active community, to formulate social thought, to promote social action, and to subvert the forces preventing a homosocial network directed toward political and intellectual activity.

“For a Russian Poet” (The Fact of a Doorframe 53-55) suggests that both poets are troubled by the injustices of the world but struggle to address them through their writing. The speaker describes them listening to the radio at night, “unable to read, unable to write / trying the blurred edges of broadcasts / for a little truth” (53-54). She describes, “taking a walk before bed / wondering what a man can do, asking that / at the verge of tears in a lightning-flash of loneliness” (54). This sense of loneliness makes it all the more important for the two women to be in contact, though. Gorbanevskaya sends a letter describing her participation in a protest on Red Square before police quickly intervene. The speaker compares their mutual political struggles, which, while not strictly equivalent, both result in “a great jagged torn place / in the silence of
complicity” (54). She describes herself relative to the poet: “I’m a ghost at your table / touching poems in a script I can’t read // we’ll meet each other later” (55). This positive note establishes that meaningful connections can develop even when they begin as distance and tenuous. In “For a Sister” (Diving into the Wreck 49) the speaker describes not having information about the whereabouts of her friend after she is arrested. She points to the unreliability of institutionalized knowledge: “A few paragraphs in the papers, / allowing for printers' errors, willful omissions, / the trained violence of doctors. / I don't trust them, but I'm learning how to use them.” She describes the police searching her residence and says, “A look of intelligence could get you twenty years. / Better to trace nonexistent circles with your finger, / try to imitate the smile of the permanently dulled.” This scene serves to evoke the many ways in which women have been expected to portray themselves as unintelligent and nonthreatening, with the stakes here being particularly high. Despite the direness of the situation, though, the speaker anticipates when the friend will be able to tell her story, to “get out the typewriter and begin again. Your story.” Again, the poem concludes on a positive note, with the implication that beyond hardship and struggle lies the possibility for connection and communication.

Rich also writes about the incarceration and eventual execution of Ethel Rosenberg. She ties the events surrounding this story to the speaker’s own experience of getting married and facing the disapproval of her father. Part of the project of this poem is to acknowledge that Rosenberg and the speaker might have in fact had different political priorities, a gesture that shows that Rich is not wholly appropriating the figure of Rosenberg for her own ends. What this poem instead focuses on is the ways in which Rosenberg was maligned for having been a woman. Rich posits that she was reviled as much, if not more, for her violation of gender roles and her

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121 The epigraph reads: “Natalya Gorbanevskaya, two years incarcerated in a Soviet penal mental asylum for her political activism; and others.”

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vulnerability as a woman as she was for the crime she might have committed. The poem does largely avoid the issue of Rosenberg’s culpability, as well as the implications of disseminating information about the construction of nuclear weapons. However, perhaps the most interesting thing about this poem is that it dramatizes the speaker meditating on what Rosenberg means to her as an iconic figure, a question that she continues to grapple with.

“For Ethel Rosenberg” (*The Fact of a Doorframe* 174-179) opens with the speaker in Europe in 1953, where she sees “Liberez les Rosenberg!” (174) written as graffiti in various places. The case involves politics, Jewishness, marriage, and loyalty, all matters of concern in the speaker’s own life. She says, “Escaping from home I found / home everywhere” (175). A week before her own marriage, the Rosenbergs are executed. The speaker says that the story of Ethel Rosenberg had a profound effect on her: “She sank however into my soul A weight of sadness / I can hardly register how deep / her memory has sunk” (176). For her, Rosenberg evokes distressing thoughts about gender and family. She thinks wryly about the rewards of marriage: “that wife and mother // like so many / who seemed to get nothing out of any of it / except her children” (176). Similarly, she looks at her difficulties as a daughter: “that daughter of a family / like so many / needing its female monster” (176). The speaker speculates that Rosenberg might have been punished to the extent she was because of her transgression of gender norms: “charged by posterity // not with selling secrets to the Communists / but with wanting to distinguish / herself being a bad daughter a bad mother” (176). The speaker compares herself to Rosenberg, although she notes that their predicaments aren’t equivalent: “And I walking to my wedding / by the same token a bad daughter a bad sister / my forces

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122 The epigraph reads: “Convicted, with her husband, / of “conspiracy to commit / espionage”; killed in the / electric chair June 19, 1953” (174).
focussed // on that hardly revolutionary effort” (176). Rich depicts the transgression of social expectations as exacting emotional toll and thereby posing a cognitive barrier to change.

The speaker wonders about Rosenberg’s nature and potential as a feminist, and by extensions wonders about appropriating her as a feminist icon: “Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg would you / have marched to take back the night / collected signatures // for battered women who kill” (177). She says that “she sang / a prostitute to sleep / in the Women’s House of Detention” (177). Nonetheless, by the time of her execution no one knows exactly what she was thinking, and as such she does not presume to speak for a woman who cannot speak for herself. The speaker then reflects on her emotional relationship to her as an icon, this “exercise of hindsight”: “Why do I even want to call her up / to console my pain (she feels no pain at all) / why do I wish to put such questions // to ease myself “(178). She realizes she has to think about women’s complicity in her treatment:

if I imagine her at all
I have to imagine first
the pain inflicted on her by women

*her mother testifies against her*

*her sister-in-law testifies against her*

and how she sees it (178)

She says she wants to imagine Rosenberg’s actual experience, “not the impersonal forces / not the historical reasons / why they might have hated her strength” (178). She elaborates on this point: “I must allow her to be at last // political in her ways not in mine / her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine / defining revolution as she defines it” (178). The speaker considers the
possibility Rosenberg became “bored to the marrow of her bones / with ‘politics’ / bored with the vast boredom of long pain” (179). This poem demonstrates several risks of sympathy, as discussed in the beginning of the chapter and in Chapter One. However, the strange parallels the speaker perceives in her own period of personal distress allow her both to think critically about her own problems and family issues, as well as to think critically about herself as a woman in a society where women engage in behaviors and forms of passivity that perpetuate the circumstances of their own subordination. The figure of Rosenberg troubles the speaker, and, by refusing to ignore or oversimplify being troubled, the speaker makes that emotional response intellectually productive.

In “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” (The Dream of a Common Language 4-6), Rich describes the fate of a female Soviet mountaineer who dies on an expedition with a group of women. It explores the mountaineering of the women as a tremendous affirmation of self, with their eventual death in a freak storm as, in some ways, the ultimate affirmation of their bond. This poem exalts the creation of a homosocial group. There are also expressions of awakening to love that could be read as evocative of lesbian desire. Ultimately, this poem is about women straining against their captivity, and though they die, they achieve a breakthrough in terms of both self and community. It is the extremity that both enables and ultimately destroys this achievement. Another purpose of this poem is to contribute a female tale of daring and adventure to public discourse—this sort of romantic tale of tragic exploration has typically been something that has been presented as a masculine discourse, and Rich is complicating that.

The poem is in the voice of Shatayev, who stresses the unity of the group: “If in this sleep I speak / it’s with a voice no longer personal / (I want to say with voices)” (4). She says that the

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123 The epigraph reads: “(leader of a women’s climbing team, all of whom died in a storm on Lenin Peak, August 1974. Later, Shatayev’s husband found and buried the bodies.)” (4).
women have arrived at the mountain with a strong and developing but not fully realized potential: “For months for years each one of us / had felt her own yes growing in her / slowly forming as she stood at the windows waited / for trains mended her rucksack combed her hair” (4). The tragic irony is that their achievement of autonomy and realization of self occurs at the end of their lives: “that yes gathered / its forces fused itself and only just in time / to meet a No of no degrees / the black hole sucking the world in” (4). She addresses her husband, who himself braves the dangers of the mountain in order to give her a proper burial. She acknowledges the validity and appropriateness of his emotions: “While my body lies out here / flashing like a prism into your eyes / how could you sleep” (5). However, she makes it clear that, while his emotions matter, they do not outweigh the legitimacy of her right to choose her own path: “You climbed here for yourself / we climbed for ourselves” (5). The poem asserts that, despite their deaths, the women live on in “the unfinished the unbegun / the possible” (5). Even though extremity and tragedy provided the catalyst for their transformations, they themselves provide a sense of “the possible,” which might help other toward a similar achievement in less adverse, more sustainable conditions.

“Olivia” (An Atlas of the Difficult World 34-35) explores the world of a woman who used her power for nefarious ends as an agent of pro-Apartheid forces in South Africa, and the speaker assumes the ironic role of the one who surveils Olivia. Rich attributes a great amount of skill and agency to her, though the power here is a product of false-consciousness: “I know the power you thought you had— // to know them all, better than they / knew you, than they knew you knew” (34). She says Olivia was “paid by them, to move // at some pure point of mastery” (34-35). The speaker derisively says that Olivia imagined she was able “to lift above / loyalty,

124 The epigraph for this poem reads: “‘Among fundamentalist Christians, she was one of them; in our anti-apartheid groups, she was the most militant...She was a chameleon.’ / —White South African student activist interviewed on National Public Radio, 10/11/88” (34).
love and all that trash // higher than power and its fields of force? / —never so much as a woman friend?” (35). Ultimately, though, this power is shown to be empty, and Olivia is abandoned by those in whose service she operated. The poem concludes, “You were a woman walked on a leash. / And they dropped you in the end” (35). The matter-of-factness of this statement implies a bemused knowingness on the part of the speaker; she looks askance at the irony that the woman who celebrated her ability to fool others was herself deluded by the bad-faith assurances of an oppressive government. The poem also suggests that she has abnegated her self beyond simply adopting a guise.

“For June, in the Year 2001” (The School among the Ruins 20-21) addresses June Jordan in affectionate and admiring terms. It references both the speaker’s and Jordan’s efforts toward social justice and their relationship to language, just as it celebrates the sensual pleasures of landscape and food. As I mention earlier, this sort of work speaks to canon formation and it asserts a collective effort in feminism in feminist poetics. It also melds the political and intellectual to the personal. The poem opens with lines about the beauty of nature and the pleasure of food. However, the speaker praises Jordan as someone who yearns for more: “but what you really craved: / a potency of words” (21). She reflects on being mired in political struggle and the politics of language, which would make the potency Jordan craves all the more important. The poem ends on a personal note with an evocation of the beauty of nature again, with the speaker approaching home and wanting Jordan to “smell the budding acacias / tangled with eucalyptus / on the road to Santa Cruz” (22). This desire for Jordan to share the experiences of the speaker suggests closeness between the two, and it suggests that Jordan is an important person in her life. Also, as an evocation of easy camaraderie and simple pleasures, it gives them something to comfort themselves with during their struggles, as well as something to struggle for.
Judy Grahn

Judy Grahn writes about the lives of women with considerable insight and compassion. She writes a good deal about myth. In fact, she tends to focus more on myth than on historical figures. The figure of Helen is a mainstay in her work. She also talks about the lives of contemporary women. In “The Common Woman,” she describes a number of fictional women in minutely observed portraits-in-verse of them going about their daily lives. In her out-of-print collection *The Work of a Common Woman*, Grahn says that she began this sequence quite simply as an attempt to describe “regular, everyday women without making us look either superhuman or pathetic” (60). Grahn also sees a project of reclamation as necessary, although for her that project has more a spiritual and ritual dimension than it does for Rich. Grahn’s work tends to be free verse, often with a strong dialogic element, and she too has a particular gift for image, for statement, and for humor. Grahn also demonstrates her interest in the poetics of Gertrude Stein from time to time in poems that are more opaque, less linear, and less distinctly referential than elsewhere.

In Adrienne Rich’s essay “Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman,” Rich describes her as a “direct inheritor of that passion for life in the woman poet, that instinct for true power, not domination, which poets like Barrett Browning, Dickinson, H.D., were asserting in

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125 Jan Montefiore writes, “Powerful and exciting as this poetry is, the deployment of myths of matriarchy or the Goddess is obviously liable to certain criticisms” (84). She continues, “But the force of these objections is much diminished by the fact that none of the poems which deploy the imagery of reference of the ‘lost matriarchy’ should be taken literally. The poems are not enforcing an orthodoxy but suggesting a mythology.” (84) That leads to “an oppositional critique of contemporary society and an imagined alternative to it” (85).

126 The figure of Helen connects Grahn to a tradition of lesbian writing, particularly to H.D., who writes in “Helen in Egypt”: “Greece sees, unmoved, / God’s daughter, born of love, / the beauty of cool feet / and / slenderest knees, / could indeed love the maid, / only if she were laid, / white as amid funereal cypresses” (369). H.D. identifies two crucial dimensions of beauty in the classic sense, its public-ness and its tendency to attract feelings of resentment and domination.

127 See my review of *The Judy Grahn Reader* in *Feminist Teacher* 23.2. In this chapter I use phrasing similar to the book review in a few brief passages, including the sentence to which this footnote refers, but the similarities are minor, and, beyond basic description, this chapter does reproduce the intellectual work performed in my review.
their own very different ways and voices” (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence 257). Two sources of power in Grahn’s work are beauty and strength. However, those two qualities have been considered somewhat antithetical, at least for women, and Grahn seeks to recode their relationship and to highlight their overlap and complementarity. Beauty especially is a problematic concept, tied to assumptions about gender, sexuality, race, and class. It is a term difficult to employ critically without sounding rhapsodic or naive. Moreover, one could argue whether beauty is better understood as innate or projected, physical or intangible, social or individual. However, throughout her poetry Grahn has three particular strategies that deal with these challenges of beauty. First of all, she addresses beauty at least to some extent as a pragmatic concern. In The Highest Apple, she speaks of “the special uses of love, beauty and intelligence with which it is possible to live lives of grace and meaning” (136). Beauty provides one path toward personal wholeness. That path might include a frank acknowledgment of lesbian desire. It might involve simple acts of affirmation, an acknowledgment of the beauty of people who pass otherwise largely unnoticed through one’s daily life. In any case, however, this pragmatic project necessitates reclaiming beauty from narrow social norms. It means moving beauty from a constricting, oppressive standard to a dynamic, efficacious force, similar to Lourde’s notion of the erotic. Second, on a more conceptual level, Grahn does not limit beauty to any sort of stable category. The richly textured, searching quality of her verse denies the stasis required for a simplistic, statuarian definition, something that would be better suited for a disapproving critique rather than integration into actual lived experience. Lastly, Grahn clearly

128 Montefiore makes a similar point about both Grahn and Rich in similar language: “The past world which Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, and Adrienne Rich create in their poems through reference, allusion, and—occasionally—direct description, is that of a buried but still persisting female culture reaching back to pre-patriarchal civilizations. This is the positive, mythical side of these women’s refusal of the patriarchal order in which they exist: they create a world of female experience where women’s power and knowledge are taken for granted—power meaning not domination but fullness and intensity of being. Poetry is the ideal vehicle for this mythical world, because as Adrienne Rich writes, ‘poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language’” (77).
describes beautiful women, though rather than saying they represent examples of beauty, I would say that they represent examples of the possibilities of beauty.

One of the earliest women of beauty whom Grahn writes about is Marilyn Monroe. Grahn writes, “I have come to claim / Marilyn Monroe’s body / for the sake of my own” (*The Work of a Common Woman* 31-32). The speaker is disinterring the dead woman while saying, “hubba. hubba. hubba” (31). In the same mordant tone, she concludes the first stanza by saying, “ha HA, oh she wanted so much to be serious” (31). The speaker is irreverent albeit sympathetic. She cannot be wholly consolatory, for she understands the figure of Marilyn to be at least partially complicit in her own oppression. This complicity contributes to the specter of “eight young women in New York City / who murdered themselves for being pretty / by the same method as you, the very / next day, after you!” (31). The poem does not blame Marilyn for committing suicide, per se; however, it does find fault with Marilyn’s enabling participation in social conditions and standards of beauty that facilitate horrors such as the copycat suicides. The operative distinction between Marilyn and the speaker is action. The former is passive, an untenable position, and the latter is active. Even though the speaker’s task is indecorous, she is undertaking measures necessary for claiming the bodies of Marilyn and the eight women, who smile “like brainless cinderellas,” which is to say, like other female figures passively waiting for the proverbial glass slipper. Marilyn “wanted so much to be serious,” so the speaker bluntly tells her, “Marilyn, be serious—” (31). In *The Highest Apple*, Grahn writes, “Consider for a moment the role of dimwit the greatest symbol of Love and Beauty of our culture, Marilyn Monroe, was forced to play—in spite of her desperate desire to be respected for her acting, her intellect, for her desire to write poetry. She played a dumb, empty-headed shell of a person, for the benefit of men who said this was the entirety of their idea of ‘beauty’” (95). Marilyn must reject the
external imposition of meaning and reclaim her own agency in the same way that the speaker is
reclaiming the female body.

One barrier to the reclamation is the reporters, who assert a greater right to the female
body than the women themselves: “the reporters are furious, they’re asking / me questions / what
right does a woman have / to Marilyn Monroe’s body?” (31). Grahn continues, “Their teeth are
lurid / and they want to pose me, leaning / on the shovel, nude. Don’t squint” (31). Attempting to
respond to power in its own discourse can be unproductive or counterproductive. Instead, the
speaker assaults one of the reporters “with your long, smooth thigh / and with your lovely
knucklebone / I break his eye” (32). Taking action, she is performing a distinctly different gender
identity than Marilyn. By breaking the “eye” of the reporter, she disengages from surveillance.
The homophone of “eye,” the pronoun “I,” also becomes broken in a sense. Disassembling the
body of Marilyn as a weapon, the speaker is performing a socially necessary reconfiguration
whereby the appetites of male domination no longer govern female corporeality. Grahn describes
Marilyn’s public mourners accordingly: “They wept for you, and also / they wanted to stuff you /
while you still have a little meat left / in useful places” (32). These are the male poets for whom
the speaker plans to write “the poems of Marilyn Monroe” (32). She informs Marilyn that the
two of them will perform a poem together for these men, whom they will entice by telling them
they will be able to see Marilyn “in action, smiling, and without her clothes” (32). She says, “We
shall wait long enough to see them make familiar faces / and then I shall beat them with your
skull” (32). This poem illustrates Grahn’s concern with what she describes as “the terrible
division we have been taught to make between the physical and the spiritual, between the body
and the mind, between the sexual and the sacred, between beauty and the beast” (The Highest
Apple 95). Monroe gains some measure of this wholeness when the speaker involves her in both
purpose and action, for the furtherance of women’s claims to their own bodies and those of
women in general.

In “Helen in Hollywood” (The Queen of Wands 46-49), Grahn examines the nature of
film icons. The mythical figure of Helen is the central character, but the speaker also mentions
the names of movie stars throughout, such as “Harlowe, Holdiay, Monroe” and “Davis, Dietrich,
Wood / Tyson, Taylor, Gabor” (48). By connecting all of these women to Helen, she presents
them as all part of the same woman, in a sense, and all facing similar struggles. This move again
suggests that the powerful part of a female icon is her commonality. Grahn looks at the message
sent by adhering to prevailing standards of beauty: “She writes in red lipstick / on the window of
her body, / long for me, oh need me!” (46). Helen’s good looks serve to attract young men,
However, the speaker also sees something fundamentally powerful and grand about her
appearance: “Her high heels are wands, her / furs electric” (46). Relative to the onlookers, “She
is totally self conscious / self contained / self centered” (46). For their part, the onlookers admire
her because she is different, like an actual star on earth, with “the luminescent glow of someone /
other than we” (47). However, the speaker also notes that Helen becomes what they want her to
be. She is “Medium for all our energy / as we pour it through her” (47). The speaker adds, “She is
the symbol of our dreams and fears / and bloody visions, all / our metaphors for living in
America” (47). Her makeup changes her appearance, so in that way she exerts control over her
appearance, but that makeup also erases her insofar as it turns her into a screen onto which others
can project what they want. As such, she evokes strong and varied emotional reactions, such as
admiration, envy, and scorn; the speaker says, “we love her, we say / and if she isn’t careful / we
may even kill her” (47). The poem then describes the many roles that Helen can play, including
“the princess and harlequin, / athlete and moll and whore and lady, / goddess of the silver screen
/ the only original American queen” (49). Being the “only original American queen” doesn’t mean “original” in the sense of uniqueness so much as the source, the actual origin, which suggests that the figure of Helen has existed through history, as Grahn suggests by drawing her name from mythology. Incidentally, this passage demonstrates what she terms “mythic realism,” characterized by “female subjects portrayed realistically on one level, yet with deep connections to a communally held myth at the same time” (The Judy Grahn Reader 283). Clearly some of these roles played by Helen, particularly the more passive and vulnerable ones, are problematic, but at the same time the figure seems to encompass all of them as constitutive of women’s experiences. To change those experiences would mean altering the culture that produces them.

While one could choose to dismiss these film icons as examples of women subordinated to the norms and desires of dominant culture, which the poem certainly does on one level, Grahn also sees that they possess great power in terms of their beauty and their ability to captivate. Presumably that power can be preserved and harnessed for other ends. Similarly, she notes that this power in part stems from the projections of the onlookers, which most obviously reminds the reader of her responsibility in perpetuating this vision of womanhood, though it also suggests that this power is not something external to the “common” woman, but rather a force and source of potential power originating from within her.

In Grahn’s work, beauty is a source, albeit a complicated one, of power. Similarly, strength is a source of power, as well as a source of beauty. Writing about Celtic warrior queen Boudica in The Queen of Swords (82-85), Grahn stresses the need for strength, for the power to fight back against violence, subordination, and humiliation. Boudica says, “I, Boudica,

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129 Metres writes, “Mary K. DeShazer (1994) has shown how writers such as Jordan, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Maxine Hong Kingston have all used the imagery of woman warriors in order to interrogate their own oppression and articulate their own means of liberation” (Metres 180).

130 In Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds Grahn speculates that “bulldyke” is a word whose origin can be traced etymologically to the name of Boudica.
// a queen am I, / a warrior and a shaman. / Shameless is my goddess and ferocious” (82). She states that she serves as a protector. She has also presided over an era of openness toward same-sex sexual relationships: “a queen of times when men are lovers to the men / and the women to the women, / as is our honored pagan custom” (82). She says that this condition would have continued if not for a violent invasion: “Ever and ever did we think to reign / in such an independent fashion, / until the day the foe came” (82). An invader comes with mercenaries, illustrating his lack of principle and also suggesting a pernicious role of the power of and desire for wealth. The invader intimidates and plunders. He strips Boudica of her clothes and gives them to his wife, and he gives her jewels to his son. He also gives her people’s lands to his men. In spite of her powerlessness at the moment, Boudica threatens him: “He put his hands upon me, he filled me with rage. / I spoke to him in anger. / I told him of his danger” (83). In order to subjugate her, he has her beaten publicly and her daughters sexually assaulted. However, she rises up and addresses her people. Boudica talks about her resolve, and she identifies her power with that of women: “I am all the power of women brought down; / one who will fight to reclaim her place. / This is my resolve. Resolve is what I own” (83). She says, “We women shall fight. The men can live, / if they like, and be slaves” (83). Her speech convinces the men to join her, and they all go into battle. Even though Boudica does not emerge victorious, she achieves a moral victory and makes her foe “know fear” (84). Boudica says what she represents continues to instill fear in those who would oppose her, those who are “unable to fully kill / the rebel things / my name means” (84). Defiant and unbowed, she boasts of “my shameless guise / and lesbian ways; / for undefeated eyes, / a warrior’s spine” (84-85). Grahn suggests that this struggle has continued through the ages, and that women should draw their inspiration from Boudica, who says, “A queen am I, a living memory / who knows her own worth / and who remembers that the
future / is the past rehearsed” (85). The figure of Boudica allows Grahn to articulate ferocity and pride, emotions of great intensity. As in the poem when she addresses her people, she is meant to rouse people to action. As a historical person, she can be someone to whom readers relate, but the fact that she comes from a vastly different era and culture allows Grahn to make this intensity more convincing and compelling. Like most of the other icons in this chapter, she fails to achieve her ultimate goal, but the poem lets her live on, so to speak, so that the readers might have the sense that they share in her passionate struggle.

In “Gloria, daughter of Yemanya” (love belongs to those who do the feeling 264) Grahn pays homage to Gloria Anzaldúa. As Rich and Jordan do, she contributes to the canonization of feminist writers and authors. This poem is elegiac, and, with its emphasis on nature and maternity, it has an element of the spiritual. The speaker asserts that Anzaldúa will continue to have an influence: “as the mother rocks you gently / you will remain heard” and “you will remain respected.” Her impact will result in a “sea change.” The speaker presents a vision of Anzaldúa moving toward new life, as she describes her following whales moving toward “warmer water / where they bear their young.” The poem concludes on a note of togetherness and solidarity: “we hear your voice / in the low tone of the sea bells / in the optimistic squeal of gulls / you are never alone.” Like Rich addressing Jordan, Grahn connects Anzaldúa with the beauty of nature and implies that her presence, like nature, will remain part of the speaker’s life.

**June Jordan**

June Jordan was born in Harlem in 1936 to immigrant parents from Panama and Jamaica (Kinlock 1). She is a poet whose poems, like many by Black writers during her era, demonstrate rhetorical directness, with parts that are exhortative and performative, and which appear to have
a “rough,” everyday quality, a sort of gesture of authenticity. They also embrace strong statement. Philip Metres notes that some critics might view this “righteous certainty” as “self-congratulatory,” which he himself does in some instances, but he considers it “a (necessary) performance of self-empowerment for the disenfranchised selves that Jordan identifies with and whose cause she champions” (175). Valerie Kinlock states, “She was, and continues to be, one of the most versatile and widely published black American writers who employed democratic and uncensored language in order to convey, with passion, truths about race, gender, sexuality, violence, war, and human rights” (1). Similarly, in her forward to Directed by Desire (xxi-xxviii), Rich writes, “She wanted her readers, listeners, students to feel their own latent power—of the word, the deed, of their own beauty and intrinsic value; she wanted each of us to understand how isolation can leave us defenseless and paralyzed. She knew, and wrote about, the power of violence, of hate, but her real theme, which infused her style, was the need, the impulse for relation” (xxii). Like the other poets discusses in this chapter, Jordan has a keen interest in social justice, especially with relation to matters of race and non-Western identity. She also tends to be more specific in her political targets. That specificity, along with her tendency to dedicate poems to other living figures and writers, gives her work an occasional quality. In addition, she is upending the decorum of poetic diction that contains politically suppressed affects and truths. Some of her poems about icons focus on historical figures fighting for racial justice. Others focus on women, historical or contemporary, dealing with political oppression and captivity, either personally or vicariously. Also, there are a few poems about more recent individuals that do not quite fit into these categories. And a series of poems deals with the death of Dr. Elizabeth

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131 Metres also writes: “Jordan firmly situates herself among the voiceless and the powerless, and her writing becomes at once an exhortation to the voiceless and a cry of outrage against those who silence voices with their force; in other words, ‘righteous certainty’ is not a proclamation of a fundamentalism that proposes to know the truth for everyone. Rather, it is a performance of self-worth in the face of physical and psychological brutalization” (178).
Karlin, ostensibly an acquaintance of Jordan, who performed abortions in an adverse and
dangerous political climate, and who stood up generally for women’s rights.

Jordan demonstrates a distrust of literature, theory, and Western systems of thought that lead her to look at a different set of figures than does Rich. As Margaret Grebowicz and Valerie Kinloch note, Jordan discusses the women kept out of some women’s studies curricula by class or ethnicity; Jordan says, “But yes, you will find, from Florence Nightingale to Adrienne Rich, a white procession of independently well-to-do women writers (Gertrude Stein/Virgina Woolf/Hilda Doolittle are standard names among the ‘essential’ women writers)” (qtd in Grebowicz and Kinloch 2). With respect to Jordan’s attitude toward theory, they write: “[Her] mistrust of theory is thus a genuine mistrust of theory itself, which has been used as a tool for oppression, a way of talking about the other (and never to her), while at the same time making the very language in which she is described (but never addressed) unavailable to her” (2). As Nicky Marsh notes, one traditionally canonical figure who appealed to Jordan was Whitman, in part because of his democratic impulse, but also because of his awareness of the ways in which critics and publishers affected and hindered his discourse.132

“Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley” (424-425), an ode to Phillis Wheatley, imitates the diction of the poet’s work to some extent. It is fairly straightforward as a celebration of Wheatley’s ability, her ability to overcome adversity, and her status as an icon of the intellectual and creative capacities of Blacks, evident even amidst the ravages of slavery. The

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132 Marsh writes, “Jordan’s questioning of the models of the public available to her make such concerns explicit. It was, with an irony she appeared to enjoy, Walt Whitman who offered her the opportunity to fully consider the relation between America’s failed democratic promise and the alternative possibilities offered by poetry. Jordan’s celebration of Whitman’s democratic aspirations—this ‘poet of the many people as one people’—is read against the contradictions of modernity itself. Jordan reads Whitman’s repudiation of feudalism not through an idealized bardicism but through his awareness of his intermediaries, the ‘critics and publishers,’ of the New World. Such figures inevitably hamper democratic aspirations, according to Jordan, because their reliance on the ‘marketplace’ evokes the supply and demand ‘principles of scarcity’ opposed ‘to populist traditions’ of mass art” (23).
speaker points to the role commerce played in Wheatley’s captivity: “Who fell to a dollar lust coffled like meat / Captured by avarice and hate spit together” (424-425). She describes Wheatley’s suffering: “Trembling asthmatic alone on the slave black / built by a savagery traveling by carriage / viewed like a species of flaw in the livestock / A child without safety of mother or marriage” (425). She describes Wheatley’s unusual opportunity, but she says that it is Wheatley herself who is responsible for her extraordinary and improbable accomplishment: “Chosen by whimsy but born to surprise / They taught you to read but you learned how to write” (424). The poem concludes, “Your early verse sweetens the fame of our Race” (425). Jordan identifies the power of an accomplished icon, especially one who triumphed over adversity, to contribute to the “fame” of those associated her, which presumably means to stand as evidence of their abilities and determination. Interestingly, this poem is one of the least fraught and complicated in the chapter. On one level, Jordan might not have wanted to turn Wheatley into an ironic or overly complicated character. However, I think the more important reason is that, as the title suggests—“Something like a Sonnet”—Jordan is operating according to a different set of literary conventions, similar to those guiding Wheatley herself, conventions that allow praise to be more straightforward.

Another poem about a historical black female icon is “A Song of Sojourner Truth” (283-285). The poem describes an instance where Truth demands to be allowed to ride a trolley that would not stop for her. Truth takes a stand, and she places her body in the way of the trolley. She announces her resolution: “‘It’s me!’ she yelled, ‘And yes, / I walked here but I ain’ walkin back!’” (283). In the face of Truth’s defiance, the conductor and driver back down. The speaker shows that Truth believes in speaking out: “she said I’ll talk / she said A Righteous Mouth / ain’ nothin you should hide” (284). This dedication emerges from a sense of justice, as well as pride:
“she said she’d ride / just like the lady / that she was in all the knowing darkness / of her pride” (284). The poem presents that pride in the context of negative social views of black women: “They said she’s Black and ugly they said she’s / really rough / They said if you treat her like a dog / well that’ll be plenty good enough” (284). In a way that encourages the reader to embrace this sort of social struggle, Truth frames her experiences as strengthening: “I’m a woman and this hell has made me tough / (Thank God)” (285). Throughout the poem, Jordan includes variations of the refrain “Sojourner had to be just crazy / tellin all that kinda truth” (284). This diction imitates the orality and emphatic repetition of Truth’s rhetoric. It serves to create a sense of her character, and it also evokes the insistence of her determination and conviction.

“For Beautiful Mary Brown: Chicago Rent Strike Leader” (48-49) describes an activist in Chicago during the period of massive black migration there, which the speaker suggests involves the disillusionment of people realizing that the city was not what they had expected. The poem opens with an image of a group: of six women whom the speaker presents as engaging in both wage labor and reproductive labor. The speaker acknowledges that activism can be demanding, but Mary Brown’s message is: “We can fight” (49). Brown demonstrates not only determination but also compassion: “She listens to you and she sees / you crying on your knees” (49). In a somewhat unclear passage, the speaker seems to be saying not to complain but to take action: Again, the emphasis in this poem is on taking a stand, although unlike “A Song for Sojourner Truth,” this poem emphasizes collective action.

Jordan also looks at women experiencing captivity. In “As Always Lei of Ginger Blossoms for the First Lady of Hawai’i: Queen Lili’uokalani” (423-423), Jordan describes the imprisonment of Lili’uokalani by “mainlander businessmen” (423). The speaker discusses the

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133 The passage is “Don’t / tell me how you wash hope hurt and lose / don’t tell me how / sit still at the windowsill: // you will be god to bless you / Mary Brown” (49).
“weary ones” (423), presumably natives who have been oppressed and deprived of their sovereignty. She says that they need more than the familiar charms of Hawaii, African tulips, Diamond Head, mango, pineapple, sugarcane, colorful marine life, as well as “more than forgive and forget about ‘the secret annexation of society’ // mainlander businessmen who held you / prisoner / inside the “Iolani Palace” (423-424). The speaker describes the imprisonment of the queen, with her being kept in solitary confinement for nine months, forbidden even to write, before her captors finally relent and let her have her guitar. Despite this imprisonment, the poem suggests the queen continued traditions surreptitiously: “Your Highness / schooling Honolulu into secret conduct” (424). The poem suggests that the spirit of Hawaii and the Hawaiian people will endure as “the weary ones throng / faithful to the great song / once again to pound / the great gong” (424). This poem portrays a fairly idyllic vision of the natural landscape of Hawaii, with the metaphorical implication that that landscape represents the pre-colonial, and the captivity represents the post-colonial. It’s interesting that the poem emphasizes the creative powers of Lili’uokalani, which further serves to contrast her with her “businessman” captors.\footnote{134}

In “To Free Nelson Mandela” (416-418), Jordan discusses Mandela’s wife enduring her husband’s incarceration. The poem repeats two phrases, “Every night Winnie Mandela” and “Every night the waters of the world / turn to the softly burning / light of the moon” (416), which evoke a sense of waiting. However, much of the poem is a discussion of “the thud of bodies fallen / into the sickening / into the thickening / crimes of apartheid” (417). The speaker

\footnote{134}{Personally, I have strong anti-monarchist beliefs. As such, I find the use of a monarch as a political icon suspect, because traditionally monarchs rule through heredity and without accountability to the governed. However, I would not be inclined to argue against the possibility of productively reading this particular poem without worrying too much about its portrayal of monarchy (though one should always be skeptical of it). In the world of the poem, Lili’uokalani is a kinder, gentler monarch, chiefly serving to dramatize the very real wrongs of colonialism. She is also an actual historical personage, a “woman of power” who can be claimed as part of the broader reclamation of women’s history in order to show that women had and can still have political power. Less problematically, Grahn also writes about a monarch, Boudica. In the passage I discuss in the previous section, Grahn portrays her residing over an ostensibly egalitarian society more through persuasion than decree.}
envisioned a point at which “no one obeys the bossman of atrocities” (417). Then, she lists many different classes of people, including professions but also “the anonymous” and “the everlastingly insulted,” and she says that, at last, they “despise the meal without grace / the water without wine / the trial without rights / the work without rest” (418). She adds, “at last the diggers of the ditch / begin the living funeral / for death” (418). While the emphasis in the poem is on waiting, the implication is that this waiting might take far longer than it should but that oppression and injustice eventually provoke meaningful opposition, among both those directly affected and those who aren’t.

In a somewhat more “experimental” vein, Jordan explores the forces of constraint affecting the Japanese Empress in “What Great Grief Has Made the Empress Mute” (506). The poem is a series of couplets, each line a subordinate clause staring with “Because,” with the two lines sometimes reinforcing one another. However, some of them are contradictory, as in the identical first and final couplets: “Because it was raining outside the palace / Because there was no rain in her vicinity.” Similarly Jordan writes about Michiko’s simultaneous exposure and invisibility: “Because people kept asking her questions / Because nobody ever asked her anything.” Perhaps this exploration of contradictions is meant to evoke the contradictions in the life of the Empress herself, ostensibly in a position of great honor and respect (although neither the Emperor nor the Empress have any legal power, even ceremonially), but she is also constrained by her gender, by Japanese social norms, and by the demands of her position. Her role isolates her from the women in her life: “Because marriage robbed her of her mother / Because she lost her daughters to the same tradition.” Her son does not comfort her: “Because her son laughed when she opened her mouth / Because he never delighted in anything she said.”

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135 Jordan writes much about the Japanese lover Haruko, and she seems to have a good deal of interest in East Asia in general.
136 The epigraph reads: “N.Y. Times headline / Dedicated to the Empress Michiko and to Janice Mirikitani.”
Other couplets explore the divide between appearance and actuality in her carefully staged life:

“Because the jewels of her life did not belong to her / Because the glow of gold and silk
disguised her soul.” Perhaps the most interestingly complex couplet is: “Because no one could
imagine reasons for her grief / Because her grief required not imagination.” It is not entirely clear
what it means not to require imagination. On the most basic level, it is possible that the
imagination of others might do very little to assuage that grief. It is also possible that grief is a
fundamental emotional experience that doesn’t need to be explained. I think that the most
interesting reading of that line is to see that Michiko serves as a screen for the imagination of her
countrymen and the world media, which undermines her as actual person, so Jordan is implying
that she should be able to have her own personal experience that is not held up for public
scrutiny and discussion.

A series of poems celebrates the life and work of Dr. Elizabeth Ann Karlin, an advocate
for reproductive rights and women’s rights in general. The poems celebrate her humanity and
bravery. Some also emphasize that she was a lesbian and left behind a bereaved partner. By
addressing the partner as well, this collection of poems also affirms a sense of community bound
by common purpose and affection. “The End of Kindness: Poem for Dr. Elizabeth Ann Karlin”
(582-583) describes the doctor dying of brain cancer. The poem opens with a description of
people going about their daily lives, which contrasts with death, and which also shows the people
who might have been the recipients of Karlin’s kindness. The speaker says that she has sent a
peace lily to Karlin’s bedside to comfort her and steady her resolve to stop living with “that
disease that saw / Intelligence and speech become / Impossible” (582). She says that Karlin’s
kindness toward others is reflected in her decision to limit her own suffering. Feeling grief, the
speaker accidentally cuts her thumb with a kitchen knife, which heightens her sense of being
alive. It also makes her think about “what hurts / What really hurts / And what / Does not” (583). The speaker acknowledges the pain of the doctor, and she accepts her decision, but she still maintains a tone of determination, as it to suggest the doctor’s struggle with illness may be over, but her struggle for social justice carries on.

“Poem for Annie Topham, Partner of Dr. Elizabeth Ann Karlin” (583-584) opens, “As you know / I loved her too / And that was not so long ago” (583). The speaker describes her memories of the deceased: “I will not forget the laughter / Or the mock fights / That came after” (583). She remembers other shared experiences, which suggest that she and Karlin were close: “Tears / Mosquito bites / And bike rides through / The wildly blooming arboretum near the lake” (583). She tells the partner, “I loved her too / The woman who loved you” (584). The speaker describes the addressee keeping vigil over her dying partner on a “makeshift cot” (584). The speaker considers that death makes things seem meaningless, and perhaps especially things that are usually considered cheerful: “As useless sunlight glistens / On the useless world beyond that / Final gloom of light” (584). However, while acknowledging that cynicism and the pain of grief, the poem concludes with the speaker determining to keep love alive, so to speak. Just as she loved Karln, she resolves to love her partner “Forever / For love’s sake” (584). The emotional connection she felt with Karlin endures on a personal level, and the implication is that Karlin’s power as an icon in the struggle for reproductive rights also persists.

In “Poem for The New York Times Dedicated to Dr. Elizabeth Ann Karlin” (623-625), the speaker has decided “that the Pope / should not and shall not / have / an abortion” (623). The speaker thinks the Pope should only have a say over what happens “underneath / all those clothes / he loves to put on / and never take off” (623). She wants him to be aware that billions of people, Catholics, members of other religions, and atheists do not appreciate his “pronouncements / on
everything” except “his own / personal life” (624). She adds that the fact that he himself is supposed to be celibate should illustrate for him “the absurdity / of your having any / opinion / whatsoever” (624) with regard to the sex lives of others. The other two poems addressing Karlin include her more directly and thus adopt a more solemn tone. This poem does not focus on her personal life and death so much as it pays homage to the cause of reproductive rights she stood for, expressed here through the particular insistence and humor of Jordan. The Pope serves as the antithesis of Karlin, as he appears a character driven by judgment and lacking in compassion. While he has safely ensconced himself in authority and archaic, silly pageantry, Karlin has braved a culture of disapproval and violent intimidation to help individuals and allow them to make their own decisions.

Jordan explores the ethics of being an artist in “Poem to My Sister, Ethel Ennis, Who Sang ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at the Second Inauguration of Richard Milhous Nixon, January 20, 1973” (166-168). The speaker addresses the singer, who is singing at the inauguration of “the killer king” (166). She asks, “what is this song / you have chosen to sing?” (166). Then the poet quotes the parts of the anthem about the instruments of war being used: “and the rockets’ red glare / the bombs bursting in air” (166). The speaker asks, “my sister / what is your song to a flag? // to the twelve days of Christmas / bombing when the homicidal holiday shit tore forth” (166). Then the speaker describes the violence wrought upon Vietnam: “the agonized the blown limbs the blinded eyes the / silence of the children dead on the street and the / incinerated homes and Bach Mai Hospital blasted” (166). She puts the martial imagery and symbolism of the song in the context of the actual brutality of war: “the ceremonial cannons that burst forth a choking / smoke to celebrate murder” (167). Continuing to ironically use the lyrics of the song, the speaker asks Ennis when it will be clear to see “power / strangling every program / to protect and feed
and educate and heal and house / the people” (167). The poem concludes, “say you can see / my sister / and sing no more of war” (168). The poem is not particularly harsh toward Ennis, but it displays considerably graphic and outraged detail about what the facile display of patriotism and militarism in the national anthem might actually mean in terms of current events. In this case, a Black woman receives the dubious honor of singing this anthem, but this honor in fact is a farce when viewed in historical and cultural context. While the speaker presumably understands the fact that singing at a presidential inauguration might be viewed as a great honor and obligation for the singer, she wants to remind her of the very real horrors hidden behind the trappings of power and pomp and circumstance.

Conclusion

I’d like to address three issues relating to the forces of emotional regulation in these poems. The first is the matter of the divide between “political” and “personal” poetry. I think it is obvious that these two categories are not in strict opposition to one another and the publication of one does not threaten the legitimacy of the other. That said, my personal impression is that assumptions about the relative worth of these two modes of poetry persist to some degree, and the debate over this issue offers a valuable historical example of the forces leading to excuses for emotion.

It is a very simple matter to criticize poetry for being too “political,” which is to say it takes straightforward positions, “tells” more than “shows,” and is of inferior artistic quality, which its proponents presumably would overlook because they care more about political matters than poetry itself. Another implicit criticism is that it is self-congratulatory. On the other hand, more politically-minded people could criticize less political poetry as quietist, solipsistic,
hackneyed, and stylistically reactionary. I strongly suspect that, like so many things, the criticisms on both sides arise from insecurity. The people critical of political poetry are worried that their own work is not political enough, or will be criticized as such. Meanwhile, the people critical of personal poetry are worried that their own work is not artful enough, or will be criticized as such. Examples of significant figures addressing the dichotomy of “personal” and “political” can be found in the work of Adrienne Rich and Helen Vendler. I think some of the passages I will discuss are intentionally provocative and should probably not be taken as absolute statements of unwavering core convictions. Nonetheless, statements such as these do very much circulate within and influence American poetry culture, so I think they merit serious and critical consideration.

Rich has written, “I was constantly struck by how many poems published in magazines today are personal to the point of suffocation” (*Arts of the Possible* 109). What does it mean for a poem to be personal to the point of suffocation? Could one draw a picture of that? The statement seems exaggerated, to say the least. I understand that much feminist and political writing is polemical, often usefully so, but polemic can’t become a reflex, and statements such as the one above do not stand up to scrutiny. Rich further complains about the “shallowness of perspective” (*Arts of the Possible* 112) in these journals, resulting in “self-absorbed, complacent poems,” including “brittle poems of eternal boyishness” and “poems oozing male or female self-hatred.”

137 Rich is certainly policing emotional content here. Poems that express dissatisfaction with the self aren’t just bad; they ooze. Similarly, she polices both emotion and gender when she

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137 Rich writes, “This shallowness of perspective shows up in reams of self-absorbed, complacent poems appearing in literary magazines, poems that begin, ‘In the sepia wash of the old photograph...’; poems containing far too many words (computer-driven? anyway, verbally incontinent); poems without music; poems without dissonance; brittle poems of eternal boyishness; poems oozing male or female self-hatred; poems that belabor a pattern until it becomes numbing; poems with epigraphs that unfortunately say it all; poems that depend on brand names; others that depend on literary name-dropping (‘I have often thought of Rilke here...’)” (112).
criticizes “eternal boyishness,” which leads one to wonder what sort of male perspective she considers superior: solemn and stoic, perhaps? That would be a major, if unintentional, reinforcement of male gender norms.

Taking the opposite approach, Helen Vendler wonders, “At first I found it hard to understand, when such categories were ritually invoked, why people felt they could respond only to literature that replicated their own experience of race, class, or gender” (Soul Says 2). She reflects on Toni Morrison’s account of reading novels while “looking for me” but being angered by the representations of black women; making an interesting genre-based argument, she says, “Since I was not a novel reader, I had never gone on that quest for a socially specified self resembling me. The last thing I wanted from literature was a mirror of my external circumstances. What I wanted was a mirror of my feelings, and that I found in poetry” (2). It is certainly fine to look for a “mirror of my feelings” in poetry, though of course the distinction between “my external circumstances” and “my feelings” does not stand up to scrutiny either: the two cannot be separated, either in terms of one’s present feelings, or in one’s habits of emotional response, which have been shaped significantly by external circumstances over time. Moreover, as a white woman, Vender would have historically had greater access to literary narratives that reflect her circumstances in a realistic or empowering manner than would a black woman. That leads her to a purist perspective where identification with the identity of the characters does not and should not matter—a perspective that oversimplifies the experience of encountering a text, even for sophisticated readers. Later in the same book, Vendler identifies the poetry written by Rich about pure victims and pure forces of victimization, without any complication of the victim-victimizer

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138 One might argue that the operative word is “eternal,” meaning that Rich is not criticizing “boyishness” per se but rather poems that are static and incurious. However, the passage in which this phrase appears very much critiques other manifestations of emotion in poetry, so I remain convinced that “boyishness” lacking an excuse for emotion is itself the target of her ire.
dichotomy, as the work of a “moral allegorist” (216).\textsuperscript{139} To be fair, Vendler makes sure to say that is not true of all of Rich’s work, and neither does she said that it is necessarily a bad thing. She says, “If we give her her way, and agree to see the world through her eyes as a morality play, we find that her work, like other stylizations employing simplification, can have a powerful effect. That effect is chiefly one of pathos, of the innocent wronged. Perhaps this is an especially maternal feeling” (217). She writes, “The value of Rich’s poems, ethically speaking, is that they have continued to press against insoluble questions of suffering, evil, love, justice, and patriotism. For all their epic wish to generalize to the social whole, they are both limited by, and enhanced by, their essentially first-person lyric status. They hate what the person Adrienne Rich hates, love what she loves” (223). Nonetheless, Vendler adds, “But the real and complex Rich remains more convincing than her allegorical surrogate victims” (223). As elsewhere, the critical demand is for the complex, for modulated emotions, which is identified with what is authentic, “real.”

Based on these passages alone, one might imagine a deep and intractable divide between Rich and Vendler, and perhaps one does exist. And yet in an article published in 1973, Vendler writes, “Adrienne Rich’s memorable poetry has been given us now, a book at a time, for twenty-two years. Four years after she published her first book, I read it in almost disbelieving wonder; someone my age was writing down my life” (“Ghostlier Demarcations” 160).\textsuperscript{140} Despite her

\textsuperscript{139} Vendler writes, “For all her stylistic appearance of realism, then, Rich is actually a moral allegorist. We might as well have the Spenserian Una and Archimago (Truth and Evil) as the innocent girl and the doctor/aesthete/sadist. Rich has a powerful Manichean conviction that the world exhibits a struggle to the death between structural Good and structural Evil, and she picks (from history, from the news, from sociological analysis) allegorical illustrations of her Manichean world. Personal good and evil, one-on-one (the possessive mother dominating the victimized son, the cruel brother tormenting the naïve brother, the attractive brother stealing the boyfriend of the plodding sister) don’t interest her because such relations don’t stand for anything in her allegorical scheme of Oppression and Victimage” (216).

\textsuperscript{140} Vendler writes, “Adrienne Rich’s memorable poetry has been given us now, a book at a time, for twenty-two years. Four years after she published her first book, I read it in almost disbelieving wonder; someone my age was writing down my life” (“Ghostlier Demarcations” 160).
aforementioned dismissal of the power of identification, at least as based on “external circumstances,” she attests to an almost rapturous identification with the work of Rich, which was by 1973 already distinctly political, and had been for a while. As for Rich, she writes, “I take it that poetry—if it is poetry—is liberatory at its core” (*Arts of the Possible* 116). At first glance, that statement might appear to be a call for insistently political poetry, if one were to interpret “liberatory” as a political quality. However, Rich also states, “I want to write, and read, different kinds of poems for different urgencies and kinds of pleasure. I don’t believe any single poem can speak to all of us, nor is that necessary; but I believe poems can reach many for whom they were not consciously written, sometimes in ways the poet never expected” (118). So, perhaps these “different kinds of poems” with “different urgencies and kinds of pleasure” would include poems that are not explicitly political. However, that makes the phrase “liberatory at is core” broad beyond any meaningful distinction: it would mean political, but also enjoyable. Do not those personal poems suffocate, though?

Excessive insistence on any one kind of poetry can lead to statements that clearly oversimplify things. I understand that polemic plays a role, that feminism has faced much resistance within and outside of academia, and that poetry has played an important role within feminism, 141 so it would be important to lay claim to a place in poetry for politics. One can certainly understand Rich’s remarks in that context. That said, it is also important not to take that sort of remark as an absolute statement of truth, and to reinforce the facile dismissal of certain “personal” poetry on the primary basis of its lack of political content or engagement with social

141Nicky Marsh writes, “Poetry was a crucial cultural practice for second-wave feminism. It provided the movement with a ‘generative core’ able to encompass many of the familiar divisions—between affirmation and subversion, between identity and difference, between literary criticism and political transformation—that characterized Anglo-American feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. Poetry could address the individual and the collective, the public and the private, be as faithful to feminism’s need to contribute to a high literary aesthetic as it was to its need to undermine the grounds upon which such a category was constructed. So quick to write, so cheap to reproduce, poetry could raise consciousness, destabilize the symbolic order, and still be back in time for class” (15).
context. Such policing of the borders of poetry as a genre limits poetry’s potential and reinforces and allows to pass unexamined a regime of emotional (and gender) regulation, as evidenced by the casual dismissal of “eternal boyishness.”

The second issue I want to address is the presence of struggle in the poems in this chapter. Why must there be struggle and failures of power? In the introduction of this chapter, I address the question of what those failures of power accomplish, but wouldn’t it be possible to have feminist poetry that shows scenes of triumph instead? I understand that one doesn’t want to create a false sense of complacency, as if to suggest victories have been won and struggles ended when in reality they continue with considerable urgency. I also understand, despite the project of historical discovery and the celebration of iconic women able to inspire and create a sense of possibility, feminists might be understandably skeptical of the concept of heroes in general. After all, heroes can be appropriated for propaganda, and they reinforce the notion of the exceptional individual, which obscures social context. But feminists still celebrate heroic women—just not so much in poetry. Despite the very functional use to which the poets in this chapter put poetry, it remains a genre demanding some sort of complexity, some form of emotional regulation. However, I think it is possible, and important, to imagine politically efficacious poetry following a different paradigm. Certainly feminism is a famously self-critiquing enterprise. As feminist thought and aesthetics advance, it makes sense to experiment further with different emotional rhetorics. One point to consider is whether certain emotions are highly incompatible with feminism and political activism in general, and whether different emotions are better suited to different forms of activism than others, or whether they are merely arbitrarily unevenly distributed. Anger most definitely has its place, but what about hatred? I suspect that undiluted hatred stands almost alone in its perceived incompatibility with contemporary American poetry.
Lastly, despite the skepticism I just expressed about a few passages from Rich’s prose, I think that the poets discussed in this chapter provide good examples of purposeful emotional regulation that can be compellingly justified. Although I am skeptical toward emotional regulation as an under-theorized and overly determinative force, I do think it can be a valid strategy. These poets want people to interrogate what it means to have an icon. They were well aware of the operations of politicized rhetoric, with oppressive leaders inflaming hatred and zeal, marginalized groups being silenced through shame and derision directed at members of those group—whether activists, artists, or those accused of criminal acts—held to be representative of that group and its purported deficiencies, and women patterning their selves after women such as Marilyn Monroe whom others said were desirable. To foreswear this method of persuasion is to limit access to a powerful political tool. However, these poets offer women other emotional experiences: dignity, solidarity, desire, responsibility, integrity, and strength. In particular, they evoke power/affirmation and injustice: in any activist discourse, these are arguably the two most central concerns. If one were to make a compelling, non-arbitrary justification of emotional regulation—of requiring excuses for emotion—the emphasis of these two concerns would probably be it. In general, changing readers’ emotional reality means changing the emotional rhetoric they encounter. By not adopting the form of emotional rhetoric they seek to undermine, they deny its legitimacy. Of course, poetry already exhibited the form of ambivalence and complicated emotion they sought, so it is rational that they would embrace it. With poetry lending itself readily to public performance, its “difficult” emotion also holds open the possibility that provocation will lead to discussion, and discussion to action.
THE PROMISE OF WHITMAN

For gay male American poets, Walt Whitman is an emblem of possibility: he wrote robustly homoerotic poetry, lived a life of adventure and service, became a literary celebrity in his own lifetime, pioneered a powerful and influential poetic style, and ultimately assumed a role of tremendous prominence in the canon. To be sure, his “scandalous” lifestyle and writing caused some hardship with respect to employment and publication, and society certainly constrained the forces that could form a thriving gay community in which he could openly participate, but at the same time he triumphed against remarkable odds, as if his personality and vision were elemental forces, rising far above those of the common person. Adding to that, his vision was one of kindness, acceptance, and vital, unashamed eroticism. It is no wonder, then, that he is a figure whom gay poets might credit in interviews and essays, as well as through other forms of commentary.¹⁴²

As should be no surprise by Chapter Five, however, it is not unambiguous admiration but rather “complex” emotion that characterizes poetry written by gay poets in which Whitman appears. On the one hand, they certainly pay homage to him: to his artistry, to his democratic vision, and to his personal bravery. They also describe his poetry giving them a sense of personal connection to him,¹⁴³ and they closely link it with the development of their own sexual identity. At the same time, they express ambivalence. Either they portray a humanly flawed Whitman, perhaps peevish or lonely, or they call into question his idealistic vision, both of the possibility of

¹⁴² Perhaps surprisingly, though, relatively few gay male American poets have brought much attention to him as an icon in their actual poetry.
¹⁴³ Whitman also connects them to other gay readers of his work. Christopher Nealon notes that “gay male poets cited each other, or cited Walt Whitman and Crane, to signal their membership in something like a lineage, specifically a lineage of imagining brotherhood as the trope and relationship that could redeem the American sins of violence and greed, and make space for gay men as true citizens while doing it” (617).
making their sexuality as at home in society as it is in his poetry, and of the potential for sexual encounter to become spiritual and empoweringly egalitarian. The speakers in these poems seem to yearn for these things to be true, but they cannot avoid awareness of the distance between this ideal and their reality. They feel sad but still hopeful. While they display skepticism toward their literary icon, they also hint at a measure of self-reproach for not living the life or creating the art that he himself was able to. Yet another source of ambivalence in these works might stem from poetic self-fashioning. That is to say, the speakers are asserting their own value, and the value of the poem, by engaging with and challenging the myth of Whitman, the gay American poet against whom all other gay American poets are read on some level. They position him as a figure of value, but they also assert their own worthiness of not only addressing him, but also pointing out his limitations and shortcomings.

This complexity of emotion reflects (but is not, I would argue, wholly explained by) the complex emotional reality of gay men, shaped by stigmatization and oppression, the AIDS epidemic, and their navigation of the emotional script in society that are informed by gender norms to which they do not entirely adhere. Queer theory addresses this emotional landscape—in fact, it has heavily informed the recent trajectory of emotion theory. One of the great achievements of queer theory has been the questioning of supposedly positive emotions that are supposed to guide one toward and reward one for living a conventionally heterosexual lifestyle, as well as skepticism toward conventional understanding of homosexuality as a pathology necessarily entailing negative emotions. Sara Ahmed notes, “Queer subjects, when faced by the ‘comforts’ of heterosexuality may feel uncomfortable” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 149). This insight brings awareness to the conventions of society that promote heterosexuality as

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144 As Heather Love writes, “We need a genealogy of queer affect that does not overlook the negative, shameful and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence in the last century” (qtd in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 89).
natural and privileged, which then allows critics to denaturalize those norms, challenge them, and argue for establishing social practices of greater inclusivity. Judith Halberstam, as well as others, consider the despair wrought by the AIDS crisis, but despite its ravages, she notes, “The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and, as [Mark] Doty explores, squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand” (2). Even outside of the context of the epidemic, though, the unconventional and often non-reproductive aspects of homosexual experience allow her to see “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (Halberstam 2). Ahmed writes about “Queer pleasures” and “queer hope” emerging not only through sexual activity but also through gathering together and participating in activism, exploring new possibilities and finding new ways of relating to others (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 165). She adds, “Such possibilities are not about being free from norms, or being outside the circuits of exchange within global capitalism. It is the non-transcendence of queer that allows queer to do its work. A queer hope is not, then, sentimental. It is affective precisely in the face of the persistence of forms of life that endure in the negative attachment of ‘the not’” (165). Like Halberstam, Ahmed sees meaning and political potential in queer experiences of emotions, but both nonetheless retain an explicit link between that possibility and negative emotion.

Michael D. Snediker writes that “queer theory, for all its contributions to our understandings of affect, has had far more to say about negative affects than positive ones”
Of course, queer theorists, including the ones above, do not argue from a position of absolute despair, and they do discuss possibilities, pleasures, and positive emotions that can counterbalance the negative emotions they discuss. Surely Snediker realizes as much, so I am left to assume that what he is reacting against is the fact that in queer theory the discussion of positive emotions is usually associated with, or emerges from, discussion of negative emotions. Snediker’s underlying point, as I understand it, is therefore similar to the one that I’m making: context matters. By linking positive emotion to negative emotion, queer theorists can perform important work as discussed in the paragraph above, but to do so persistently, almost perfunctorily, is to perpetuate that discourse of negative emotion on some level, and, more significantly, to forestall other ways of thinking about positive emotion. What Snediker proposes is “queer optimism”: “Queer optimism, oppositely, is not promissory. It doesn’t ask that some future time make good on its own hopes. Rather, Queer Optimism asks that optimism, embedded in its own immanent present, might be interesting. Queer optimism’s interest—its capacity to be interesting, to hold our attention—depends on its emphatic responsiveness to and solicitation of rigorous thinking” (2-3). As he explains, his project is metatheoretical: “Even as my investigation extends, at certain junctures, to the likes of happiness, this is not because if one were more queerly optimistic, one necessarily would feel happier. Queer optimism, in this sense, can be considered a form of meta-optimism: it wants to think about feeling good, to make disparate aspects of feeling good thinkable” (3). Snediker rightly identifies the need to bring

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145 His point that immediately follows is also worth consideration: “Furthermore, in its attachment to not taking personhood qua personhood for granted, queer theory’s suspicious relations to persons has itself become suspiciously routinized, if not taken for granted in its own right” (4).
146 Ahmed writes, “Of course, queer feelings are not simply about the space of negativity, even when that negativity gets translated into the work of care for others. Queer politics are also about enjoyment, where the ‘non’ offers hope and possibility for other ways of inhabiting bodies. How do the pleasures of queer intimacies challenge the designation of queer as abject, as that which is ‘cast out from the domain of the liveable’ (Butler 1993:9), or even as the ‘death’ made inevitable by the failure to reproduce life itself? This is a risky question. Whilst queers have been constructed as abject beings, they are also sources of desire and fascination” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 162).
critical attention to an emotion in a field that has historically been skeptical (and justifiably so) toward it. If one cannot find a way to talk about a positive emotion, in and of itself, as “interesting,” then one perpetuates a discourse tied to suffering and frustration—vitally important topics, to be sure, but ones that do not provide a sufficiently broad perspective on human experience.\textsuperscript{147}

If one accepts Whitman as he appears in these poems as a symbol of positive emotional experience—openness, kindness, egalitarianism, camaraderie, adventure, sexual enjoyment, and unashamedness—then it is possible to read these poets as thinking about the possibility of positive emotions. And yet Whitman eludes them. He exists in the past. He can be a bit peevish and sad. He appears in the present, but only in erotic flashes. Nonetheless, he exists as a promise of something more. It is understandable to be skeptical of such a promise, especially in a culture long dominated by oppression and disadvantages in many different forms. And such concerns aren’t invalid, insofar as optimism entails a risk of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism,” which “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (\textit{Cruel Optimism} 1).\textsuperscript{148} Still, the promise of Whitman holds considerable power, and the speakers in these poems demonstrate an abiding investment in that promise even as they question it.

\textsuperscript{147} In another significant passage, Snediker writes, “\textit{Queer Optimism} involves a thought-experiment. What if happiness could outlast fleeting moments, without that persistence attenuating the quality of happiness? What if instead of attenuating happiness, this extension of happiness opened it up to critical investigations that didn’t a priori doubt it, but instead made happiness complicated, and strange? (That is, what if the ‘quality of happiness’ were not itself a given?) If the insights of the past few decades have mobilized shame, shattering, or melancholy as \textit{interesting} (as opposed to instances of fear and trembling) what if we could learn from those insights and critical practices, and imagine happiness as theoretically mobilizable, as conceptually difficult? Which is to ask, what if happiness weren’t merely, self-reflexively happy, but interesting? \textit{Queer Optimism} cannot guarantee what such a happiness would look like, how such a happiness would feel. And while it does not promise a road to an Emerald City, \textit{Queer Optimism} avails a new terrain of critical inquiry, which seems a felicity in its own right” (30).

\textsuperscript{148} Berlant writes, “Whatever the \textit{experience} of optimism is in particular, then, the \textit{affective structure} of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that \textit{this} time, nearness to \textit{this} thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of
Allen Ginsberg

Ginsberg makes frequent references to other writers, such as Blake, Shelley, Gide, Artaud, W.C. Williams, Tzara, Breton, and so forth. He also alludes to contemporary writers such as Neal Cassady, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, LeRoi Jones, and Peter Orlovsky, many of whom he had a personal connection to. What most of these writers have in common is some sort of stylistic innovation, especially, as with Blake and the Surrealists and Dadaists, if that stylistic edge gestures toward the irrational or the mystical. Another common characteristic of many of these authors is homosexuality, at least in their personal lives if not always explicitly in their writing. Ginsberg’s frequent allusions to authors such as these demonstrates his awareness of canon formation, and he is advancing a countercultural, queer, and in some ways (but not others) iconoclastic canon. In that manner, he advocates literature as a force for challenging social norms.

On another level, Ginsberg is also engaging in a sort of self-promotion, a myth-making and self-conscious pursuit of literary celebrity. While that in and of itself is not terribly remarkable or even all that uncommon, he does pursue it with a degree of unabashed enthusiasm that has been seldom rivaled. Another dimension to this practice is that it shows his concern with being a chronicler, an unflinching observer of society, which can also be seen in the work of Whitman, as well as in that of Williams and other Modernists. For Ginsberg, this tendency is perhaps homage. At the same time, it constitutes a genuine challenge to social order and to the literary establishment, especially with regards to sex and sexuality. It is as if Ginsberg is saying, here is reality, here is what others are afraid to write about, here is what social norms attempt to suppress and erase, and here is what I find to be of significance. In that way, the verisimilitude...
and comprehensiveness of his work is moving toward the same objective as the irrational elements of his work.

Although Blake and W.C. Williams are frequently acknowledged throughout Ginsberg’s body of work, the strongest and most consistent presence in his work is that of Walt Whitman. “Improvisation in Beijing” (937-939) discusses the reasons why the speaker writes poetry. He lists various writers, other people such as his parents, and other factors such as homosexuality, religion, politics, and mortality, that cause him to write, but he keeps returning to Whitman. He says, “I write poetry because Walt Whitman gave world permission to speak with candor. / I write poetry because Walt Whitman opened up poetry’s verse-line for unobstructed breath” (937). One can understand breath as openness and candor, or as a sweeping quality observable in Ginsberg’s own use of the long line. Either way, the key idea is “unobstructed,” which presents Whitman as a breaker of boundaries. The speaker says, “I write poetry because Walt Whitman said, ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself (I am large, I contain multitudes.)’” (939). By using this quotation from Whitman, the speaker endorses his willingness to “contradict” himself, to make bold hortatory statements; this line suggests the speaker admires Whitman’s confidence, as well as his candor about himself. Also, as Ginsberg occasionally remarks, he himself feels like a fraud at times, and surely he recognizes some limitations to what he writes. However, even if he “contradicts” himself, he still sees merit in his writing. In addition, the speaker says, “I write poetry to talk back to Whitman” (938). This reason reflects a sense of immediacy, as if one could speak to Whitman almost as easily as one could speak to someone who’s still alive. Ginsberg’s work certainly aims for that level of immediacy.¹⁴⁹ These qualities are arguably a bit naive, at least from a theoretical perspective. After all, the problems with a Wordsworthian conception of poetry as a man speaking to men have long since been discussed.

¹⁴⁹ Ginsberg also writes, “I write poetry ‘First thought, best thought’ always” (938).
On the other hand, Ginsberg’s poetry is aiming for real social action, involving real community and real bodies. He promotes sexuality and various discourses that have been hidden or effaced. As such, the ideals of connectedness and immediacy fit with those aims. Moreover, one might ask whether naiveté, to the extent that it is present, is even a problem. Earnestness, enthusiasm, and a sense of connection to others are all easy emotional qualities to criticize, yet they offer not only political potential but also a potentially powerful, moving emotional experience for the reader.

Throughout Ginsberg’s work one can find similar stray references to the virtues of Whitman. In “Personals Ad” (970), Ginsberg addresses this connection between the erotic and the literary and the social even more when he writes that he “seeks helpmate companion protector friend” who is “empowered by Whitman Blake Rimbaud Ma Rainey & Vivaldi.” (One seems similar gestures in Grahn’s work with the notion of a Sapphic community.) In “Thoughts on a Breath” (637-639), he praises Whitman’s erotic vision: “Oh Walt Whitman salutations you knew the laborer, / the sexual intelligent horny handed / man who lived in Dirt / and fixed the axles of Capitalism!” (638). In “Ode to Failure” (745), Ginsberg celebrates Whitman’s kindness and openness: “Walt Whitman viva’d local losers—courage to Fat Ladies in the Freak show! nervous prisoners whose mustached lips dripped sweat on chow lines.” In these passages, Whitman evokes, and perhaps lends credibility to, sexual energy and diverse lives, especially of a subversive nature.

In addition, a few poems have titles indicating that they are written in a Whitmanesque style, and a couple of poems deal with Whitman as a central character. “Love Poem on Theme by Whitman” (123) is one of Ginsberg’s earlier poems; published in 1954, it in fact predates Howl. The poem begins with a Whitmanesque, biblical sense of erotic possibility: “I’ll go into
the bedroom silently and lie down between the bridegroom and the bride, / those bodies fallen
from heaven stretched out waiting naked and restless.” The speaker engages them in a tender
advance, but the action quickly becomes sexual: “legs raised up crook’d to receive, cock in the
darkness driven tormented and attacking / roused up from hole to itching head, / bodies locked
shuddering naked, hot hips and buttocks screwed into each other.” After the resulting climax, the
speaker departs: “throbbing contraction of bellies / till the white come flow in the swirling sheets,
/ and the bride cry for forgiveness, and the groom be covered with tears of passion and
compassion, / and I rise up from the bed replenished with last intimate gestures and kisses of
farewell—.” The speaker contrasts this vision of erotic possibility with the reality of erotic
restraint: “all before the mind wakes, behind shades and closed doors in a darkened house /
where the inhabitants roam unsatisfied in the night, / nude ghosts seeking each other out in
silence” (123). Despite not showing a terrible amount of sexual interest in women elsewhere,
Ginsberg certainly does seem to strike an egalitarian pose for this poem, which is perhaps a
gesture toward Whitman’s egalitarian spirit, though it is worth asking why exactly the female
participant will be crying for forgiveness. In the final three lines, the poem retreats from, or at
least frames, the erotic content of what came before. The images of darkness, of being closed off,
of wandering in unfulfilled desire suggest a metapoetic project for this poem. Ginsberg is
pointing toward the power of poetry, as exemplified by Whitman, to rouse readers from erotic
slumber. The “all before the mind wakes” line suggests some element of reverie, but even if the
narrative action is only a daydream, it still conveys the idea that Whitman has somehow enabled
the expression of this particular form of desire and the articulation of this vision of sexual agency.

“After Whitman & Reznikoff” (740) is a short poem in two sections. The first, entitled
“What Relief,” imagines the speaker losing the ability to write letters after a truck accident,
which would free him from writing letters to the editor and poems in protest against war, law enforcement, and authoritarian governments. Feeling relieved, he imagines young men in rural Kansas encountering his dusty books in the library. In doing so, the speaker might help them better understand and accept themselves as the work of Whitman has done for others.\textsuperscript{150} The second section, entitled “Lower East Side,” describes a neighborhood woman who fondles the speaker’s crotch and asks why he doesn’t talk to her. The section concludes: “‘Big Jerk...you think you’re famous?’—reminds me of my mother.” This section hints at the speaker’s homosexuality as evidenced by his lack of interest in the woman, but it also shows the limits of his own “democratic” sexuality.

Beyond these poems that are written explicitly after the style of Whitman, there are a couple of poems in which Whitman himself is the main topic. By far the most famous is “A Supermarket in California” (144). The poem opens with the speaker in so-so condition, “with a headache self-conscious,” heading toward the supermarket. The speaker says, “In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!” These enumerations lead him to exclaim, “What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, García Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?”

“[D]reaming of your enumerations” is a playful commentary on Whitman’s style of writing, and

\textsuperscript{150} John Raskin records the ambivalence Ginsberg himself displayed toward Whitman as a young man: “Ginsberg noted that Whitman was a homosexual—he was ‘born a “freak,”’ he wrote—and he suggested insightfully that ‘we are fortunate in his abnormality, because it was the prime factor in shaping the message of Leaves of Grass.’ Reading between the lines, one might say Allen recognized that he, too, was born a freak. Whitman helped him to recognize his own abnormality and to accept it, at least in part. But he was also very ashamed of his abnormality, and he felt that Leaves of Grass was ‘very slightly tainted’ by Whitman’s abnormality. Ginsberg was also troubled by Whitman’s deliberately crafted persona—his habit of calling himself Walt not Walter Whitman, his manner of wearing ‘working man’s clothes,’ and his habit of posing in public with his hand casually resting on his hip” (41). Ginsberg’s ambivalence concerns Whitman’s homosexuality and theatricality, traits that Ginsberg himself would later embrace wholeheartedly.
the following description of things such as “peaches and penumbras” is playfully over the top and perhaps a bit ironic, although with Ginsberg irony sometimes difficult to discern. The overarching image is one of wandering, of searching for something. The “shopping” for images line describes writing poetry, and it also describes searching for an icon.

Next, the speaker sees Walt Whitman in that grocery store: “I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.” He talks, and flirts, with the young men: “I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?” He is a paradigm of uninhibited sexuality and sensuality, evoked by the abrupt and unguarded, although rhetorically lofty, question, “Are you my Angel?” The speaker follows this extraordinary character, and the two start to sample all of the food without “passing the cashier”: “I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective. We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.” Not having to pay for anything is a vision of a utopian society (however silly in this instance) without capitalist encumbrance, even though it unfolds in what is actually a thoroughly capitalist institution, a store. Also, sampling the different foods is a metaphor for Whitman’s openness to new experiences.

The final section carries with it a sense of both possibility and loss: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?” “Which way does your beard point tonight?” suggests erotic possibility, in which Whitman assumes a leading role. However, that possibility exists alongside an awareness that they cannot linger in this space. Accordingly, the speaker asks, “Will we walk all night through solitary streets? “The poem concludes with a searching tone: “Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher,
what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?” Even though Ginsberg is now together with Whitman, who was lonely at the beginning of the poem, both of them are now lonely, albeit together. Perhaps that’s a commentary on what it means to be a person, or what it means to be a poet. Interestingly, Ginsberg addresses Whitman as “father,” which posits Whitman as a source of influence and guidance, who is also a “courage-teacher,” perhaps of the courage it takes to be open to others, to write honestly, or to be gay. However, crucially, there is a disconnect articulated by the speaker himself: “(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)” He feels absurd perhaps because adulation of another, especially of a celebrity or icon, is a bit absurd insofar as one invests a great amount of feeling into a person or figure who almost certainly does not live up to those expectations. It is hopefulness, the hopefulness of looking beyond the self for some greater figure or presence, that leads to this sense. There’s also the fact that Whitman comes from a different era, as the concluding rhetorical question indicates. That shows that Whitman might not be the ideal fit for the present era, that there might be something decidedly anachronistic about yearning for his presence, and, moreover, that there might be something strained or silly in trying to sound like or otherwise evoke Whitman in Ginsberg’s own, distant era. Nonetheless, Whitman represents a companion and a great influence, both sexually and literarily, whose immediate presence the speaker longs for.

In “I Love Old Whitman So” (900), Ginsberg describes the speaker spending time in China and reading Whitman in that context. He refers to Whitman as “the old soldier, old sailor, old writer, old homosexual, old Christ poet journeyman, / inspired in middle age to chaunt Eternity in Manhattan.” The speaker praises Whitman’s observational acumen, “ten thousand
noticings.” He also praises his “desperado farewell,” a sign of Whitman’s confidence in himself and his writing, as well as a sign of the immediacy with which he wishes to engage with others, such as his readers. Ginsberg lists the many roles Whitman has played as well, as a tribute to his skill, his flexibility, and his efforts toward experiencing and living a rich and varied existence. This poem depicts the speaker reading Whitman “to those few Chinese boys & girls / who know enough American tongue to ear his hand.” In that sense, he shows Whitman’s democratic politics in action by spreading his work in politically oppressive country as an endorsement of openness and freedom, a poet serving as an unacknowledged legislator of the world. That said, the poem does not overplay Whitman’s revolutionary potential, and much of it emphasizes the manner in which his work emotionally touches the speaker, so much that he not only rereads it but also carries it with him during his world travels.

Richard Howard

Of American poets in recent years, Richard Howard is one of the most consummate examples of the poet-critic. In fact, I am hard-pressed to think of anyone who could lay a better claim to that title. He has produced a large volume of belle-lettristic criticism, and he has further made his critical influence felt by serving as poetry editor of The Paris Review, teaching, and translating major works of French literature, most famously works by Baudelaire and Barthes. Arguably, these other activities are what he is known for more so than his poetry, though that should by no means detract from his own poetry, which has a distinctive degree of wit, refinement, and taut control, and which makes an interesting exploration of syllabics, persona, and longer poetry, characteristics that are by no means unique but that are nonetheless distinctive, especially when appearing together in a single poem.
Like Allen Ginsberg, Richard Howard is a gay Jewish-American poet born in the 1920s, just three years after Ginsberg himself. Howard also resembles Ginsberg insofar as he makes frequent reference to other writers and figures in the arts, contemporaneous and historical, such as John Ruskin, J. M. W. Turner, Richard Strauss, Edith Wharton, Hart Crane, Susan Sontag, James Merrill, Muriel Rukeyser (who gave him a computer), and, of course, Walt Whitman. Each of the two men has tended to write and publish poems that are slightly longer than perhaps the average American poem. However, there are important differences. Howard writes a much more formally controlled verse in syllabics. The voices of his poems are often personas, particularly historical personages, and to that extent they have a strong narrative element, along with plenty of detail to create setting and a sense of historical rootedness. David Bergman argues that this use of historical personages is a conceptual strategy for dramatizing the struggle of the gay American poet to achieve a sense of selfhood.\(^{151}\) Howard employs highly refined diction, which variously captures charm, resentment, admiration, self-conceit, longing, and joy. With his polysyllabic diction and measured pacing, the effect is almost always one of subtlety. As for subject matter, he discusses the aforementioned historical figures. In general, he shows a great deal of interest in the arts and high culture, with numerous ekphrastic poems as well. His later work is sometimes more sexually frank, as in a poem that is a reflection on the lover of the speaker going to a bathhouse, but his earlier work tends to be much more contained in that regard,

\(^{151}\) Bergman writes, “Ashbery's resolve to accept his weak ego identity has allowed him to produce a body of work perhaps unrivaled in American poetry in its power to explore the workings of consciousness stripped of personality, yet this is only one resolution to the problems gay poets have inherited from Whitman or find themselves confronting on their own. Richard Howard suggests another way of resolving the artistic and psychological problems that beset the American gay male poet and of situating selfhood in his work, and Howard's way is to construct a cultural and historical matrix in which his own depersonalized work may be located and against which it can resonate. The construction of such a matrix and the establishment of such a tradition have been a project not unlike the one feminist poets such as Adrienne Rich, Sandra Gilbert, or Marilyn Hacker have set for themselves, yet the dramatic forms that Howard so often employs to evoke, reconstruct, and explore this continuity make the dialogue between himself and his tradition more problematic and vivid, for it is as though he must be possessed by that tradition so that he might be created through it. At nearly every step of the way, Howard makes problematic the historicism that is central to his construction of the imaginative space of his poems” (397).
although he does bring a great amount of attention to the bonds between men, especially when those bonds are situated to some degree in the aesthetic. A prime example of that is the poem “1851: A Message to Denmark Hill” (28-32) an epistolary poem presented as a letter from John Ruskin “on his wedding journey in Venice” to his father on the occasion of the death of J. M. W. Turner, whom he refers to as “my earthly master” (29). Another motif in Howard’s early work that appears in this poem is men seemingly expressing or affirming their affection, sexual or otherwise, for other men through misogyny of the Henry Higgins variety. In the poem, Ruskin criticizes his new wife wanting to leave the city in which they’re staying: “A woman cannot help having no heart, but / That is hardly a reason she should have / No manners” (31). This passage illustrates one Howard’s major strengths, his ability to use wit and snappy dialogue to make a serious point, which in this case is his illustration of the understandable but unjustified petulance of the bereaved Ruskin toward his wife.152

“Infirmities” (Inner Voices 104-113) is a poem from Howard’s 1974 volume Two-Part Inventions, named for a style of poem that is an extended dialogue. “Infirmities” offers a fictionalized account of Bram Stoker’s visit to Walt Whitman in Camden, Jersey when the former is middle-aged and the latter is elderly. This poem reflects on the bonds between men, especially those committed to the arts. It considers the “infirmities” of men, a concept left open to some interpretation. It also compares the open, egalitarian, and life-affirming sexuality of Leaves of Grass with the dark, hierarchical, and violent sexuality of Dracula. Stoker affirms a direct lineage from the former to the latter, an assertion that repulses Whitman.

152 In “Arendt: An Arguable Elegy” (The Silent Treatment 52-61), Howard sees himself as having been a feminist albeit an “elementary” one: “Was it the consequence—I fear it was— / of what a feminist would call / my ‘elementary ‘ feminism of those days / that when you asked me to arrange (‘no fuss’) / a meeting—an evening, in fact— / with Natalie Sarraute (my old and ancient friend, / in town for lectures), I seized upon / your surprising request to ask / to dinner all the women writers whom I knew / (all eight), not realizing this would be / exactly what you meant by fuss!” (57-58).
The poem opens with Whitman criticizing his executor Horace Traubel for not having found a letter sent by “Abraham Stoker” many years ago. Howard’s Whitman is declamatory, which is to be expected, but he is also a bit dramatic, playful, irritable, cynical—“Now he’s coming to see me, or to let me / have a look at him” (104)—and not a little bit bossy/imperious toward Traubel. Seemingly Howard wishes to denude Whitman, as it were, and to show him beyond the mythos of the democratic graybeard poet and depict him as an irascible old man, who still manages to be wise and charming. As for the letter, it carries erotic overtones, connecting the then-middle-aged Whitman with the younger Stoker—“Some things / you don’t forget. Keep looking, Horace: a young man’s hand” (104)—causing an impression so deep on Whitman that he remembers it years later. He tied together the letters with a green ribbon, standing for Ireland, a whimsical and playful selection that further humanizes Whitman. After they find the letters, he instructs Traubel, “Just read out the top one, / then you’ll understand why I kept the others” (104). This letter represents the power of the written word to connect men, particularly men of literature, with passionate and enduring feeling.

Stoker’s letter heavily implies the similarity between the language of impassioned admiration and erotic desire, with the ostensible innuendo and language of secrecy adding to the sense of barely closeted homoerotic longing. The letter opens with Stoker’s teasing about throwing the letter into the fire, which he calls an “unworthy impulse” (104). For overcoming this temptation, Whitman is “a true man” (104). Stoker expresses his desire to be an apprentice and to have Whitman be his master. He tells Whitman that he has “shaken off the shackles” (105), whereas Stoker himself is still shackled, a statement that could easily be interpreted as a reference to closeted homosexuality. Similarly, Stoker says that he writes Whitman because “you are / different from other men” (105). Stoker then boldly asserts that he must call Whitman “Walt
This claim suggests a strong desire to make a connection with Whitman. It also suggests that part of the appeal of Whitman is the personal immediacy of his verse, so much so that it is in this case essential to Stoker’s admiration. Stoker thanks Whitman for “the love / & sympathy you’ve given in common / with my kind” (105), which is yet another suggestion of a shared sexual orientation. Then, Stoker describes reading the book alone by himself, late at night with the door locked and on the seashore. Yet again, this isolation evokes erotic activity.

Whitman says, “Stoker thought he was writing to me, of course, / but it was really to himself. I answered—warmly, / I always do, to the personal. / I wrote with my whole heart. Now read me some more” (105). This passage reiterates that Whitman is deriving some pleasure and validation from this attention, even as he urbanely dismisses it as Stoker simply writing to himself. He also talks about responding to the personal with his whole heart, which very much fits the mythos of the warm, open, accepting, and authentically personal Whitman, but at the same time he demonstrates skepticism toward the true depth of connection achieved. Stoker’s letter then describes lying out on the grass and having philosophical thoughts: “I look among the stalks or blades / & wonder where the energy comes from— / that fond hum of Nature, never ceasing, / for ears that can hear” (105). This passage leads Whitman to reflect appreciatively: “That boy was my reader, no doubt about it. We need / our readers, every one. Now we’ll see / what this man’s done with that boy” (106). Here Howard seemingly asserts the Romantic view of a close kinship between reader and writer, exemplified by Whitman.

Whitman notes that Stoker sounds different in his latest correspondence: “He sounds polite enough now, of course, but determined / to settle the business of the day” (106). This passage portends that some of Stoker’s youthful ardor has dissipated, or at least changed form,
and it suggests that Whitman is managing his expectations. Interestingly, as in Ginsberg’s poetry, Whitman seems to be associated with age. In all likelihood, his age symbolizes wisdom and stature, as well as his historicity. He tells Traubel to send him up but to retrieve him after half an hour: “Half an hour’s / all I can stand of any man’s ‘needing’—even mine!” (106). Again, Whitman displays a cynical and impatient side, even as he does so with charming wit. While waiting, Whitman continues to read Stoker’s letter, and he reaches a passage about a mysterious disabling childhood illness the latter had, which left him unable even to stand up until around the age of seven: “I know about the grass because for years / I could not walk, though no one ever put / defining names to the disease I had” (106). This passage has a certain pathos to it. The imaginative power of Whitman’s work appears as a sort of salve or remedy for illness real or figurative. As a parallel to Whitman’s age, this section suggests an infirmity of Stoker.

When Stoker appears, Whitman warmly greets him: “Welcome, Stoker— / welcome, Abraham! Let’s greet one another / as old friends, as indeed we are” (107). Howard is showing Whitman’s welcoming spirit, as even as he challenges by showing Whitman’s interactions with Traubel. However, in that same sense, his “realistic” crankiness makes his welcoming spirit seem like an ideological commitment transcending his transitory moods. Stoker immediately tests that welcoming spirit: “Sir, I cherish your friendship, but the name / a friend must know me by is changed: it’s Bram, / Bram Stoker I call myself, sign myself, / now that I endeavor to write...fiction” (107). Whitman dismisses this change: “Stoker was born Abraham, and he should be / Abraham still—has the breath of humanity in it, / and Lincoln too. Can’t ‘Abraham’ write / fiction as well?” (107). Stoker replies, “Surely you’ll sanction the change, Sir: you too / must have known a like need for a new name. / Were you not called ‘Walter’ before the Leaves?” (107). Whitman concedes the point: “You show an old man his place... / Glad to be there. The
years might have blurred that need. The man / Stoker repeats, no—fulfills the boy!” (107).

Despite his brusqueness, Whitman is self-aware and gracious about being corrected.

Whitman discloses that he reread Stoker’s old letters, and he says, “Appears from what you wrote me, / if I understand you rightly, that we share / infirmities. Most men do, of course. Sometimes I think / it’s all they share. All they can share” (108). He notes, though, that Stoker endured his infirmities at the beginning of his life, but he is toward the end of his. The infirmities under discussion are physical, though the term might also be an allusion to homosexuality. The Whitman in this poem, with his dark speculation that infirmities might be all men share, is a notable contrast with the exuberant and democratic Whitman of Leaves of Grass. Stoker says, “I’m honored, sir, by your welcome, and / happy you still recall the impetuous / and perhaps importunate outpourings / of a faltering youth to Walt Whitman” (108). That’s certainly the dream of the fan—to get through to an admired figure, to leave an impression, and to be received welcomingly. Stoker says that he finds him as “I hoped you would be: that wonderful / mane of white hair over your collar, that / munificent mustache over your mouth, / to mingle with the mass of flowing beard” (108). Stoker serves as the mouthpiece for the physical admiration of Whitman. He compares him to Tennyson, and he asks if Whitman minds the comparison. Whitman is quite pleased with it, and it reminds him of the praise Oscar Wilde lavished upon him during his visit.

Whitman asks if Stoker knows Wilde, and he replies, “I knew his mother, Lady Wilde. She kept / a sort of salon in Merrion Square— / in fact it was there I first met my wife” (109). He adds, “Florence / —that’s my wife—was a friend of Oscar’s too...” (109). At this mention of a heterosexual relationship, Whitman shows, or at least feigns, surprise, particularly surprise that a man in a socially sanctioned heterosexual relationship should seek him out: “Hah! You’re
married, and respectable, / and an author of ‘fiction’ into the bargain...Not / often such a man comes to me with / questions” (109). About the salons, Whitman remarks, “All about art they were, art with / a big A. I spell it small, myself...” (109). He then asks Stoker, “What sort of fiction is it / that you must ‘endeavor’ to write?” (109). Stoker deprecates his fiction, much of which he claims is hastily composed and commercial, but he adds, “I too have a sort / of poem I must write—oh, it’s in prose, / of course, but you understand that” (110). This composition is about a man he says resembles Whitman, with the white hair and facial hair and a certain ‘leonine’ quality; Stoker explains, “He longs to pass through the crowded streets / of mighty cities, to be in the rush / of humanity, to share life, change, death— / all that makes us what we are” (110-111). He then asks Whitman, “Is this not / Walt Whitman’s “call in the midst of the crowd”?“ (110-111). Whitman skeptically replies, “I don’t know that it is. Tell me some more, ‘Bram,’ / let me here what you want to do with me...Leonine?” (110). Although this Whitman seems to like exuberance and sincerity, the hint of dark romanticism goes against his sensibility.

Stoker elaborates, “Yes, masterful. You know: the king of beasts. / I’ve written quite a lot about the man / modelled on you. In my narrative, / all others serve him, or come to do so...” (110). Stoker informs Whitman that the character in question is named Count Dracula. Whitman responds, “I don’t much like this talk of Masters / and Counts. What is it he’s done, this Dracula, / that everyone is so eager to serve him? Does he serve / others in return?” (110). Cryptically, Stoker explains that he found his inspiration from Whitman: “It was you, sir, who gave me the clue, you / who spoke of adhesiveness, that union / beyond any binding together of bodies, / a universal solvent in the blood” (110). He asks Whitman if he remembers “Trickle Drops.” Yet again demonstrating his democratic impulse and aversion to authority, the latter responds, “Make it a rule / that if I wrote it, I don’t remember it. / The Leaves is not a sacred book, but a growing
thing” (110-111). His hesitation here contrasts with the hierarchical domination and submission of Stoker’s vision. Whitman asks him to find it and read it, and he says it is in “Calamus.” The mention of “Calamus” leads Whitman to reflect that that was the passage critics wanted him to excise, which he refused to do because he felt he “was doing / right” (111). Although perhaps self-congratulatory, Whitman is demonstrating not only a principled stand, but also the successful outcome of that stand. Importantly it is his sexual trailblazing that here receives attention.

Stoker reads the passage, describing drops of blood falling from Whitman onto the words he has read: “Let them know your scarlet heat, let them glisten, / Saturate them with yourself all ashamed and wet, / Glow upon all I have written or shall write, bleeding drops, / Let it all be seen in your light, blushing drops.”” (111). The blood appears as a source of vitality and authenticity, connecting him to and bringing vividness to his language. Whitman says he remembers these lines, and Stoker replies, “Then you follow me, sir, as I do you... / to the point where the Count dismisses / the Vampire Women to claim the bleeding / youth for his own: ‘This man belongs to me’” (112). Whitman is not having any of this: “‘Vampire Women’? No such thing. / And is your Count a vampire too? Inspired / by Walt Whitman and a bloodsucker?” (112). Stoker tells him about the “voluptuousness / of death equal to the deathlike nature / of love” (112). He adds, “Like you, sir, I dare my readers / to acknowledge that the mystery of / sexual love is worth dying for...” (112). Whitman rejects Stoker’s alleged comparison: “...Not ‘like me,’ Stoker! / Only worth living for, that’s my mystery, / if you can call it such. Take your Count back home with you” (112). Stoker explains, “I’ve learned that close relations / between two people, any two, always / afford vampiric exploitations. Sir, / I fear you find my expressions...misplaced” (113). He adds, “no one, I now perceive, may pluck the heart / out of Walt Whitman’s mystery,
who lives / according to the Eleventh Commandment / of Modern Times...” (113). Whitman says, “As if ten weren’t enough. I don’t hold much with / commandments, Abraham. What in Hell’s the eleventh?” (113). Stoker says, “Thou Shalt Not Be Found Out” (113). Whitman responds, “That’s one I’ll obey” (113). Then, he has Traubel show Stoker out. He says, “Goodbye, son, / there’s no bad blood between us two now, / am I right?” (113). The poem concludes with Whitman wishing Stoker well with a backhanded remark: “Endeavor / to write your own fiction, young fellow. Good luck / with it. Nothing to do with me... / Night, Horace. Leave a lamp” (113). It is possible that Whitman feels awkward about his strong reaction, or maybe he simply wishes to be done with the exchange. In any event, his earlier misgivings about the encounter prove accurate, as it goes worse than he even expected. On the other hand, Stoker seems to take things more in stride. It would certainly be possible to rationalize this encounter as meeting an older, tired Whitman, removed from the vitality and edginess of “Calamus,” and in that case the literature is a greater testament to his nature as a literary icon than he himself is.

This poem explores a number of themes. One is the nature of literary admiration, and Whitman has certainly had his share of admirers, both in his lifetime and afterward. Of course, a problem arises when an admirer seems to be admiring a different person from who the admired person is in actual life. Stoker is one such person. Howard does leave it somewhat ambiguous as to whether Stoker’s Whitman or Whitman’s Whitman is the more accurate version—probably the truth is somewhere in the middle. As a gay poet writing about Whitman, Howard is another such admirer. It’s notable, though, that his Whitman seems a bit peevish, and while the poet himself once acknowledge that he contradicted himself and contained multitudes, this incarnation seems to be a little more contradictory than he is in other representations, less of a secular saint. Another theme is the notion of infirmities. The infirmities referenced are
Whitman’s age and Stoker’s childhood weakness. It’s a bit of a romantic notion that infirmities are what bind men together, but then again, there might be some truth to it. Weakness, injury, and limitation—physical or emotional—create the capacity for sympathy and compassion, and foster a need for companionship and acceptance. The obvious resonance here is with clandestine homosexuality being a bond between men. The third significant theme is the nature of sexuality, whether vampiric or not. Howard, through Stoker, makes a compelling case for the vampiric, and even the vampiric understood as an extension of Whitman’s vision. In turn, Whitman seems to protest a bit too much. However, there’s also the problem of romantically making sexuality darker than it is. One thing that Whitman accomplished was promoting a vision of homosexuality that escaped the clichés of disease, darkness, and self-destruction. Bergman writes that the work of Howard (and Jon Ashbery) is characterized by “finding in Whitman, not a Father who must be rejected in the Oedipal drama (as Pound, for instance, enacted), but a companion whose hand can be grasped, whose affection can be accepted, and whose promise of comradeship can be—if not fulfilled—satisfied at least for the moment” (401). I think that Howard troubles this companionship—certainly in this poem—but perhaps it is the very humanity, and vulnerability, of Whitman here that ultimately makes him more companionable.

Another dialogic poem is “Wildflowers,” set in Camden in 1882, which imagines the more amicable meeting between Whitman and Oscar Wilde. In the opening it is raining outside, and Whitman addresses a woman named Mary, whom he instructs to put on his red tie: “red has life in it—most men I know / dress like undertakers making sure they look / mournful enough to manage / their own funerals.” He thinks he hears something outside, but apparently she doesn’t hear it, so he muses it would be better for him just to sit in his chair and “listen to my beard grow. / Now if hair was poetry, / then your Walt Whitman / would be a great success.” Howard is
showing a self-deprecating side of the poet, and is also having him take an ironic view of his beard, one of his iconic features. Again, Whitman shows a general desire not to be disturbed, presumably in part because of his old age and weakened physical condition. He says, “Mary, no visitors today—or one, just one: what else is a red tie for?” The expected visitor is “Some English poet.” Whitman demonstrates a sort of fatigue with his visitors, and he expects this poet will “ask the usual questions. I don’t like questions / that require answers.” While this statement shows a certain curmudgeonliness, it also has an element of koan-like profundity—in this way, the all-too-human and the larger-than-life Whitman are shown to be one and the same.

Whitman remembers a young man coming to ask him for his opinion of the man’s epic poem, to which Whitman responded: “‘Thank you,’ say I, ‘but I’ve been paralyzed once / already.’” He hopes that this next visitor will “mind his tongue, maybe you spare you / the trouble of putting his latest tribute / on the shelf with all the rest.” He adds, “Give me enemies / rather than these disciples of mine.” Then, Wilde arrives. Immediately, he is effusive in his praise: “I am convinced of / the cosmos in your company, Walt Whitman! / I greet you, sir, as America’s great voice.” Whitman replies, “Well, you’ve come to be disillusioned, have you?” He says he has “been photographed until the cameras themselves / are tired of me. The real man / by now is a poor / replacement.” He remarks wryly on the public attention lavished on him, which seems both to exhaust him, to impose the burden of expectations on him, and to highlight for him the fact that he himself does not live up to his myth.

Seeming to register Whitman’s cantankerousness, Wilde asks if has disturbed Whitman while he was in poor health, and the latter replies wryly and earthily, “My health is hell, / and heaven is the first moment after / constipation.” Nonetheless, Whitman expresses surprised delight at the fact that Wilde is such a “great boy.” Wilde says, “You are the lion, sir, between
the two of us.” Whitman responds flirtatiously, “Well, you’re no lamb, judging by the look of you.” Wilde tells Whitman that he himself is older than he appears, but he suggests that it is Whitman’s ability to gaze toward the future that makes it appear there is more of an age difference between the two of them than there actually is. He says, “Future of mind, you have that, / where presence is the most one hopes for.” Whitman says, “You know how to say / the remembered, if not the right thing. / If I can’t speak poetry, I can inspire it— / I swim in your flattery, son.” Wilde replies, “Better swim than drown, in any element. / Never heed our ages, Walt (may I call you / Walt? I must be Oscar to you).” As with Stoker, the notion of names receives mention, as if to suggest the role that self-presentation plays, even in intimacy. However, in this instance Whitman offers no protest.

Eventually discussion turns to Leaves of Grass. Wilde rhapsodizes, “The Leaves—ah, Leaves of Grass! I have always thought / spears your word, my dear Walt—Spears of Grass: you are / a naked man, you know, bearing a naked spear.” Whitman replies, “Leaves is what I wrote / and what I wear, if my nakedness / must be covered. Spears! I want no defences.” He then expresses exasperation with “All this fear of indecency, / all this noise about / purity and social order.” He adds, “I got it all said in the Leaves, Oscar.” Wilde compares him to a prophet, and imagines Isaiah listening to him, a comparison that Whitman dismisses. He says, “Spare me Isaiah, spare me / the responsibility. / The Leaves is a this-side book, Oscar.” Wilde explains that he meant “I can conceive of no Bible worthy, save / yours and Baudlelaire’s, to prepare mankind / for an identical body and soul. Leaves / of Grass, Flowers of Evil: our sacred botany!” Whitman says, “Is that meant to be / a joke—Oscar, flowers of evil?” As with Stoker, he expresses skepticism toward a dark vision of existence.

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153 Howard himself published a significant translation of Flowers of Evil.
Wilde gives Whitman a copy of his first volume of poetry. Whitman tells Wilde not to apologize for flaws in his work, as “Books are like men, the best of them have flaws. / Thank God for the flaws—if not / for the flaws, Oscar, / love would be impossible.” Wilde replies cynically, “I think it is, Walt, flaws and all, unless / you link the temperament of a vampire / to the discretion of an anenome.” As with Stoker, Whitman is confronted with a vision of love and the erotic that is both exploitive and surreptitious. Whitman responds dryly, “Is that / the evil flower you speak of—anemones? / Even sea-anenomes?” After some more discussion, Whitman does ask more seriously, “What kind of a gardener is your / Baudelaire? Are his flowers indecent, like mine? / Were some plucked up by the roots?” Wilde explains that the book was called obscene and censored shortly after *Leaves of Grass* appeared. He says, “Their interest is not that they were suppressed / by a foolish official, but that they were / written by a great artist.” Whitman says, “‘Foolish officials’ / can be interesting too, Oscar.” He makes the somewhat Foucauldian argument that those who would censor often show great, fastidious, and even quasi-scholarly attention to the work in question.

Whitman then talks about what it means to scandalize people. He says he’s experienced a lot, and he adds, in a tone reminiscent of Wilde himself, “Even the *Leaves* are no longer said / to be lewd: nothing is harder to keep up / than a bad reputation.” He then says that he is willing to let Wilde read him a poem by Baudelaire, his supposed “fellow-evangelist.” Echoing the theme of self-presentation, Wilde says that he is eager to read the poem and adds, “Not until / you permit a poet a mask does he dare / tell the truth.” Whitman cuts him off: “I dared. / Do not suppose that the *Leaves* / is a mask. It is a man, / the life a man can live in language.” He is arguing in favor of the authenticity and immediacy he feels he has brought to poetic language. Wilde reads “Spleen,” which describes ennui, along with weakness and a feeling of being
prematurely aged. Whitman relates to the phrase “king of a rainy country,” which is in keeping with the rain at the beginning of the poem. However, he doesn’t particularly like its “sickly sensuality…the sensuality of convalescence.” He also says, “Still, if the world is unjust to you, / you must take care not to be unjust to the world. / I don’t get much beyond that / with ‘Spleen.’”

After having made his case for the merit of Baudelaire, Wilde relents, “I shall not be so foolish as to defend / one genius from another.” He adds, “Surprising, though, / you are not more taken by the criminal.” Whitman says, “the Morbid, you mean? / I am not taken by that.” Wilde explains, “Americans I have met are certainly / great hero-worshippers, and always / adopt their heroes from the criminal classes.” Whitman responds, “The Leaves is a book / written for the criminal classes.” Wilde asks him if he considers himself a member of the criminal classes, and he says he does. Wilde describes visiting a prison where locals took him to visit. There he saw a murderer reading novels; he says, “a poor apprenticeship, / I thought, for facing either God or nothing.” Whitman says, “It was for just such a man / I wrote Leaves of Grass.” He adds, “No one was ever bad enough / to be put in jail; / he was, or might be, bad enough to be / put in a hospital.” Whitman compares “judging” to a disease, and says, “Breaking loose is the only thing, / opening new ways.” Whitman notes, though, that this task can, and has, caused problems for him, and he expected as much.

Speaking about fortune, Wilde says, “I have more, I am sure, than I deserve, / but it is always nice to have a little more / than one deserves.” Whitman says, “There is no ‘deserves,’ / Oscar. I never weighed what I gave / for what I got, but I’m glad of what I got.” He then speaks candidly of homosexuality: “Well, I got the boys, / for one thing: the boys, hundreds of them. / They were, they are, they will be mine. I gave myself / for them: myself.” He continues, “Without the boys—if it had not been for the boys, / I never would have had the Leaves.” Wilde
Walt, you’ve gained another boy.” He then says that wants to ask a favor. Whitman says, “I usually can guess / why a man comes to see me. You want / more than a handshake with Walt Whitman, you want / to know what you must give up!” Somewhat abruptly, Wilde tells him that he needs his blessing but cannot after all leave his book with Whitman, for “it is not the book I must write / for Walt Whitman.” Whitman seems surprised that Wilde takes back the book he gave him, but he says he’ll give Whitman a flower instead—“Not an evil one, I trust!” says Whitman. Wilde gives him a heliotrope, a flower that follows the sun as a metaphor for Whitman’s influence over Wilde. Whitman says, “Take my blessing with your book, boy. They’re both yours.” Wilde says, “In you, Walt, I discover / how a desire becomes a destiny. To give / myself away! Not to make sacrifices / but to be one. To be, somehow, holy, like you—” Whitman says, “I am a sick old man on Mickle street, boy, / I am not a holy man; / or all men are.” He says that Leaves of Grass was an “essential poem” that needed to be written, “like an essential life needs living. / Maybe yours will be an essential life— / one needing to have been lived!” Again, the poem plays with the relationship between literature and life, with both being somewhat natural, both being somewhat self-conscious constructions.

Then, Whitman sends Wilde off: “Kiss me, / and catch your trolly, I’ve lectured long / enough.” Wilde says, “I came, I saw, I was conquered! Not by fame, / though anything is better than virtuous / obscurity—not fame conquered, but life, / your life, your immortality!” Whitman says, “Not / immortality, / Oscar, identity: call it that / and we are one.” Wilde then leaves: “Walt. I am with you, and so I leave you, / with gratitude and honor and all my love.” In this statement, Wilde refers to paradox that is central to the poems in this chapter: Whitman is a symbol and a source of presence, though he is absent. After Whitman has Mary show Wilde out, he muses, “I can still hear him, as if here’s there.” He adds, “The North his needle points to is only art. / Art is
always only art. / But a great boy, still, / a great manly boy.” He asks Mary if Wilde left a green book downstairs—he didn’t—and he instructs her to put the heliotrope in water. He has her help him back into bed for a nap, and the concluding words of the poem are: “I want / time to myself now.” As with Stoker, the encounter proves to be draining, but here Wilde’s charms, his playfulness, and his simultaneous earnestness and irony endear him to Whitman. They are literary figures interacting on a highly stylized level, but despite, or perhaps because of, the elaborateness with which they communicate and their own differences, they are able to achieve a sense of connection that they will carry with them. There will still be isolation and desire, but at least that sense of connection, and the sense of the self as seen charitably by the other, will remain with them.

“Decades” (157-161) is a poem dedicated to Hart Crane, who, like Howard, is a gay poet from a wealthy family in northeastern Ohio. This poem is organized into five sections, beginning when the speaker is four years old, when Crane died, and proceeding in ten year increments, to fourteen, twenty-four, thirty-four, and finally forty-four. The speaker compares the trajectory of his life to that of Crane, with an emphasis on family life, sexuality, and literary development, and this poem gives a strong sense that the speaker maintains a sense of personal connectedness to Crane. The speaker also posits that Crane maintained a parallel sense of connectedness to Whitman, who is a well-known influence on Crane’s work, particularly the sweepingly American and historical The Bridge. Although “Decades” stylistically resembles Howard’s other work insofar as it is a first-person reminiscence that unfolds over several pages with introspection, wit, and narrative development, the language is slightly more dense and opaque than usual, which I suspect is the result of Howard bringing a touch of Cranean diction to the poem.
The fourth and fifth sections are the ones in which Howard discusses Whitman. In the fourth section, “Sands Street Bar & Grille,” the thirty-four-year-old speaker reflects on reaching an age older than Crane at the time of his suicide. He also reaches out to Crane, much as Crane reached out to Whitman—the exact manner in which he does so is not clear, but the implication seems to be that this reaching is as much emotional and imaginatively personal as it is as aesthetic. The speaker references Whitman, “no wonder / you gave your hand to Walt, always on edge, / on the beach of embarking, the brink where they fall / into the sea, these castles of our misconduct...” (159). The speaker refers to the “disgrace” of the men’s sexual orientation: “Was it from this / you made your Bridge, reaching up to Walt / and down to me” (159-160). He implies Crane inspired him: “I do not believe in exceptions—if you did it / then it can be done” (160). However, he also says, “I still do not / understand you, but I stand under you here, / marvelling at the shadows where apprenticeship / is not vocation, of course, only voyeurism” (160). Compared to in earlier sections of the poem, the speaker seem to have cooled in his emotional connection with the figure of Crane, and to have become more aware of both its real value and its artificiality. It is this awareness that appears to cause him to reflect on Whitman’s importance to Crane, which suggests a lineage of influence, as well as an enduring need for icons, especially for those who face a lonely struggle on the margins of society.

In the fifth section, “Garretsville,” the forty-four-year-old speaker enjoins Crane to join him. The tone is more weary, and there’s an awareness of age and mortality, but this section is in some ways also the most focused and resolute. Howard writes, “By forty-four I know / your beginning lost at land, your end at sea: / sometimes beginnings can be more desperate / than ends, patrimony more than matrimony” (160). He adds, “and middle age the worst despair of all” (160). He describes a sense of longing: “I do not find you here, or in the bars, / or Laukhuff’s, or
that yellow restaurant— / not even on the beach you walked with Walt, / hand in hand, you told him: *never to let go*” (160). Still, he feels some connectedness: “Take my hand / as you gave yours to him. We suffer from / the same fabled disease, and only the hope / of dying of it keeps a man alive. Keeps!” (160). He says, “We join the Fathers after all, Hart, rejoin / not to repel or repeal or destroy, but to fuse, / as Walt declared it” (160-161). This section plays with a number of the themes: parenting, the authority of fathers, sexuality, icons, despair, and resolve. The key factor, though, seems to be choice: to choose their “fathers,” to embrace sexuality, and to decide to live one’s life. Crane made one kind of choice, and Whitman made another, to live unabashedly and unconventionally. As in the previous poem, Howard contrasts the vision of Whitman with a darker vision, although the two are not complete opposites. As for the speaker, he maintains a sort of urbane ambivalence, but underlying that is perseverance and the desire to understand. Jacques Khalip sees inherent in this poem as an elegy the failure of personal connection, especially insofar as the speaker is addressing one who is no longer living, but seemingly that act of calling attention to the possibility of forming new forms of relationships (81-82).\(^{154}\)

**Timothy Liu**

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\(^{154}\) Khalip writes, “The structure of the elegy imagines (as it distorts and nullifies) the very life it purports to memorialize, but instead of proving to be a shattering failure, elegy’s suffering over its incapacity to bring persons to life precisely incurs it with a responsibility to acknowledge that its form might testify to a different conceptualization of relations: that is to say, poetry not as the reconfirmation of an established sense of belonging, but rather as an aesthetic practice that continually exposes us to what Charles Bernstein calls an ‘aversion of community in pursuit of new constellations of relationship—in other words, community [as something] to get away from—reform—as form’ (177). We might then define the elegy in these terms: that the friend whom we address should be indefinitely mourned on the condition that he or she is never to be reduced to formal and finite closure—a kind of mourning that refuses what Derrida would call the ‘infidelity’ of interiorization, of keeping ‘[the friend] alive, within oneself’ as a perilous token of the ego” (81-82).
Timothy Liu is a gay Chinese-American poet from a Mormon background. His language is at times fragmentary, opaque, imagistic, and surreal, reminiscent of a subdued Ginsberg, a muted Plath, or an updated Hart Crane, and he is very sexually frank, with several poems set in the vicinity of a glory hole. Many of his poems are conventionally lyric, although many others are also what could be called experimental, with language that defies ready interpretation. He has considerable range: conventional free verse meditations on life and personal experience; formal work (blank verse, the villanelle, the pantoum); and more experimental pieces. In a recent collection, Polytheogamy, he presents his work alongside reproductions of the paintings of Greg Dasler, many of which depict “everyday” scenes, especially those of cars, with strange elements of fancy, a sort of René Magritte sensibility. This collaborative work shows Liu at his more surreal and fragmentary, with many of the poems dealing ostensibly with relationships, especially relationships gone sour. More generally, his subjects include family, the domestic, the erotic, the AIDS epidemic, and the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. Numerous poems deal with the speaker’s parents, with occasional references to discord his in childhood caused by the mother. In “Crepuscle with Mother” (Say Goodnight 11), Liu includes passages such as “Even after Father / folded up the Ping-Pong table we hid / behind when mother started smashing dishes” and “those evenings / at the piano, a glass breaking / here or there, Father wrestling the cleaver / out of her hands.” In “Thoreau” (Burnt Offerings 10), the father describes reading Thoreau “in a steakhouse down the road” and weeping with his father. In the narrative present, the two sit outside “on the curb / in front of someone else’s house”: “My father and I have no place to go. / His wife will not let us in the

Andrew Parkin writes, “Timothy Liu's parents came to the United States from the People's Republic of China, but he was born and raised in California. He writes and speaks as an American, but one who is fully conscious not only of immigrant roots but of the internationalism of the world's great cities—such as Hong Kong, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Vancouver—where a multinational renaissance of Pacific cultures is taking place” (247).
house—/ afraid of catching AIDS.” As such, the father comes across reasonably well. Liu writes about cruising, about penis size ("The Size of It" [Burnt Offerings 11]), and about gay sex in frank detail. He writes about domesticity, and refers to what appears to be gay domestic arrangements as marriage ("The Marriage" [Burnt Offerings 43]) and elsewhere. Liu also invokes Whitman, though unlike Ginsberg, Howard, and Doty, he does not go to great lengths to turn Whitman into a character in his poetry or to address him. Rather, he seems to invoke Whitman for three reasons: his commitment to chronicling the breadth and depth of life, particularly life in America; his description of the bonds between men; and his frank depictions of the homoerotic. To the extent that Liu himself displays skepticism toward Whitman, though, Richard Serrano presents two possible reasons why. The first is that Whitman embodies a sort of rugged, hyperbolic masculinity that potentially marginalizes other forms of masculine, especially with respect to stereotypes of the inadequate masculinity of Asian men (206). The second is that Whitman’s idealized vision of male contrasts starkly with the sometimes gritty daily realities of gay life (203).

In two poems from separate volumes, Liu associates Whitman with public restrooms, places where men gather, where the physical body and its waste are on display, and where sexual encounters can occur between strangers. In “Oasis” (Say Goodnight 85), the speaker goes to a rest stop: “Just off the Jersey Pike we saw it—/ the Walt Whitman Service Area.” He describes the need to evacuate with an erotic undertone: “long lines of men standing behind / the urinals, those sideways glances glooming in / on a common need that brought us there.” He imagines

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156 Richard Serrano writes, “Liu’s narrator begins to equate ‘Asian’ with ‘inadequate,’ as if the quarter-inch by which he falls short of that vaunted five-to-seven-inch average is due to his racial heritage. Then he projects his own racialized inadequacy onto ‘one billion / Chinese measured against what?’ Against whom? I would like to suggest that the inadequacy of Liu’s Asian man and the invisibility and silence of Hemphill’s Black man are both measured against the hyperadequacy and loquacious omnipresence of Whitman and the sort of masculinity celebrated in Leaves of Grass” (206).
Whitman actually being present in this place that bears his name: “No pubic hair would fall unnoticed / on the lip of an unflushed john if Walt were here— / father of unspeakable desire / wherever two or three are gathered in his name.” Liu emphasizes Whitman’s evocation of forbidden sexuality, and he connects Whitman’s vision of the erotic with physical community. As such, the speaker enumerates the men there: “Ho those men kept filling in—truckers, / Boy Scouts, New Yorkers, bikers.” Nonetheless, the poem concludes with a sense of erotic potential but missed erotic opportunity: “no time it seemed / to look for glory holes, to worship / at the altar of a stranger’s groin and taste / the infinite.” Contrasting with the grime of the restroom, this messy and anonymous encounter instead sounds sublime, a gesture toward Whitman’s open and spiritualized vision of sexuality. Liu contrasts this vision with what happens outside the rest stop: “wives and lovers / rummaged through a bargain bin in search of tunes / to play just once on a beat-up deck / for the ride back.” With the image of a pack of cigarettes and spare change on the dashboard, the poem concludes, “none of us losing any time at all” (85). This phrase contrasts a utopian vision of the erotic with the workaday, conventional reality where punctuality and efficiency crowd out the erotic.

In “Reading Whitman in a Toilet Stall” (Burnt Offerings 12-13), the speaker notices a lookout outside the public restroom and a female janitor on the inside as he goes to take his seat behind a glory hole. The speaker describes the scene with a sense of erotic possibility: “The faintly buzzing flicker of fluorescent light / erased the contours of a place where strangers / openly parade their sex” (12). He has brought with him “the pocket Whitman that I leafed my way through / before the others arrived” (12). Reading the poetry, he remarks, “how those words / came flooding back to me while men began to take / their seats, glory holes the size of silver dollars” (12). In that way, he connects the words of Whitman with erotic immediacy. Then the
speaker addresses Whitman himself: “O daguerrotyped Walt, your collar / unbuttoned, hat lopsided, hand on hip, your sex / never evading our view!” (12). Whitman creates a sense of physical, erotic presence that serves as a beacon of sexual possibility. However, the speaker implies that even the scene of the glory hole is marked by erotic restraint: “how we are confined / by steel partitions, dates and initials carved // into the latest coat of paint, an old car key / the implement of our secret desires” (12). Similarly, he suggests that the language of desire remains coded: “How each of us must // learn to decipher the erotic hieroglyphs / of our age (12). The speaker then describes the sexual activity of the men: “while we go about our task, our tongues made holy / by licking each other’s asshole clean, shock of sperm / warm in our mouths, white against the clothes we wear / as we walk out of our secrets into the world” (12-13). Liu combines the language of sacredness with frank sexual detail, which suggests that the experience is transcendent on one level, but even so, he acknowledges that it is limited to a small, carefully guarded time and space. Serrano argues that this poem contrasts “the tawdry mechanics of lived gay life in the 1980s and 1990s with the idealized or sentimental depictions of ‘camaraderie’ and love found in iconic gay authors” (203). He quips, “Liu’s narrator in a bathroom stall is a long way from the untrodden paths and manly attachments of Whitman” (203). While I agree that this poem is meant to illustrate an ironic contrast between actual lived experience and the vision of Whitman’s literature, I view the project of the poem as less ironic than he perhaps considers it. As Serrano himself, Whitman’s own poetry is homoerotic, but not explicitly so, and he leaves many things unstated, which suggests that, rather than being ironic, Liu is updating the vision of Whitman, and filling in the blanks, so to speak.

157 Serrano writes, “Whitman was the first great gay American poet, although neither he nor any of his contemporaries would have understood him as such, since when he was writing Leaves of Grass, in the 1850s, the world ‘homosexual’ had not yet been invented. Whitman did himself recognize, however, that he was the first to write about ‘manly friendship’ (Fone 20). And while Whitman could never have written about sex in the park or in a
“Naked” (*Burnt Offerings* 57-66) is a sequence of ten sections concerned almost exclusively with the speaker’s emotions and daily life after a breakup. In the ninth and penultimate section, “*A World Made out of Absence*,” the speaker compares the physical presence of Whitman, in the form of a recording, the absence of his lover: “No news from you, only the voice of Whitman / on the radio last night—a recording / Edison had saved on a cylinder made of wax, / discovered after all these years.” Ironically pondering the nature of time, he says, “*Timing / is everything*, a woman once said, she / who had waited twenty years to spend one night / with a man in Vermont.” He then contemplates his loss and foreclosed possibilities it entails, and he remembers an incident fifteen years ago when his lover parted ways with him while carrying his viola at the Curtis Institute of Music, a poignant image that portends their eventual separation. The poem connects the recording of Whitman with the breakup: “Why call late at night just to hear a voice / recorded on some machine, as if words / could make distances retreat?” Here, Whitman signifies as he does for the other poets under discussion—as presence. Just as Whitman is held up as a poet of personal immediacy who serves as an iconic figure for the artistic and sexual growth of gay poets, his long-past death—as well as the inevitable divide between art, particularly idealistic art, and life—serves as a marker of absence, as it does for speaker in this poem. At the same time, Whitman’s presence proves enduring even if it is limited, and he provides solace for the speaker when human relationships falter.

Mark Doty

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bathroom stall, even if he had been inclined to seek partners in such places, more than one gay male reader has seen his own desires reflected in such lines as ‘The march of firemen in their own costumes, the / play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trousers / and waist-straps, / ... / Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, / and count’” (199).
Mark Doty is primarily a poet of observation and meditation. Stylistically, Doty’s work is distinguished by its clarity, both in terms of description—“What is description, after all, / but encoded desire?” (Atlantis 5)—and its diction. He favors a witty, urbane diction, but it is not as intricate or as fussy as that of a poet such as Howard. His subjects include the beautiful and the bleak, the gaudy and the grimy, especially in an urban environment. He writes appreciatively of art, as well as artists, including writers such as Hart Crane, Cavafy, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, and Alan Dugan. He also describes poverty and AIDS. The settings of his poems tend to be urban, although he does display some interest in nature and the natural, often through reflections on pet ownership. His most prominent theme is probably personal relationships. In his earlier work, he describes a teenage marriage, as well as parents, the father an engineer working on missile silos and the mother an ostensible alcoholic. While these poems take an affectionate tone toward the parents, there is some indictment of the mother, as well as an expression of joy that the father eventually finds a second wife who brings greater happiness to his life. While these early subjects quickly disappear, he goes on to write much more about friendships and relationships, particularly that with his partner, Wally Roberts, who died in 1994 (Sweet Machine 117), and later about his partner Paul. Doty is perhaps best-known as a chronicler of the AIDS crisis, featuring heavily in much of his mid-career work. In general, and even more so recently, his poems about relationships tend to be domestic, although he certainly writes about the erotic and about briefer encounters. He is somewhat rare as a contemporary American poet insofar as he also writes about friendships—not necessarily deep, sustaining friendships, but connections

Christopher Robinson sees his concern with the urban as follows: “At the center of this process of internalization of the city is the issue of a sensibility, which, in both Doty and Cavafy’s case can be read as not just sexual or homosexual but more specifically as ‘queer,’ in the sense that it refuses to privilege the linear and fixed social values of conventional heterosexual society, and instead places a relationship between sensuality, beauty, and intensity at the center of all meaning. It is these values which the city embodies” (271-272).
with various people. As for Whitman, he serves as an object of meditation, as Doty ponders themes such as human connection, sexuality, and art.

In one of several poems entitled “Apparition” (Theories and Apparitions 19), Doty describes a photograph of an unidentified figure, perhaps an apparition, who provokes in him an intense reaction: “the look // sucks the breath out of me: he is gazing in my direction / with a pleased half smile, eyes a little out of focus, as though I’m seeing him // or he views me through a kind of gauze, and he isn’t the man I know—.” He describes the immediacy of his impression of “the impossible gentle manly visionary / of the eighteen-fifties, bowl-cut hair, warm lines around the eyes // dilated as by an opiate, what shines in / and out of them in equal proportion—.” The speaker then finally states whose picture he’s looking at: “That’s the Walt Whitman who has come to look at me, / curiously, on a mild November afternoon on the west side of Midtown.” Whitman appears as an eroticized character. The fact that the poem does not even reveal till most of the way through that the person under discussion is in fact Whitman further emphasizes the erotic and forestalls the associations the readers might have with Whitman in order to let that erotic impression fully form and then influence whatever the reader might have already thought about him. The poem does similar work with the phrase “the man I know,” which creates a misleading verismimilitude with respect to this experience. Ultimately, what this poem does is to assert the immediacy of Whitman’s legacy, so much so that the speaker feels that, while he may be looking at Whitman, Whitman looks right back at him. While the emotional register is more subtle and muted in “Apparition” than it is in Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California,” both poems show that thoughts about Whitman can pull the speakers into a reverie with strong emotional content even in otherwise thoroughly quotidian situations.
In the long poem "Letter to Walt Whitman" (Source 24-33), Doty pays homage to Whitman, though he recognizes the challenge of doing more than just penning another paean to Whitman: “I know you’ve been bothered // all century, poets lining up / to claim lineage” (24). This at-times ironic, at-times wry long poem intertwines biography, history, and images of Whitman’s great topic, America, in order to meditate on Doty’s admiring but tempered relation to Whitman’s vision. Opening with an address to Whitman, the poem asks, “Are you more than editions, or the grave’s / uncondition’d hair? (More likely, these days, / permed and mowed to chemical perfection” (24). The joke seems a bit forced, and a few other passages suffer from similar awkwardness, but I wonder if what I perceive is awkwardness or stiltedness is a conscious evocation of the ambivalence toward Whitman’s vision that Doty evinces throughout the piece. In any event, the poem then describes a pilgrimage to Whitman’s home in Camden, where, Doty writes, “We loved the evidence of you” (25). Of all the objects, the one that most powerfully conjures its owner’s presence is a stuffed bird, leading the speaker to imagine it perching on Whitman’s shoulder, and thereby bringing the speaker into an imagined closeness with Whitman himself. This perception of proximity leads the poet to meditate on sexuality and men’s bodies, a meditation followed by what is presented as an interruption to the poem by two Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, this interruption gives him the chance to pursue his reflection in another direction: a meditation on vision and belief. The speaker then reflects on his time in Columbus, Ohio as a visiting poet. Toward the end, the speaker discusses his domestic arrangement with his lover Paul and their trip together, after a stint of gardening, to a Paul Meyer supermarket, a Ginsberg-esque location for the conclusion of Doty’s meditation. In terms of

159 Robinson notes that Doty uses the form of the long poem to explore “different fragments of experience and layers of types of expression which create the overall identity of city and self” (272). Later, he notes that in his work Doty “emphasizes the way in which the fragments can voluntarily be joined together and link the individual to other individuals, the inner world to the outer, the past to the present. (275)
praise, there are two primary dimensions. The first, which I am discussing first, is perhaps the most obvious: praise for Whitman’s pioneering expression of sexuality and social impact, a praise entwined with frank erotic celebration. The second dimension is a bit more meta-poetic: praise of Whitman for his boldness of vision.

Early on, the poem introduces the erotic dimensions of Whitman’s legacy. After describing the poets lining up to claim lineage, he sees that it is not just the poets claiming that lineage but also nude male models who appear opposite his verse in a recent edition of his work: “handsome lads wrestle in sepia, / freshly laved by some historic stream: / the roughs are models now, and pose / in nothing” (24). The image suggests that Whitman’s writings on sexuality have contributed to a cultural environment where the erotic, and especially the homoerotic, is more celebrated and less reviled than it had been during his era. However, these youths appear in the poem at the same time as the poets lining up to claim lineage, which suggests something importunate about them. The juxtaposition of these images with Whitman’s verse appears incongruous, perhaps tacky, a little over-the-top, banal, and certainly commercial. What is arguably missing is Whitman’s views of the ennobling, spiritual aspects of sexuality. Later, Doty asks, “I wonder if you’d like those boys / in underpants looming huge on billboards / over Seventh Avenue? We’re freer now, / and move from ghetto to turbid mainstream” (30). A few stanzas afterward, Doty answers his own question: “You would not / like it here, despite the grassy persistence / of your name” (31). The claim here is a distinctly postmodern one: the images of the erotic contain the form, but not the putative function, of Whitman’s representations: “your astonishing news: no conflation, / you made it plain, to mistake the nipple / for the soul, souse of ejaculate / for the warm rain of heaven” (29). Doty does take some time to grapple earnestly with Whitman’s vision, “that bond of flesh to equal flesh, / might be the
bedrock of an order” (26). He thinks that he has had a similar sentiment, and adds, “I don’t mean to romance this, Walt, / but much of what I’ve known of fellowship // I’ve apprehended in the basest church[…]I thought, We’re all here, every one of us” (26-27). Later, though, he asks, “That moment, unguarded, / skin to skin, why didn’t it make us change?” (28). As such, the poem does not unquestioningly endorse these loftier notions of sexuality in their entirety, as evidenced both by the occasionally glib tone and even the speaker’s own admission that some of what he says is a joke.

Whitman’s vision of the erotic-democratic sublime aside, Doty explores the more domestic dimensions of the erotic, in this regard enabled more by Whitman the public figure than Whitman the poet. After doing laundry, the speaker’s partner Paul lounges on the couch and reads Proust before they go out for Vietnamese food: “We have what amounts / to marriage—sexy, serviceable, pleasant, / plain” (30). This situation is beyond the reach of Whitman, who “lost your day job for writing scandalous / verse” (29). The speaker speculates that “You might have lived like this / awhile with Peter Doyle, who can now say? / Of our company in your century, / dust and silence almost all erase” (30). The operative irony is that Whitman’s enunciation of gay identity, his scandalous verse, has been part of efforts to increase the visibility of and tolerance for gay culture. In fact, the cultural situation has even progressed to the point that Doty can write, “And—explain this to a ghost!—our theorists / question notions of identity: Are you who you love, / or can you dwell in categorical ambiguity?” (30). Doty continues, “Our numbers divide, merge and multiply; // shoulder to shoulder with our fellow folk, / who’s to say just who anyone is?” (301). While this “categorical ambiguity can create new possibilities, the

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160 In “Paradise” (Bethlehem in Broad Daylight 53-58), Doty writes: “I didn’t know whose hands were whose; // the breathtaking fall from self / brought us farther into the garden, / blind readers who disappeared, / for a while, into the text. // In little clearings half a dozen men / became no one, and lost nothing. / I don’t want to glorify this; the truth is / I wouldn’t wish it on anyone, / though it is a blessing, / when all your life you’ve been told / you’re no one, and you find a way / to be what you have been told, // and it’s all right” (57).
speaker also describes “all our uncountable specks and flares, / powerless, uncertain...You would not / like it here” (30-31). This passage suggests that identity has become unmoored. While this questioning of identity and the performance thereof, as found in the work of Judith Butler among many others, may appear liberatory, it also dispenses with a sort of romantic certainty. Again, the postmodern cultural milieu is at odds with Whitman’s bardic declamations.

Ultimately, the boldness of Whitman is what the poem seems to be praising most insistently. Paraphrasing another famous gay poet, Auden, Doty asks, “Is it true then, what your descendant said, / that poetry makes nothing happen?” (31). While the speaker does not answer that question, he seems to be at the very least drawn to Whitman’s vision as a force opposing Auden’s cynicism. In the concluding section, the speaker and his partner visit a Fred Meyer supermarket after a morning of gardening. Doty writes, “Every one that sleeps is beautiful, / you said. Every one who shops is / also lovely: we go out together / to try on what the world is made of’ (32). It is easy to read this as a nod to Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California.” It also evokes James Merrill’s “The Mad Scene” (114), in which he “dreamed the dream called Laundry,” where quotidian items serve as a metonym for love and affection. (Indeed, love calls us to the things of this world.) Once again, the tone is a bit tongue-in-cheek, the lofty rhetoric conflated with the everyday, and it has a certain campiness, but it is difficult not to read some measure of sincerity. After all, the store serves as a Whitmanesque microcosm of American life,

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161 Butler writes, “I do not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing, but it does draw attention to the difficulty of the ‘I’ to express itself through the language that is available to it. For this ‘I’ that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language. I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this ‘I’ possible. This is the bind of self-expression, as I understand it. What it means is that you never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you. If I treat that grammar as pellucid, then I fail to call attention precisely to that sphere of language that establishes and disestablishes intelligibility, and that would be precisely to thwart my own project as I have described it to you here. I am not trying to be difficult, but only to draw attention to a difficulty without which no ‘I’ can appear” (xxiv-xxv).

162 Doty writes, “Our poets fear / the didactic, the sweeping claim; we let / the televangelists and door-to-door / preachers talk hope and apocalypse // while we tend more private gardens” (29).
with workers, bikers, “fancy wives,” Hispanic women, a crossdresser, and “Indian kids in the runs of their inheritance,” with everyone joined “in the bond of our common needs” (32). As the speaker and Paul load their car with “more than we ever / thought we’d need,” the speaker concludes, “the poem stops here, / in the parking lot, waiting for you” (33). The quotidian setting of the conclusion suggests something of the role that Whitman serves as an icon who is praised. He is a role model, as well as an almost paternal or saintly figure. He provides the hope of something greater than the present, even though, ironically, what he praised was very much the here and now. An ideal can provide hope and inspiration, but it can also make actual life seem like mere waiting.

**Conclusion**

Could anyone write like Whitman today? And would it, could it be published? I think the obvious answer is probably not. Such poetry would be treated as affected and outdated, and it would be consigned to the margins. Despite the obvious answers to such questions, I think that it is nonetheless important that they be asked. Furthermore, with respect to the vital but under-theorized relation between emotional regulation and poetic practice, it is important to try to ask new and better questions, a project at the core of *Excuses for Emotion*. Making an argument similar to my own in this study, Snediker notes that “poetry has become a genre susceptible to many of the charges likewise leveled against optimism, positive affect, and nonincoherent persons. Lyric poetry, like optimism or joy, solipsistically disengages from or flits above the crises of lived experience. Lyric poetry, like nonincoherent personhood, forges the semblance of coherence only in its severance from the conditions by which it is produced” (31-32). He calls these charges “fatuous” (32), an assessment with which I largely agree, which should be clear by
this point. Of course, these charges can be true, but they can be also be leveled so reflexively and in so many varying situations that they can become a form without deeper meaning.\textsuperscript{163} Both he and I argue for questioning the values that underlie our aesthetic and critical judgments and thereby broadening what we can think of as, to use his word, “interesting.” I think that representations of intense, unironic, and “personal” or “private” emotion can be theorized in a way that is interesting and productive—in other words, worthy of serious scholarly attention and not subject to cursory dismissal.

Each chapter of this study considers emotional regulation as determined by axes of identity, especially gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Each poet under discussion uses emotional rhetoric that has a social, political dimension, though the degree of self-consciousness and degree of effectiveness vary considerably, I think. The most explicitly political, as well as the most purposeful in their use of emotional regulation, are probably the poets discussed in “Women of Power”: Rich, Grahn, and Jordan. They form an instructive contrast with the poets of this chapter. The lesbian poets tend to be more earnest (Grahn being the most ironic and playful of the three), whereas the gay poets tend to be more ironic, urbane, and performatively witty. For the gay poets this emotional profile is presumably in part a reflection of their cultural tradition, with Wildean wit and an emphasis on sophistication. For the lesbian poets, there is more earnest seriousness of purpose and more righteous anger. It is not much of a stretch, I think, to say that their work is more programmatically political; Ginsberg is political, as are the others to varying degrees, but I doubt that many would read any of them as first and foremost political poets. Interestingly, the

\textsuperscript{163} Snediker writes, “Following the liquidation of New Criticism and in the ambivalent wake of Paul de Man, lyric poetry has become a genre susceptible to many of the charges likewise leveled against optimism, positive affect, and nonincoherent persons. Lyric poetry, like optimism or joy, solipsistically disengages from or flits above the crises of lived experience. Lyric poetry, like nonincoherent personhood, forges the semblance of coherence only in its severance from the conditions by which it is produced. Both of the above pronouncements—which I find equally fatuous—rehearse indictments of lyric poetry, and even more so, of the New Criticism that continues to organize lyric reception” (32).
gay poet discussed in this volume who is the most theoretically explicit about identity politics in his work, Rafael Campo, pays homage to female intellectual and artistic influences, particularly Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Marilyn Hacker. The gay poets in “The Promise of Whitman” have struck me as the most the most playful, and the most counterintuitive, or at least the most contrary to my expectations before I began my research in earnest. One major reason irony and playfulness are perennial favorites of the academy are that they are conducive to discussion and speculation. And, I find the logic underlying the emotional regulation in this poetry to be in some ways the most elusive on a fundamental level, so I would like to proceed with some speculation before returning to the questions I asked at the beginning of this section.

The skepticism exhibited toward Whitman in this poetry could stem from several factors. It’s good to have both affection and skepticism. Maybe even a kind of affectionate skepticism is possible. Affectionate skepticism winks at itself: the person experiencing it admits the dubiousness of what he or she feels skepticism toward. However, this knowingness preserves the affection. Whitman is also a haunting presence, for generations of gay men already dealing with lost connections and lost opportunities, so it is possible that the emotional register is to some degree mournful. It is possible that these poets are also encountering their own sense of inadequacy, with Whitman’s legacy serving as a perpetual goad and reminder of what might be accomplished. Maybe they see something dangerous in his idealism. Maybe the fact that he has been thoroughly appropriated by American culture also makes him suspect. That might be true, though I don’t think I would argue that the poets are reacting on that basis, or primarily on that basis. At least on a pop cultural level, representations of gay male sassiness and playfulness have become incorporated into the American mainstream. Also, I am skeptical that one could successfully define oneself in perpetual opposition to the dominant order.
Although it makes sense for various reasons that gay poets would adopt Whitman as an icon, there remains the question of how they position themselves relative to his poetics, as well as why they do so. The poems aren’t about Whitman’s poetry so much as they are about him as a part of the poet’s literary biography—a quaint notion, perhaps, but also a compelling one. Ultimately, they may be mostly talking about themselves, with Whitman serving only as a representation of something they imagine and long for. In that way, Whitman eludes them. From that perspective, then, it appears that poetry about Whitman is a self-aware critical exploration of their own nostalgia and desire. It is even more interesting to think that, at the very least, Whitman might have been the source of their own desire and optimism, which sustained them with hope but also conflicted with their experiences. They are men wrestling with their own idealism and hope, as well as with their connection to other gay men and collective gay experience, both symbolized and influenced by Whitman. Their irony is understandable, and it may even have political value, but even so it raises the question of what a more straightforward paean to Whitman would look like—or, rather, the question of under what circumstances such a poem might meet with critical plaudits. Whatever those circumstances may be, they would almost certainly require a more rigorous and sustained critical dialogue on emotional regulation. On a side note, I wonder to what extent poetic subject matter is an excuse for emotion insofar as it is an excuse to have an emotion. Perhaps this line of speculation leads to questions of intentionality that are notoriously slippery.

It is time for a serious and sustained discussion of what new ways emotions (and poetry in general) can be interesting. This discussion will help illuminate problematic constraints on representations of emotion. It is also very possible that, by changing the ways in which poetry is read and talked about, it will bring new varieties of poetry to attention, and a refreshing change
will follow. Will we see the emergence of a “major” poet who publishes primarily in a style similar to that of Whitman? Probably not. But we might, and that makes things interesting.
CONCLUSION

In almost all instances emotion is an integral part of writing and reading poetry (I am comfortable making this assertion, even though it cannot really be proved and others would surely disagree with me). Consequently, I consider an investigation of emotion in poetry to be an exploration of poetry at its most fundamental level. It’s an important task, not just in these pages but for the broader poetry community. I hope to provoke conversation, and to that end I have tried to be judiciously provocative. Even though I might sound as though I’m judging the poetry and poetry criticism under discussion (and surely I am), I do not mean to suggest that this privileging of the “difficult” and the “complex” automatically makes it dubious; what I am suggesting is that we need to move away from a paradigm of poetic composition and criticism that assigns those qualities value without further explanation. I am not arguing that what poets do is bad just because it is the logical, and predictable, result of their inhabiting a particular academy and literary culture with norms about the expression of emotion. What I am arguing is that their particular expression of emotion is not an achievement so much as a requirement. When critics praise Robert Hass for avoiding “easy” sentiment, they implicitly or explicitly praise him for embracing what is “difficult.” All of the poets discussed in these chapters do something “difficult”: critical self-reflection, the transgression of socially acceptable conventions of discourse through taboo subject matter and provocative language, and so forth. Such work can be brave, original, and even necessary. It can be good. It can be great.

But we are limited by the conventions of our praise and disapproval. And those conventions have a real and sometimes insidious effect on literary production, literary publication, and the awarding of prizes and jobs. Emotionally “difficult” poetry can be just as
formulaic, predictable, and easy to produce as “easy” work. Just as obscure language, densely allusive content, and novel or conceptual form are common features of work that is taken seriously, so are critical self-reflection and irony. One could argue, with some justification, that poetry is an important place for these qualities precisely because they are rare elsewhere. But do rarity and resistance to the established practices of dominant culture make something good? And is the inverse true? I think the answer to each question is: not necessarily. If one is speaking on matters of artistry, I see little reason why irony can be expressed in artful, evocative language but sincerity can’t. In fact, eloquent sincerity and idealism can be powerfully persuasive. Oddly, it seems one is more likely to encounter them in popular culture—television shows, movies, and so on—than one is to encounter them in poetry. I have been deeply moved, gotten goose bumps, fought back tears, and reflected intently on dialogue from these sources—dialogue that I think is meaningful and artful. I’m not saying contemporary American poetry doesn’t do these things, but it doesn’t do them nearly as much as it could.\textsuperscript{164}

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One might wonder why, if “complex” emotion is as aesthetically arbitrary as I claim, it has such purchase in the academy. In several ways “complex” emotion supports agreeable narratives about self and others. In art and scholarship, aesthetic judgment serves as lens on the self. People wish to be taken seriously, as well as to obviate criticism directed toward them. As Jane Tompkins has discussed, one such way is adversarial: to challenge and criticize other

\textsuperscript{164} The objection I would expect is that popular culture makes use of melodrama, and of course melodrama is affecting, but that doesn’t make it artistically or intellectually serious. I would reply that even melodrama and otherwise uneven material can have moments of greatness. Also, it seems that the designation of “melodrama” arguably relates more to the emotional impact of a work than its actual quality. Perhaps it is the claim it makes upon the audience’s emotions that is resented.
academic work. Another such way (which often overlaps) is to praise or create something that is “difficult.” It’s safe to criticize that which is “easy,” straightforward, simple, popular outside of the academy, and not ironic—and to pledge allegiance to work that has the opposite qualities. However, it’s hard to criticize (and to be criticized as) difficulty as spurious and unnecessary without coming across as a little anti-intellectual, a little intellectually lazy. Maybe the emperor has no clothes, one might say. Maybe you lack the sophistication and drive necessary to see them, goes the reply.165

And, on the creative side of things, the poetry workshop certainly encourages writers to embrace “difficult” emotions. First of all, it’s easy advice to give—the first commandment of the poetry workshop is “show, don’t tell,” an ethos that privileges the indirect, which leads to a certain degree of ironic distance. Moreover, many, if not most, poets come to poetry as a means of self-expression, and that expression involves strong, cathartic emotion. As such, that sort of emotion has come to have the connotation of being “juvenile,” with the emotionally revised poetry signifying artistic maturation. Similarly, strong and unironic emotion, as well as emotion that is “told” more than “shown,” is associated with pre-Modernist aesthetics, and, by extension, considerable naïveté.

Also, as the expression goes, familiarity breeds contempt. Poets and critics presumably encounter voluminous quantities of poetry, to the point that they are aware of its conventions, and the sort of claims it makes on readers. It quite simply becomes stale for them. Novelty can

165 One of my distinct memories from graduate school comes from a seminar in which we discussed critical writing. During class discussion I made the casual remark that I thought many works of literary theory and literary criticism could stand to be shorter. I was expecting to see looks of agreement. Instead, the looks I saw were closer to aghast than agreement. I wondered: did they vehemently disagree with me? did they agree with me but were embarrassed to be seen as doing so? did they simply think I had transgressed some line of graduate program decorum? The irony is that I feel that on a stylistic level literary criticism and theory of the past decade or so are in fact moving toward greater clarity and economy, with this lucidity leaving intact—and, I would argue, enhancing—the intellectual rigor of their projects. They’re more readable—and more enjoyable—but they’re certainly not airy belle-lettres.
recapture their interest; poet and critic Ira Sadoff remarks; “If I want to be moved by a poem, the poem itself generally must be moving, which is to say mobile, emotionally, linguistically, and syntactically. I may have come to this view in part because reading so many representational poems over the years has made their strategies seem predictable” (12). He still wants to be “moved,” but he wants to be moved in a way that accounts for his earlier experiences as a reader. I would somewhat cynically point out that the poetry that moves him might be as stale and predictable for me as that poetry that fails to move him. Furthermore, insofar as poetry makes a claim on the reader, it is possible that a reader might grow tired of and even come to resent the claims made on him or her if they are made often enough. A poem that might initially impress a reader with its intensity of emotion might, over time, evoke resentment that the reader is expected to be impressed by emotion that seems unrealistic. At the very least, then, “complex” poetry consistently flatters the reader that he or she is intelligent, discerning, and perhaps even a little jaded in a cosmopolitan way. However, it is important not to too readily respond to such flattery with praise.

Like familiarity and novelty, “authenticity” also factors into critical reception. All poetry is stylized language. Even when a poetic voice imitates the conversational and quotidian, it is still an artificial construct. For historical poetry, which is to say poetry whose style and voice have been anachronistic, the act of recognizing this artifice allows a trained reader to appreciate the artistry and aesthetic and intellectual accomplishment of work toward which that reader might otherwise be deeply critical. On the other hand, contemporary poetry can be perceived as more artistically fresh and more immediately relevant to the reader’s personal and social experience. It offers the pleasure of authenticity, which is of course a dubious and highly subjective quality. While feeling that an artistic work is authentic insofar as it resonates with
one’s life experiences and sense of self is not a bad thing, one should not let the sense of personal authenticity distract from the fact that the poem is at its core the voice of a persona, a product of artifice. In addition, praising a poem as authentic sometimes means that the individual offering the praise perceives the poem in question as artistically superior, particularly if it appears to be innovative. This sort of praise can be highly self-congratulatory. I think of instances when I’ve spoken with younger poets dismissive of Billy Collins. Their criticism has struck me as questionable at best, with assertions of his inauthenticity and aesthetic emptiness having no real justification aside from the fact that his work is widely popular with a non-specialist audience.

Lastly, a poem is sometimes said to be authentic when it represents the voice of a marginalized group. In some instances, this perception of authenticity can work against stereotypes and generalizations about that group while spurring outside interest in that group and sympathy toward its struggles. In other cases, though, the spurious appearance of authenticity can reinforce misconceptions and exoticization.

It should be noted how easy it is to mark oneself as “suspect,” unpleasant, or undesirable by the manner in which one expresses oneself emotionally. It seems to me that the emotions privileged in poetry are the ones that, by and large, members of the poetry community would find agreeable in people with whom they interact socially. That might seem like a sound standard of judgment, but there’s something more than a little solipsistic about that. Readers want emotions that they would find pleasant in others, enhanced emotions that they can enjoy on the level of wish fulfillment or vicarious experience without feeling too silly, and emotions that appeal to their sense of self as a caring, ethical person. That constitutes a broad but also constrained range of emotional rhetoric.
A major challenge in thinking about the culture of literary production and criticism is identifying what is actually going on, and where. In a conversation published in 2009, poet and professor Arielle Greenberg and poet and MFA student Becca Klaver discuss the work of Sylvia Plath, along with a brief discussion of Sharon Olds, with particular attention to the poetry’s significance for young women readers. About Olds, Greenberg says, “I do think she is, in a chronological as well as topical sense, the most direct descendent of Plath,” although she admits there are “huge dissimilarities” (201). She views Olds as a pioneer for contemporary American women poets: “Olds seems to pick up on one strand in Plath—the brazen attitude towards writing about familial issues, and the narrative lure of that—and take it to its next step. Another gift contemporary women poets have to offer teenage girl readers—frank sexuality—can be credited in part to Olds” (202). Greenberg adds that, “Although Plath’s poems are entrenched in the female body, and the voice is often brazen and carnal (‘I eat men like air,’ etc.), she was writing in the 1950s and 60s, and there was so much left unsaid in the poetry of her circles” (202). This point is important, because it takes Plath’s poetry on its own terms and resists the temptation to read the work as the unabashed advancement of all things feminist, which it most certainly was not.

What captured my attention the most in this piece, though, was the opening, in which Klaver stated that at her MFA orientation, she was “a bit shocked” to hear Greenberg say that she liked Plath (180). She recalls wondering, “Are my tastes okay? Should I mention my guilty pleasures? God, I should have read more.” She then makes a curious remark: “In the unwritten handbook for aspiring female writers, it’s understood that the chapter on Plath ends with
adolescence. Much of my own knowledge of Plath existed on the level of cultural mythology—I had the idea that she wasn’t studied, she was talked about. Or she was simply alluded to, a metonym for ‘crazy girl.’” She wonders, “How can Plath be both one of the most popular poets in the United States and a constant subject for academic criticism, while at the same time be a figure ‘serious’ poets have been taught to look down upon?” This question illustrates an important divide that is not seriously addressed on an institutional or intellectual level. On one side are contemporary American poets, often educated in and employed by MFA or other creative writing programs, who publish largely through journals and presses run by other creative writers, and whose critical output largely consists of reviews, interviews, and craft-related articles in literary journals and writing-oriented publications. Much of their discourse occurs in workshops, at readings, at creative writing conferences, and, increasingly, online. On the other side are conventional literary scholars, who attend academic conferences, publish through peer-reviewed academic presses and in (primarily institutional and print) academic journals, and who are even more tied in a professional and academic sense to the university system—one can in theory imagine a poet with a few books from decently reputable presses who has perhaps only an undergraduate degree and whose primary source of income is a blue-collar job, but can one imagine that being true of a literary scholar? The idea that that could happen in our current system is absurd. It is more or less openly acknowledged that each side views the other with varying degrees of bemusement, suspicion, contempt, and insecurity—a situation only exacerbated by institutional struggles for resources and authority. This factionalism, though, means that even though each side might occupy the same department, interact on a regular basis, and be reasonably aware of the other’s work, they might generate highly divergent ways of
talking about poetry, with their own virtually unquestioned sets of assumptions about what counts as serious literature, what constitutes literary merit.

Another divide, though, is the one between what people say amongst themselves—in conversation, in private correspondence, in anonymous comments online—and what they are willing to commit to saying in print. As I discuss in the first chapter, Tony Trigilio notes disparaging comments his colleagues made about Ginsberg in relative privacy. However as the publicness of the genre increases—from personal discussion to conference comments to print—the number of people willing to criticize, and the force of the criticism, proportionately decreases. And, as Klaver notes, despite the less public nature of this criticism, it can still be widespread and exert a strong effect. She writes, “The explicit cultural code—that ‘unwritten handbook for teenage writers’—calls Plath ‘juvenile’ when the implicit script is that she’s a woman unregulated, and that’s the real reason we’re shooed away from her” (187). This cultural code is unwritten, but, at least in her experience, still explicit. A critic who calls Plath juvenile in print might attract the censure of someone like Ostriker, who may or may not frame her response primarily in terms of gender, but in the walls of a workshop or in writing program culture, Plath and her style might treated as products of another era, with maybe some feminist value, but certainly not indicative of a style students would necessarily want to imitate. Of course, Greenberg herself is open about her admiration of Plath with her students, but Klaver has obviously received her impression from somewhere, though unfortunately she is not more specific about where that somewhere might be.

In pointing out these divides between literary scholarship and creative writing, private and public discourse, I mean to suggest that even though the literary criticism of a figure as widely studied and taught as Plath might celebrate her artistic and feminist achievements, the
discourse surrounding her work in workshops, in private conversation, and online—not to mention in popular culture—can very much influence how practicing poets assess her, as well as how they define their own style and subject matter in relation to hers. The same is even truer of Olds, still living, whose status as a feminist icon is far less sacrosanct. Literature inhabits a cultural regime of emotional regulation shaped by these highly visible and also less visible discourses. Poets and literary scholars inhabit discourses with widely accepted but also highly unexamined assumptions about the proper role of emotion in literature, assumptions that in some cases have real political value, but in other regards are arbitrary, petty, poisonously self-congratulatory, and also deeply politically problematic.

It is my belief that we should consider these other forms of discourses when thinking about contemporary writing, because they very much govern what poets write, as well as the sort of poetry that is brought to prominence through publications, awards, and inclusion in anthologies. We increasingly live in a culture of incessant feedback, which incentivizes writers to prioritize avoiding criticism, real or imagined, in various genres.

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What can you and can’t you say in a poem? Irony, persona, disclaiming self-awareness, and other excuses for emotion allow you to “say” almost anything, just as long as it’s clear you don’t really mean it. But, without excuses, there several emotions conventionally understood as negative or destructive that are difficult to express strongly without censure: anger, hatred, greed, envy, self-pity, pride, resentment, despair and Schadenfreude. Do these have emotions have a place in respectable poetry? They are certainly dangerous emotions, and one is right to be wary
of them, but at the same time I am not absolutely certain that they cannot somehow be harnessed without requiring an excuse—though as to how one would harness them, I’m not sure. Beyond them, even emotions that can be positive (such as “sentimentality,” affection, and praise) require an excuse lest they be perceived as overwrought, trite, or misguided. Safer emotional content includes self-criticism, desire, gentle wonderment, humor, and ironic detachment.

I do not offer any manifesto-like paradigm for the sort of poetry that might make a different use of emotion. It’s not as though I’m necessarily suggesting that there’s some deeper sincerity waiting to be unleashed. The poets will need to innovate, and the critics and scholars will need to be prepared to articulate the significance of that new work. While pondering the question of what might come next, I thought of the emotional equivalent of Imagism—which I half-seriously suggest we might call Emotionism—in which the evocation of the emotion is the primary act of the poem. Would that then be apolitical? Not necessarily. It would allow us to better understand emotion, which is a potent force in our political and social life, not to mention our understanding of self and other. So, in that sense, it would be political in an auxiliary way but would nonetheless have strong explanatory, inspirational, and provocative power. I would not say that Emotionism is the apex of what I consider possible, and I could even say that I think it would be something productive to pursue further. In all likelihood much potential lies in simply adjusting present poetic practices. Whatever new emotional practices poets ultimately adopt, however, I think the present moment requires first and foremost active experimentation, ranging from the modest to the radical, and even to the potentially ludicrous.

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In a significant way, my purpose in this study has been to provoke discussion of what constitutes good writing, as well as of the way those criteria vary according to the identity of the author. Our critical and artistic discourse has a very limited vocabulary for both quality and significance, which ought to make people uncomfortable. As I have stated, I first asked, what have these poets actually written? I then asked, could they have written this poetry differently? The answer to the latter question has consistently been, not really. Essentially, I’m arguing for three things. First of all, I would like poetry critics and scholars to explain why “difficult” emotional content, to the extent that they praise it, is a good thing. Second, I would like them to think about the ways that non-“difficult” emotional content could be “interesting” from a critical perspective, to use the formulation of Michael D. Snediker. Third, I would like poets themselves to experiment with work that consciously challenges prevailing emotional norms, and to pursue its publication. While I think that poetry will continue to require an excuse for emotion, I find it exciting to consider reading some future poet who, in contemporary language, makes an artful, sustained, and unapologetic exploration of the emotional content toward which we are trained to be suspicious.
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