FROM PRINTED PAGE TO LIVE HIP HOP:  
AMERICAN POETRY AND POLITICS INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

MICHAEL DOWDY: From Printed Page to Live Hip Hop: American Poetry and Politics into the 21st Century
(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

This project identifies and explains the major rhetorical strategies American poets from Vietnam to the present use to create political poems. It argues that there are many different, though overlapping, approaches to making sociopolitically engaged poetry. Understanding political poetry as a collection of multiple rhetorical strategies moves away from identity-based and subject-based criticism. This project thus considers a number of representative poems from each strategy in order to illuminate each strategy’s intricacies. Further, the contention that hip hop has the most political potential of contemporary poetries suggests convergences with strategies for making printed poetry political.

The framework for understanding both hip hop and printed poetry is derived from theories of agency that negotiate the individual’s ability to act according to her purposes in relation to the determining economic, political, and social forces that constrain action. The strategies considered thus emerge from various types of poetic agency: embodied agency, including both experiential and authoritative agency; equivocal agency, including comprehensive and particular varieties; migratory agency; and contestatory urban agency, which includes strategies indigenous to hip hop.

Poems of embodied agency utilize the lived experiences of speaker-poets, experiences transformed through poetry but demonstrable through the body and memory. While poems of authoritative agency present individual and collective experience, they insist that they know
the conditions of others and demand action from their readers. Poems of equivocal agency problematize notions of direct experience and are often nearly devoid of human presence, but replete with equivocation, irony, satire, and transpersonal experiences. The primary source of agency in poems of migratory agency is the fluid border between English- and Spanish-speaking cultures in the Americas. Their bilingual textures contest English’s role as the language for poetic, social, and political expression in the United States.

The final chapter expands the scope for contemporary American political poetry, arguing that hip hop can achieve politically what printed poetry cannot. Live hip hop shows at small clubs can create interactive, community-based, democratic spaces, and hip hop’s internal debates about authenticity and agency vivify the culture, ensure its diversity, and work to uphold its endangered emphasis on collective identity and community strength.
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PREFACE

While initially I feared that it would be difficult to articulate points of convergence for the three controlling imperatives of this book, I soon realized that those imperatives are bound together intimately. My dedication to contemporary American poetry, hip hop music, and international politics reaches a critical juncture under the broad designator “political poetry.” As Adrienne Rich once wrote, “Poetry never stood a chance / of standing outside history” (*Your Native Land* 33). Despite the opinions of some scholars, colleagues, and friends that contemporary poetry is obsolete except in a few isolated conclaves and that hip hop music is ephemeral and vacuous, I believe that poetry – both in printed form and in hip hop performance – is not only a ubiquitous and powerful cultural form in the United States, but that it is perhaps the best means for exploring contemporary American culture and the ways artists make their work political. In this book I explore the poetics of late twentieth and early twenty-first century poets, including those who perform on stage and on record, as well as on the printed page. Their strategies for confronting complex political, social, and global contexts in an era of globalization, war, human rights abuses, increasing economic inequality, and a prevailing uncertainty about the future help illuminate how artists negotiate between creative work and real-world constraints.

I want to make a confession at the outset: I grew up listening to and thinking and talking about hip hop music and culture long before I became a serious poet or critic. I went to my first hip hop concert when I was thirteen years old, but did not read my first full-length volume of poetry until much later. If, therefore, I sound occasionally like an ardent fan or
passionate defender of hip hop, my stance is a product of this history. I trust that my growth from fan to critic/fan does not prevent my analyzing hip hop music and culture in an illuminating way. Printed poetry, on the other hand, does not have “fans” in the same way that hip hop does. Hip hop is both a youth-dominated and performance-based culture, while the most exalted and celebrated poetic traditions in the United States have been passed along in printed form and are generally more intellectual and less accessible – so the story goes – than youth cultural forms.

This dynamic has led many observers to view hip hop as an evanescent art form with little long term value. In hip hop culture, after all, fans often think of music made prior to 1994 as “old school.” In contrast, printed poetry, at least what critics and scholars have determined is the “best,” tends to mature and gain in cultural value over time. I have come to believe that these opposite trajectories are a key to understanding contemporary political poetry and the different political potentials of printed poetry and hip hop. Hip hop artists are capable of accomplishing what active contemporary poets often strive to create – a public space of collective agency, potential change, and community. They have a larger stage on which to interact with their audience, to create alternative images of justice, and to build potential political movements. Printed poetry, though, appreciates more slowly. Its impacts are often not immediate as they are in hip hop; thus, it is often difficult to see printed poetry as political. I have also come to believe that any extensive study of contemporary poetry, especially political poetry, is incomplete if it does not include the political work of hip hop. Such a study as this has never been published; consequently, critics have missed the opportunity to explore what hip hop can teach us about printed poetry and what printed poetry can tell us about the world’s most popular, dynamic, and confounding art form.
Years of attending hip hop shows at night while reading, writing, and studying printed poetry during the day have compelled me to consider the shifting roles of both poets in society and of hip hop as a powerful form of political poetry. I have also been grappling with the apparent desire of many critics, readers, and poets to make lyric poetry – since the Romantic period associated with introspection and interpersonal emotions – political. Poetry, these observers hope, should be capable of making a difference in the world. Further, although I enjoy reading the poetry of previous generations, I am drawn more to contemporary poetry’s inextricability from current political and social contexts, partially, I believe, because of what Robert von Hallberg pointed out in 1987, a dictum which still applies nearly twenty years later: the need of humanities scholars to make the study of poetry “obviously important” (*Politics and Poetic Value* 2). Printed poetry can be “obviously important” in the classroom when it reverberates beyond the classroom to confront issues of social justice, war, and foreign policy – outside, between, and within the walls of the individual heart and mind. In my view, it is unnecessary to style hip hop as “obviously important”; Patrick Neate’s recent book *Where You’re At: Notes from the Frontlines of a Hip-Hop Planet* shows that hip hop music and culture are a fascinating combination of local and global forces, what he calls “glocal,” and have sociopolitical implications in places as dissimilar as Tokyo, Cape Town, New York, and Rio de Janiero.

Throughout my years of graduate study, I wrestled, often inconclusively, with the same question from friends, family, and colleagues. After being asked about my scholarly interests and responding with “contemporary poetry, especially political poetry,” I often received blank stares, as if to say, *I know what poetry is and I know what politics are, but what is political poetry and who writes it?* The following, then, is my extended answer. As Michael
Bérubé discusses in *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics*, there is a great need for a more accessible language and a better articulation of political positions in humanities scholarship so that it has greater potential to reach a broader audience (171). As such, I hope this book contributes to academic discussions of contemporary printed poetry, literature and politics, applied theoretical studies of agency, and discourses about hip hop music and culture. Further, I hope what follows will be capable of reaching a broader audience, those who enjoy reading poetry and those who grew up with hip hop music, those who follow global politics, and those who are interested in art’s engagement with sociopolitical realities. Thus, I attempt to negotiate the constraints of scholarly literary criticism and use a more approachable style.

Although I employ various theoretical terms, I trust that those terms will challenge and engage rather than confuse readers. Also, my theoretical and stylistic approach to the material is similar to hip hop artists’ approaches – eclectic and pragmatic. I do not hesitate to borrow from a variety of academic disciplines and scholarly approaches. Like hip hop sampling, I also sample a variety of approaches to poetry scholarship and cultural studies. When Helen Vendler writes that poets who use more than one language or register employ a “macaronic aesthetic” (“Poet of Two Worlds” 31), she derides them for their unsustainable voices. However, I believe that these voices are dynamic and creative even if they appropriate and reuse previous voices and traditions. I hope that this book’s “macaronic” critical approach is the best one to elucidate the complex landscape of contemporary poetry in the United States in both printed poems and hip hop song and performance.
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INTRODUCTION
Navigating the Landscape of Politics and Poetry in the United States

The age of the ignorant rapper is done
knowledge reigns supreme over nearly everyone
the stereotype must be lost
that love and peace and knowledge is soft
do away with that and understand one fact
for love, peace must attack
and attack real strong, stronger than war
to conquer it and its law

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.
- from W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (1939)

Poet and critic Edward Hirsch once wrote that poetry embodies a “magical potency” (How to 1-5). In this book I explore the ways that poets and hip hop artists attempt to transmit, impart, and create political potency in their work without losing the magic and dynamism that is usually the province of poetry but less often of politics. I begin, then, with two epigraphs – one from a rapper and one from a poet who made the United States home for most of his adult life. Both suggest some critical departure points for this study of the rhetorical strategies for making poetry political. It is often thought, as Auden implies in his elegy for Yeats, that poetry “makes nothing happen.” It is isolated from the domain of political power and from the executives who make decisions about the future of nations.
Nevertheless, Auden claims, poetry “survives” as a “way of happening,” an action in its own
right that persists and retains a power and mystery with which the powerful “would never
want to tamper.” For KRS-One (Kris Parker), the rapper for Bronx-based Boogie Down
Productions and one of the culture’s most respected innovators and political voices, hip hop
artists must use positive, powerful language to “attack” the forces of “war.” This poetic,
KRS-One believes, is capable of helping to “conquer” the “law” of war that upholds
inequality in a world rife with racism, violence, poverty, unemployment, and the forces of
imperialism. This optimism and abiding belief in language as a force of resistance to
injustice, which is often qualified in many hip hop songs, differs from Auden’s suggestion
that a poem is ultimately an ineffective social act.

I chose these two epigraphs because they illustrate centuries-long questions about the
usefulness of political poetry and the survival of poetry in face of substantial doubts about its
viability. Moreover, they illustrate the ways that poets alternate between swaggering
braggadocio and despondency about their poetry’s making something “happen” politically or
socially. The divide between naïve optimism and pessimism, though, should not be
understood as one between hip hop songs and printed poems. Numerous hip hop artists
bemoan their inability to affect change in their communities while other poets, such as those
of the Black Arts Movement, swagger and challenge and deftly proclaim the power of
language. Poems such as Quincy Troupe’s “Boomerang: A Blatantly Political Poem,” which
claims that “absolutely nothing / will have been undone” (665-6) by the poems of resistance
during the civil rights movement, and José Montoya’s “The Movement Has Gone for its
Ph.D. over at the University, or the Gang Wars are Back” (95-6) suggests that progressive
change is compromised by institutionalization in which poets are complicit. But rarely, if
ever, is any printed poem as unabashedly swaggering as a rap song. Even if tongue-in-cheek, one of hip hop’s primary tropes asserts the power of language as a weapon for change and as a metonym of the artist’s linguistic dexterity. For instance, Edan’s “Promised Land” (*Beauty and the Beat*) proclaims both the power of hip hop and the impact of his verse: “my power settled the clash between races / and put good people on the magazine faces.”

Most importantly, though, these epigraphs point to an overarching warrant for writing about the political strategies of printed poetry and hip hop music instead of some other expressive form such as folk music, film, fiction, or blogging. Auden implies that poetry is and always will be primarily countercultural. Similarly, hip hop music began as a countercultural art, but has since lapsed (or progressed, depending on your perspective) into a cornerstone of popular culture. Most of the most politically and socially adept hip hop is still countercultural – both within the culture itself and within the larger American culture – and is often recorded on independent record labels and performed at smaller, independent clubs and concert spaces. These artists are able to comment on both the dominant American culture and the hypermaterialistic commercial hip hop that often implicitly supports it. In the fourth chapter I explore some of these artists’ works and the implications of hip hop’s movement into the mainstream. Precisely because printed poetry and the hip hop I look at are countercultural, they are able to comment on the larger culture in unique and penetrating ways. At the same time, poets themselves still have a large amount of cultural currency and prestige even if their work often does not. Independent hip hop and printed poetry, therefore, survive and remain countercultural while maintaining prestige and credibility.

These two epigraphs, finally, are apt departure points for a rhetorical mapping of the strategies contemporary poets use to write political poems. Today’s poets and critics capture
three primary centuries-long concerns about political poetry, two of which I discuss
thoroughly in the introduction: (1) the dynamics and efficacy of poetry as public discourse;
(2) the functions of poets and poetry in society; and (3) the potential for political poetry to
remain important across cultural and historical borders.

There is no satisfactory method of determining the efficacy of poetry. Denise Levertov,
one of the United States’s most assertive political poets during the Vietnam War, claimed,
somewhat tenuously, that poetry can “indirectly” affect the course of events by “awakening
pity, terror, compassion and the conscience of a leader” and by “strengthening the morale of
persons working for a common cause” (174). How should “indirectly” be expanded or
understood? Does poetry retain elements of mystery and subtlety that prevent such certainty?
I argue that cause-and-effect criteria are too limiting a means for understanding poetry’s
powers. Establishing a poem or poems as primary motivators of an agent’s actions would be
a remarkable achievement, which would likely require extrapolation and reductivism. While
I do not elide the question of audience in the work that follows, especially in the hip hop
chapter, determining any art form’s verifiable efficacy is largely speculative. More
importantly, such a focus would distract from the main purpose of my book – to study poetic
strategies. Regardless, the difficult question remains and will likely remain in perpetuity: are
poems capable of creating change? While discussing poems *per se*, I concentrate on the
strategies poets use to engage political issues, conditions, and problems. If we can map and
understand poets’ rhetorical strategies for making political poems, we can perhaps begin to
understand the potential for poetry as a form of political speech, as a form of speech that can
influence people in public spaces.
Poets, Political Poetry, and the American Public

What, then, are the functions and the roles of poetry in the broadly defined contemporary United States culture? In “Responsibilities of the Poet,” Robert Pinsky explores the dialectic between the poet and her culture; he claims that poets must continually revise the definitions of the “poetic” that the culture reifies, sustains, and encourages. The poet’s job, he claims, is to make social judgments prior to the actual writing of a poem, and more crucially, to re-envision the poetic and thereby transform values by, in Pinsky’s words, “looking away” from the ways that the culture represents the poetic (“Responsibilities 12,19). Poetry, then – and I consider both printed poetry and hip hop music “poetry” – is thoroughly countercultural and resistant to dominant sociopolitical structures.

In an equally important statement, in Praises & Dispraises: Poetry and Politics, the 20th Century, Terrence Des Pres grapples with the “impact of political havoc” on poetry in the twentieth century. He claims that poetry, often the territory of hope and praise, now “finds more exercise in cursing” and “dispraises.” While he points out that the “patron saints of poetry in dark times” – Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, and Nazim Hikmet among others – come to North Americans through translations from places ravaged by political upheaval, he also suggests that the poet’s role has fundamentally changed, largely due to what he calls the “miracles of modern communications,” including the work of television’s “instant replay of events” and horrific images captured by photojournalists. Thus, he asserts that “a wretchedness of global extent has come into view; the spectacle of man-created suffering is known, observed with such constancy that a new shape of knowing invades the mind” (original emphasis xiv-xv). From the vantage point of 2005, when beheadings, charred bodies, and bitter struggles about viewing flag-draped
caskets returning from Iraq are only a computer mouse or television remote click away, Des
Pres’s assessment of the onslaught of media images in 1988 seems tame by comparison.

Five years earlier, in 1983, Czeslaw Milosz wrote in *The Witness of Poetry* that poets’
roles have changed, largely because of an exponential expansion of their “knowledge of
reality”; once limited to perhaps a single village, now subject to the catastrophes of the globe,
poets, he suggests, bear an increased burden, especially when the role of the United States in
conflicts around the world is palpable and often negative. Is it not surprising, Milosz asks,
that poets are “morally indignant?” He continues with a final commentary on the trajectory of
twentieth century poetry toward dark visions: poets, he says, have a difficult time imagining
a future devoid of economic crises and wars (116). Similarly, in the late 1980s Chuck D, lead
rapper of one of hip hop’s most acclaimed groups, Public Enemy, explained many rappers’
dark visions as “the Black CNN,” because they described with gritty realism the actual living
conditions in urban city centers that mainstream news consistently ignored or essentialized.
Des Pres, moreover, describes the imperative for a “diction” that can challenge and outlast
these dire events and support through “the stamina of language” the trials of the twentieth,
and now, by extrapolation, the twenty-first century (xv). What, then, is this “diction” that Des
Pres invokes? An analysis of strategies for inscribing the political in poems moves toward
understanding any such diction, or dictions.

In *The Uses of Poetry*, Denys Thompson provides a sweeping description of the poet’s role
in society, one that boldly suggests the poet’s superiority and a preexisting societal
consensus: “In the past the poet has often been the spokesman of his society, saying what it
wanted said but could not voice for itself” (202). Similarly, and often dangerously, many hip
hop artists are styled as the spokespeople for their communities, sometimes to negative
effect, while poets are often considered “outsiders.” Although slightly misguided, Thompson’s broad definition is helpful as an initial departure point. Social theorist Anthony Giddens rejects the functionalist conception that social systems have “needs” or “reasons” of their own, as Thompson suggests, when he implies that society “wants” to “say” something (109-115). Perhaps Thompson simply chooses some unfortunate words – “society” instead of “people” – and if he avoided the implication that there are only spokesmen and not spokeswomen, then the definition may be more helpful.

Poets are often seen as charged with speaking on behalf of their people, which is quite a lofty task, albeit one that Latin American poets like Neruda and Ernesto Cardenal took on willingly in the twentieth century. As Suzanne Gardinier points out, Neruda’s Canto General was an attempt to summon forth power on “his people’s behalf.” Furthermore, the Canto General, she says, was made to be both beautiful and “a force of nature, a testimony, a pamphlet, a letter, a sword” (18). However, given the debates concerning a poet’s right to speak on behalf of others – cogently outlined by Hélène Cixous in her essay “Conversations,” Hirsch in How to Read a Poem, and by the various theorists of the Latin American testimonio (which I discuss thoroughly in Chapter One) – the wisdom and propriety of writing on behalf of others is now viewed suspiciously, especially by those living in postcolonial nations. Hirsch calls into question the appropriateness of this prophetic function of poetry because of “compelling reasons” for poets “to resist any public or ideological pressure to speak for anyone besides oneself” (180). Referring primarily to the dangers of writing political poetry on behalf of others in World War II era Poland, he shows the dangers, both to life and liberty, of writing to promote the needs and rights of others. Is there an inherent danger, then, in political poetry, or is this factor heavily dependent on
context? Can political poems simply speak on behalf of the poet rather than on behalf of a collective or community? I believe that even poems that speak on behalf of one person are nonetheless read by others who may see them as speaking on behalf of themselves or others. In other words, once a poem is written and published or performed, it leaves the boundedness of the author’s world.

**Political Poetry’s Historical-Cultural Contexts**

The notion of temporality has long plagued poetry. Is political poetry timeless, or is it time- and context-bound, mutable, decaying in meaning over temporal, geographical, and historical borders? If the roles and functions of the poet in American society are contested and ever-shifting, so too are the import of political poems when they are removed from historical or cultural context. In “Poetics of the Americas,” Charles Bernstein indicates that it is important not to remove poems from the local contexts that give them meaning, which is always a danger when a critic embarks on a wide-ranging exploration of political poetry (3). Removing poems from their political context can shift or recontextualize their political import; however, it should not prevent the critic from charting the political strategies of poems. Moreover, as Günter Grass has suggested, much good writing depends on a hearing at some point forward in time (cited in Des Pres 225), which is especially important for printed poems that may slowly appreciate in value. Even though much political poetry becomes dated – I think especially of many protest poems from the 1960s – the transferability of poetry to a point forward in time can reinvigorate political poems and stretch their meanings across contexts. Hip hop, on the other hand, may be most vibrant in the cultural and historical moment of its transmission, especially if it is in a live performance, which I explore at length in my fourth chapter. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics
highlight the instability of all texts because meaning changes from one historical context to
the next. He points out that all interpretations of a text consist of a dialogue between past and
present; consequently, all understanding is productive and adds to the meaning of a specific
poem.²

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers in New
York City, Auden’s “September 1, 1939,” originally written from Manhattan to mark the date
of Germany’s invasion of Poland, had a renaissance due to its eerie reverberations of the
aftermath of terror sixty-two years later. In a recent essay, Stephen Burt explores the public’s
increased interest in poetry after the attacks, and the way that the poem was presented
following September 11 as “an ideal-typical example of the kind of poetic object academic
readers now seek” – one that “described shared, urgent, clearly public concerns for a large
body of people” (535). Thus, while some poems, like Don L. Lee’s 1969 “From a Black
Perspective” about George Wallace, which utilizes African American traditions of signifying
and playing the dozens, become depoliticized more than thirty years later when George
Wallace is largely forgotten, others, like “September 1, 1939,” become more than just great
poems or pertinent cultural/historical documents – they become once more poignant political
poems.³ In an essay on Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal and political poetry, Reginald
Gibbons discusses the penetrating specificity of Cardenal’s poetry, but subsequently allows
for what I understand as a transhistorical and transtemporal movement of the poem. As such,
depending on the context, a poem may be politically important when it is published, but it
may also become important politically. For instance, historian Howard Zinn points out that
the International Ladies Garment Workers Union used Shelley’s “Mask of Anarchy” as a
rallying cry during strikes in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century (326).⁴ In
his analysis of a Cardenal poem in which the speaker names Nicaragua’s dictator, Gibbons claims that a substitution of a different tyrannical political or historical figure known by an audience as a violent dictator will not change the poem’s meaning, “only its focus” (282-3) just as the focus of Shelley’s poem changed in the decades after its writing. The current revival of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as a postcolonial text can be understood through a similar lens.

Although there have been many arguments that the role and cultural esteem of poets in the United States since the 1960s has changed greatly (mostly for the worse, critics and observers claim), in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and the events that have followed such as incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq, the role of poets has rekindled some of the public spirit of poets from the 1960s. The evidence is circumstantial but prodigious: Galway Kinnell’s “When the Towers Fell,” which first appeared in *The New Yorker* a year after the attacks; Amiri Baraka’s confrontational “Somebody Blew Up America,” which incited a flurry of anti-Semitic accusations; performance poet Saul Williams’s project against the war in Afghanistan called *Not in Our Name*; Sam Hamill’s project *Poets Against the War*; the cancelled poetry month celebration to be hosted by Laura Bush at the White House; and the speaking appearances of poets at rallies across the country like Robert Hass in Berkeley in September 2001. These examples indicate a greater public role for poets when dramatic events impinge on everyday living. Why do we turn to poets such as Hass, a former United States Poet Laureate (1993-1995) better known for poems of introspection than “political” poems, when we are faced with uncertainty and fear? Poets, we still seem to believe, can access truth by stripping back superficial appearances for deeper meanings and giving revelatory insight into public issues in ways that politicians and journalists cannot.
Gibbons indirectly points out one of the potential consequences of poets being charged with commenting on political and social issues. He discusses Cardenal’s self-imposed requirement that his staunchly political poetry refer to a tangible world outside the poem. Such an approach skirts the possibility of pulling poetic creation into the domain of referentiality and away from the imagination. Leonard M. Scigaj points out a similar problematic in the preface of his study of American “ecopoetry” (poems by A.R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, W.S. Merwin, and Gary Snyder) when he conjectures that environmental poetry has received less attention from theorists due to a widely-held assumption that it depends on mimesis and the idea that mimetic language always conveys the unmediated presence of the speaker, essentialized referents, and a passive representation of the natural world (xiv). Nevertheless, for political poetry, referentiality and poems of the “tangible world” outside the poem dilate attention on the “occasion” of poems, whether the occasion is terrorist attacks in the United States or the abuses of a Nicaraguan dictator. Do events create the need for poems or do poets recreate events, or a combination of the two? The answer must be an affirmative to both. For example, Carolyn Forché’s poems of El Salvador seem to substantiate the first while those of Charles Simic’s WWII Yugoslavia seem to affirm the later. In hip hop, The Perceptionists’s “Memorial Day” (Black Dialogue), which berates President Bush for going to war in Iraq, demands an explanation for the “missing” weapons of mass destruction. In this case, it appears that the event itself spurred the creative response.

**Political Poetry and Indirection**

There has been much debate about the public functions of poetry, which converges with another important theoretical concern in the discussion of political poetry – the interstices between direction and indirection, or the supposed binary opposition between direct public
speech and lyric poetry. The latter usually works through figurative language, indirection, and obliquity, often displaying clarity and referentiality only intermittently. In a strike against poetry written specifically to move others to a certain action or set of actions, Hirsch claims that “voice in written poetry is always metaphorical, never literal” (How to 103), while Barbara Herrnstein-Smith brings up another problematic for some political poetry when she writes that lyric poetry must affect its audience even as it must pretend that it has no audience to affect (141). Jenny Goodman, on the other hand, disrupts any private/public divide when she foregrounds her essay on Joy Harjo with a reference to the false dividing line between poetics and public discourses. Poetry, she claims, links to Aristotle’s understanding of “language as a process in which a speaker uses language in an attempt to move people toward action in public settings,” even if for Aristotle art is cathartic and a way to prevent regular citizens from engaging in public action (37).

Goodman also refers to Kenneth Burke’s definition of rhetoric and its inclusion of literary forms. According to Burke, poetry as rhetoric is “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other agents.” This definition is appropriate in a study of political poetry “even though the kinds of assent evoked have no overt, practical outcome” (41, 50). Mutlu Konuk Blasing further erodes a strict divide between private poetry and public speech when she argues that poetic rhetoric is at once figuration and persuasion, which allows the critic to negotiate poetry’s uneasy relationship between indirection and direct political message. She appears to agree with Gibbons, who says that political rhetoric values persuasion, while poetry values perception and insight. Blasing writes, “poetry’s public function is to grant a perspective on how all meanings are rhetorical and therefore political” (21-22). Both suggest that poetry’s role is to strip away surface veneer in order to
create new perspectives, meanings that are present but must be unveiled through poetry – “the sight of what is visible” and “the understanding of what is hidden” (Gibbons 294). Political poetry, then, appears to have as its charge the role of revelation. Yet, if lyric poetry is always indirect, must it also obscure what it reveals? I implicitly explore this question in the second chapter when I discuss poems that utilize indirection and equivocation as political strategies.

**Ways of Talking about Political Poetry**

In addition to understanding the roles of poetry in society and the public responsibilities of poets, a book about political poetry must tackle the array of signifiers, terminology, and confusion for what counts as “political” poetry. Some readers may wonder, as did the interlocutors I mentioned in the preface, how exactly to identify a political poem. What then should be considered political poetry? What shapes do political poems take? What kinds of political work do they attempt to do? I begin with a simple but expansive definition, a “broader view” of politics put forth by Michael Parenti:

> Politics is more than just something politicians do. It is the process of struggle over conflicting interests carried into the public arena. It also involves muting and suppressing conflicting interests. Politics involves not only the competition among groups within the system but the struggle to change the system itself, not only the desire to achieve predefined ends but the struggle to redefine ends and pose alternatives to the existing politico-economic structure. (3)

Drawing from Parenti’s view of politics, my definition of political poems is inclusive and far-ranging. For me, the line between what is “political” and what is “social” blurs. Political poems, moreover, may not narrowly comment on a certain issue, but may comment on “the system itself.” For instance, a poem does not have to be about a specific political issue such as affirmative action; instead, it may comment on the broader conditions that make a specific political policy such as affirmative action a necessary corrective. Further, political poems
may not have a “predefined end” but may instead “redefine ends” and “pose alternatives” to the existing economic, political, and social structures that currently govern our lives. They are also struggles carried into the public arena, actions themselves put into print, onto record, or into a performance.

Political poems, though, do not have to be explicitly oppositional. Reginald Gibbons’s examination of the tension in Cardenal’s work between poems that speak “against” and those that speak “for” helps illuminate the ways that poems can be political without being oppositional. Those that speak *against* speak against injustice, suffering, materialism, oppression, and so on, while those that speak *for* speak for compassion, justice, and so on (279). But it seems likely that most poems, even those that are intensely personal and introspective, speak for, against, and sometimes in the same poem, for and against something or somethings. Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” for instance, generally not considered a political poem, in the popular (but specious) reading speaks for an independent spirit of daring even as it speaks against conformity and timidity. So, if the speaker’s stance is important, it may be secondarily so; a political poem is one that speaks to political issues (if only indirectly), one that consciously engages political and social conditions, its energy directed, at least partially, beyond the poem.

Contemporary American poetry understood as political by poets, critics, and theorists tends toward consciously issue-engaged, lyric-narrative poetry of personal experience; that is, the poem’s political content must be transparent to be designated “political” – some clear issue such as the outrages of war, racism, or oppression must be readily apparent. Further, many poets and critics narrowly define political poetry as poetry that “takes its stand on the side of liberty” (Levertov 166) or that “speaks for the party of humanity” (Forché “Against”
46), thereby bracketing the functional political work of poetry that does not challenge dominant political structures or social conventions, but implicitly or explicitly supports them. Robert Bly insists that political poems “do not order us to take specific acts,” a notion that seems to contradict many of his most forceful Vietnam era anti-war poems; rather, he asserts that they move only to deepen awareness, a notion that departs fully from any notion of a poem as a facilitator of action (“Leaping” 134). Poems, then, can be part of (or symbolic of) a culture’s consciousness shift. Similarly, Robert Duncan draws from William Blake’s ideas about poetry and politics as he contends that great political poetry is “visionary” in its presentation of events as “part of larger and more universal paradigms.” He positions poetry as an imaginative endeavor that must not “become a mouthpiece for a righteous cause” or offer cures for political issues (Perloff “Poetry in Time” 209). Duncan would likely discount Cardenal’s “tactical” poems, as the term has been used by Thomas McGrath, as poems, since they stand in certain opposition to both of his imperatives. Duncan’s position reveals more about his preference for what McGrath calls “strategic” poems, which are poems that work to expand consciousness, rather than tactical poems, which often speak for a cause and diagnose political problems (28-29).

A further conundrum in the discourse surrounding contemporary political poetry is the multitude of signifiers for the political poem. Mary K. DeShazer’s study of women’s “resistance” poetry, Forché’s anthology of “witness” poetry, Hirsch’s discussion of “transpersonal” poetry, McGrath’s “tactical” (context-specific poems) and “strategic” political poems, and John Gery’s study of contemporary poetry’s embeddedness in the nuclear age as a “discourse of survival,” amongst others, provide thorny departure points for any study of political poetry. When these signifiers are viewed in conjunction with the
prevailing disregard for polemical poetry, political poetry occupies a murkily defined, over
discussed, place in the criticism. Rather than open up a platform of debate, these signifiers
for politically and social engaged poetry often reduce it to one of two spaces – active
opposition or consciousness raising, a problematic that dovetails with the illusory either/or
proposition of McGrath’s dualistic “strategic” and “tactical” political poetry. Bly’s insistence
that the political poem “comes out of the deepest privacy” (“Leaping” 132), which collapses
what is often seen as a divide between the personal poem and the political poem, is much
different from Adrienne Rich’s proclamation that “the personal is political.” Again, these
assumptions limit the range of political poetry to either an autonomous realm of assertion or
one of contestation. In the chapters that follow, I discuss poems that could be understood as
assertive, contestatory, and combinations thereof. I hope that my discussions will help move
us away from this dichotomy toward an understanding of political poetry as a collection of
multiple rhetorical strategies.

While defining the political is important for my book, defining the broader subject of
poetry is equally so. “American” poetry is itself a loaded term. I am against, in Bernstein’s
words, an American literature understood as a positive, expressive “totalization” (2). What
we usually consider American literature ignores a large percentage of the literature created in
América, below the Rio Grande in Central and South America and in the Caribbean, as well
as in Canada. The limited use of this term also privileges English as the language, literary
and otherwise, of the Americas, whereas Spanish is spoken by the majority of America’s
citizens. As early as 1889, Walt Whitman saw a difference between “American literature”
and “United States literature.” As Ed Folsom wrote on the 150th anniversary of Leaves of
Grass (1855), Whitman “heard something in the term ‘America’” that most United States
citizens “do not hear today, in part because the term has been so fully appropriated by the United States as a synonym for itself, ‘at somebody else’s expense’ as Whitman would remind us” (110). Most citizens of Latin America often think of themselves as “Americans” in the broadest sense of the term, while in the United States we often think of the term only in relation to ourselves. In this book, then, I use the term “American” for convenience’s sake, but I do so understanding that it is compromised, limiting, and inferior to the Spanish estadounidense, for which English speaking North Americans have no equivalent. In the third chapter I explore the implications of this term and its migrations back and forth across the borders of the United States and Latin America.

Bernstein’s notion that disparate poetic practices comprise a shifting poetic space is also important here, especially since I discuss both printed poetry in its variety of manifestations and performed hip hop lyrics. He writes that “disparate practices” occupy “a poetic space that is grounded not in an identical social position but in the English language itself as the material with which we make our regroupings and refoundings” (8). While I agree with Bernstein that disparate practices and rhetorical strategies are grounded in the materials of language, I do not agree that these practices begin and end with English. It is also important to consider the influences and materiality of Spanish for not only the Latino/a poets who utilize both English and Spanish, many of whom I discuss in the third chapter, but also for many wholly English language poems that may be influenced by a Spanish speaking cultural movement. For instance, many twentieth century American poets have been greatly influenced by Neruda, Vallejo, and other Latin American writers, while yet others have been influenced by the techniques and sensibilities of magic realism. I argue that the scope of political poetry in the United States must be broadened to include poetic strategies that
foreground language choice and language interchange. Social positions and geographic locations, then, can be viewed within the materiality of languages and their criss-crossings. “America” and “American poetry,” like the boundaries between English and Spanish, and like the shape-shifting signifier and its signified “political poetry,” are contested spaces. Many readers may also contest that hip hop is “poetry,” a claim which I hope to answer as this work progresses.

**Political Poetry and Interiority**

A primary obstacle for political poetry is the widely-held notion that poetry is foremost a private expression, a belief which can be attributed to a variety of factors including hangover from the Romantic and Modern eras, a false assumption that poets are antisocial, the aesthetic prominence of the lyric in contemporary poetry, and the defensible notion that “poetry is often seen as a ‘natural’ medium for the recounting and examining of personal experience” (Roberts 1). Jenny Goodman writes that “mainstream thinking” views poetry as “culturally apart” and “impotent” to engage the public sphere (39). Hirsch writes that poetry is primarily a communication between strangers and a private exchange between writer and reader (*How To* 16), while Walter Kalaidjian points out that contemporary poetry has reproduced rather than contested formalism’s “swerve from social change” as he claims that the poetics of private lyricism are the “symbolic form par excellence of the more recent American impulse to contain and repress the social text of contemporary history” (*Languages* 4). Vernon Shetley, for his part, suggests that the modernist legacy of “difficult” poetry has been inherited by post WWII poets and audiences (14). Potential audiences may avoid poetry because they see it as difficult and inaccessible, a perception which has opened a gap between poets and audiences, a gap that hip hop artists have seized upon. It is not outrageous
to claim that teenagers and college students may have read poetry in the 1960s, but now listen to hip hop instead. Even so Shetley argues that poetry should become more difficult. Further, the “romantic persistence” of American poetry, as described by Pinsky in *The Situation of Poetry*, can prevent poetry’s engagement with social and political spheres if it is viewed as insular and primarily concerned with internal mindstates rather than public issues.

Similarly, Dana Gioia describes “the energy of American poetry” as focused inward toward a self-contained community of relatively homogenous readers, which leads to (and is a product of) a lack of a broader public role for poets (2), something we see changing with a broader public activist role for many hip hop artists, as I discuss in the final part of my fourth chapter. Further, Goodman points out, then elides, the fact that Joy Harjo and other engaged poets address their poetry to two audiences – the broad literary community and those readers who share the poet’s political perspectives. Problematically, she discusses how Harjo’s poems work to transform readers’ attitudes, without acknowledging the circularity of her argument (41-42). This situation seems pertinent for many political poems – who reads them but those who already agree with the political positions and sensibilities therein? How is this form of address a political strategy, unless a political poem is simply intended to mobilize people and ideas?

Hip hop music, on the other hand, has the potential to mold latent opinions, generate interests, and spur burgeoning educations. Partly because teenagers listen to hip hop music at impressionable ages, hip hop lyrics can lead them in a variety of directions. Hip hop, unlike much political poetry, often does not merely “preach to the choir,” a problem that engaged artists often bemoan about their work and its audiences. Hip hop can literally bring its listeners to new knowledge, ideas, and historical figures. In junior high and in high school
everything I learned about African American history, the Civil Rights Movement, and radical movements of the 1960s came from listening to hip hop music. Because I was not learning about them in history classes, these glimpses of a broader American history were, I see now, crucial in forming my views about the world and my interests as a writer and teacher. Listening to artists such as Boogie Down Productions, Public Enemy, Brand Nubian, Paris, Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth, and Poor Righteous Teachers – some when I was as young as twelve years old – had an immeasurable impact on my sense of justice and my desire to learn about cultural and political figures rarely mentioned in class. Slug of rap group Atmosphere sums up these influences, both positive and negative: “as a child hip hop made me read books / and hip hop made me want to be a crook / and hip hop gave me the way and something to say” (“Party for the Fight to Write” Lucy Ford). In contrast, I did not begin reading poetry seriously until college when hip hop had already staked its claim on my consciousness, a situation I believe is true for a many twenty-somethings and college students over the last decade.

**Political Poetry and Poetic Form**

While interiority may be a potential impediment to poets speaking to sociopolitical issues, poetic form is often wrongly considered a yoke that must be rejected in order to write politically. While the common perception styles an easy correlation between form and political motivation – metrical voice is conservative, free verse is politically progressive – this understanding is highly inaccurate. Both Shetley and Blasing point out that poetic form and political values do not always align neatly. Blasing writes that “techniques serve political rather than revelatory functions…without any inherent authority” (10). A specific poetic strategy can be contestatory or politically hegemonic. Now “making it new” is decades past
and free verse is the norm and, therefore, some would argue, politically neutralized. In the 1960s mainstream poets such as Kinnell, James Wright, Bly, Philip Levine, Rich, Merwin, and Donald Hall began writing free verse partly in response to the political climate and partly in response to New Criticism, formalism, and their training in them, but they often did so for personal as much as political reasons. Any essential alliance of techniques with specific political values is faulty because many poets uninterested in politics made the same shift. Free verse, then, was radical for Whitman, the French Symbolists, or even for the Beats, but beginning with the 1960s free verse became conventional. It is now the dominant, hegemonic form for printed poetry. Therefore, it is important to note that the politics of free forms is unstable and does not align precisely with oppositional values.

Hip hop lyrics, which embody a range of implicit and explicit political values, are mostly in strict form with rhyming couplets, straight rhyme, assonance, and as one book puts it, “the verse’s syntax and meter often tortured for rhythmic gain” (Costello and Foster Wallace 24). Hip hop, then, has much more form than most contemporary poetry, and it is often much more explicitly political. However, Robert Hass writes that since free verse is now “neutral” there is “an enormous impulse” for poets “to establish tone rather than to make form.” He claims that a free verse poem does not have an imposed “specific character” so poets often “make a character in it” by working hard to establish a distinctive tone (Twentieth 71). His claim rings true for many poems I discuss in this book, regardless of their specific strategy. Tone, I argue, is important for political poems because it gives them distinctive voices. Like a politician or rapper, a poem needs a distinctive voice in order for it to be memorable for its audience. Hass concludes that “on the level of form the difference between the strategies of free and metrical verse is not very great” (Twentieth 122). Metrical poems, he says,
immediately announce their patterns but free verse patterns emerge as they develop. Many free verse poems in fact have a pattern – of beats per line, of line lengths – discernible in a full reading.

Studies of political poetry should delve further than an alignment of certain forms with certain sociopolitical commitments. Reginald Gibbons notes that Ezra Pound and Ernesto Cardenal were diametrically opposed politically, the latter leftist utilizing the poetic innovations of the fascist, but they shared both technique and the “assumptions that the structure of a society and of institutions, if changed, could improve the spiritual and material conditions of man, and that poetry may participate in the attempt to change what exists” (280). So, while it is unwise to align form with politics, it seems important to understand how both Pound and Cardenal understood poetry’s potential energy and its meliorist functions. Even if there is no strict alignment of ideological values with forms, Blasing calls to account the possibility of political resonance in the choice of forms. She believes that metrical verse has more political potential because it flaunts artifice and thus commands greater distance from cultural discourses – the more nonutilitarian and special poetry sounds, the more it fulfills its political function (19). I agree with Blasing to an extent, but she partly ignores the potential of various informal languages, working class languages, and the languages used on numerous city streets where rhythm and rhyme are highly regarded for their differences from standard discourses; she also overstresses the power of elevated literary language. For instance, hip hop both confirms and subverts her claim; rule bound, it has an extremely rigid form and does not sound at all like “normal” speech, but it is usually not “high” diction.” It often is non-standard English and exploits a variety of appropriated cultural discourses. However, Blasing’s point is significant: Robert Lowell’s strongest political poems were
generally written in form – albeit highly innovative and experimental – such as sonnets, even as free verse was beginning to carry the day, while poems such as Rita Dove’s “Parsley” rework traditional forms. A comprehensive study of political poetry should consider poems written in free forms and those written in more traditional forms. While I discuss mostly free verse poems, in the conclusion I briefly consider a metrical, end-rhymed poem.

**Varieties of and Strategies for Political Poetry**

What, then, are the advantages of a relatively comprehensive study of contemporary American political poetry, including its most popular form – hip hop music – through an argument about the major rhetorical strategies poets use to engage the political? Precisely because poetry and politics seem to be at odds in so many ways, a broad understanding of poets’ strategies may reveal clues about how politics can be made poetic, how something so unappealing to so many (politics, broadly understood) can be made poetic, striking, memorable, and actionable.

In *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry: Ways of Nothingness*, John Gery approaches the relationship of poetry to the nuclear age so as to allow for strategy’s prominence. He classifies the techniques and stylistic devices poets have used to envision the nuclear age. He explains his method as the best alternative among others, including approaches that outline a history of American poetry after 1945, or identify poems written explicitly in reaction to events or certain paradigms of subject matter. Gery’s four chapters explore poems that, respectively, speak “against, through, around, and from within potential nuclear annihilation” (original emphasis 13). Each chapter title doubles as a new signifier for a poetic technique and strategy – “Nuclear Protest Poetry,” “The Apocalyptic Lyric,” “Psychohistorical Poetry in the Nuclear Age,” and “The Poetry of Destinerrance” are
departure points for Gery’s exploration of poems. This organization allows the author “to underscore how poets have imagined the nuclear world more than what they explicitly say about it” (12). I follow Gery’s method and focus here on how poets make their poems political. Such an approach inevitably leads away from a primary emphasis on content or an event-based perspective and to an emphasis on the imaginative strategies poets use to be political. Bernstein writes that “poetry can be a process of thinking rather than a report of things already settled, an investigation of figuration rather than a picture of something already figured out” (5), a claim that converges with both my approach and with Gery’s exploration of how poets imagine nuclear threats instead of what they say about them.

My primary aim is to elucidate the primary techniques of contemporary American political poetry by doing extensive readings of specific representative poems. For each strategy, I choose five to six poems that I believe best represent the characteristics of the particular rhetorical strategy. I consider strategies for engagement the primary departure point for my study of American political poems, with their sites of engagement and issues of engagement secondary variables for understanding the work they attempt to do. Gibbons’s proposition that political poetry is “inextricable” from specific poems at “particular historical moments” leads to his suggestion that it is apt only to discuss examples of political poems (207) rather than to explicate political poetry with broad critical strokes. The examples I chose range from the Vietnam era to the present; I occasionally select those that appear in anthologies such as The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, while others I choose are lesser-known poems that exhibit a range of qualities important to my study. In choosing both Norton “worthy” poems by “canonical” poets, those that have been published only in magazines and journals, and those that have been anthologized in books like Postmodern
American Poetry: A Norton Anthology, Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination from Curbstone Press, and other lesser known anthologies, I hope to engage a broad cross-section of American poetic practices, engagements, and strategies. Most of the hip hop artists I discuss are independent artists, iconic figures in the culture, or politically resonant ones. My choices generally align with my aesthetic preferences and knowledge base. My approach in this book allows for a tangible sacrifice in depth – of a specific poet or hip hop artist, specific “school” of poetry, or a defined period of literary history – for breadth, even though I give extended readings of relatively few poems.

My framework for reading contemporary political poetry is twofold. My first consideration is the various strategies that make political poems. Categorizing strategies of political poetry makes *rhetorical* strategy primary. The categories depart from previous formulations of political poetry in that they foreground the rhetorical decisions of poets – types of voice, kinds of narrative trajectory, types of “evidence,” tones of authority, and the types of images and rhetorical figures. I want to see how the poem acts politically. This way of reading of political poetry is more specific than the terms advanced thus far, whether it is “witness,” “strategic,” or another signifier. However, my categories are not self-contained; there is significant overlap and slippage between strategies. In the conclusion I discuss a poem that actualizes multiple strategies. My categories are not nearly so rigid as Northrop Frye’s four narrative categories into which any work of literature can fit. One poem may embody multiple strategies; however, I choose the one that I think governs the poem, that shapes its action, power, impact, and the readers’ response to it. Further, there are significant changes in strategy from poem to poem or from volume to volume in a poet’s career. For instance, Forché abandoned her lyric-narrative, free verse poetry of *The Country Between Us* for the
staging of multiple voices in *The Angel of History*. Hip hop artists, as I discuss in the fourth chapter, often change their voice, style, and persona from song to song. Most importantly, the categories are not artist-generated; instead, I formulated them in order to clarify and illuminate the political work of contemporary American poetry. But, to be clear, the poetry is generative of the strategies or types – I did not read poetry and listen to hip hop for years with this framework in mind; rather, the framework comes from years of trying to understand the political work of printed poetry and hip hop.

While the categories are an emergent quality of the poetry itself, part of this book does reveal my impositions and biases. Gibbons claims that the “evaluation of political poetry” must always lead to the phrase “political evaluation of poetry” (297), and I admit that my evaluative methods and choices are political in that I do not evaluate politically conservative poems and I occasionally value message and panache above aesthetic brilliance. Explicitly conservative poems are difficult to find; in any case poems that favor the status quo, corporate power, tax cuts, national defense spending, and limited government would bore many readers. Poets generally seem a progressive lot these days, even if not stylistically. Further, while I do not evaluate what I consider “bad” poems, I do not feel indebted to traditional Western, White, European-North American aesthetic paradigms. Giving space and consideration to poems that refute traditional aesthetics for “alternative” aesthetics, such as Native American aesthetics, Latino/a aesthetics, spoken word and other voice-driven aesthetics, and the African American aesthetics of hip hop and the Black Arts Movement, foregrounds rhetorical strategy instead of any “inherent” poetic value. This approach also allows me to bracket the somewhat specious universal question of whether a poem must be “good” (whose good, it begs) to be a strong political poem. The traditional western aesthetic
is inadequate for evaluating political poetry; unlike Levertov, von Hallberg, and Ostriker, who imply (some more strongly than others) that political poetry must be judged by the same standards by which we judge all poetry, I contend that if we follow their directive, some of the most powerful political poetry being written in this country would be ignored. Hip hop artists, I argue, probably have much more political potential at their disposal than poets who work in printed form. Unlike poets, many of the rappers I discuss have larger, more enthusiastic and loyal audiences, participatory live shows, and more cultural capital – they are the bards of contemporary culture.

**Agency: A Framework for Reading Political Poetry**

My framework for reading poetry and understanding strategies is derived from theories of agency that work to negotiate the individual agent’s ability to act according to her purposes in relation to the determining material, political, and social forces that constrain action. Theories of agency can tease out the nuanced sensibilities of individual and collective agency – of paramount importance in political action – in contemporary American poetry. I understand poems as actions, as engagements with agents in various social fields. In an interview with *American Poetry Review*, Yusef Komunyakaa recently claimed that “poetry is an action” that “reconnects us to the act of dreaming ourselves into existence” (21-27). Komunyakaa refers, deliberately or otherwise, to Burke’s notion of literature as “symbolic action” where action in the “real” world is practically difficult (for example in stopping a war or a widespread invidious way of thinking) but conceivable in language. Poetry as action can be both creative and referential action; in Komunyakaa’s words, poems can call potential future actions into existence. Therefore, they make conceivable in language what is difficult to achieve in the “real” world – justice, peace, community, progressive change. They also
expose what in the outer world is often concealed in the discourses of “progress” and “freedom.”

Agency provides two frameworks for understanding political poetry. First, the subjects of poems – speakers, characters, the witnessed – can be seen as agents acting in response to various other agents, material constraints, and social fields in which they are embedded. In reading a Cardenal poem, Gibbons interprets the poem’s speaker and spoken of as political agents in their “participation in Nicaraguan society” (283). In a shift in what Anthony Giddens would call “two-way power relations” where power is, in part, transformative capacity, the dictator is voiceless while the speaker, an agent with little power in society, has the voice of the poem to act symbolically (88, 93). Whereas symbolic action is categorically different than action in the world, to bracket symbolic action as a consolation prize or wishful thinking denies the power of symbolic action in politics. (For a recent example of symbolic action in politics one need look no further than George W. Bush’s “mission accomplished” speech aboard an aircraft carrier after the “fall” of Iraq.) In any case, Giddens’s sense of agency elucidates the complex conditions for action for speakers in a space where agents, as William James might have argued, are entangled in relation to material conditions, social and political networks, pre-established meanings, and other agents. Like agents, political poems are entangled with these conditions, networks, meanings, and realities as well. Second, agency provides a way to generate categories of political poetry through a formulation of the various types of agency represented in poets’ strategies. For example, the source of agency in a first-person, lyric-narrative poem of witness or personal experience is experience itself.

Before I outline the strategies for making political poetry, I want to discuss how I use agency in my readings. Giddens suggests that human practices – the habitual acts we engage
in on a daily basis – rather than roles “should be regarded as the points of articulation between actors and structures” (117), a principle which leads away from understanding agents in poems as occupying essential or representative roles (as an African American, as a poor person, as a dictator, and so on); instead, subjects, speakers, and characters in poems are better understood by their practices, language, and their actions and consequences. Focusing on actions and practices allows for greater nuance and creativity than does mechanistic role fulfillment. Moreover, an agential reading of political poetry redirects the extant criticism about the isolated, speaking “I” of lyric poetry into social and political space: Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, and Brian Massumi all see individual identity as activated in and through action, where action transforms the relations of the field. Action does not express a pre-existing identity; rather, action creates and forms identity. Arendt also pointed out that individual identity is possible only in a matrix of social and political relations because identity emerges out of interrelations rather than out of isolation, a notion that is key to the theories I lay out about live hip hop in the fourth chapter. The notion of action as creative and productive rather than referential opens up political poetry to a more expansive paradigm than the opposition between imagination and reality, wherein a poem represents either the product of imagination or the witness to actual events. In the fourth chapter I explore the tensions between creation and representation in hip hop, specifically in relation to notions of “authenticity.” In doing so, I hope to expose how a limited formulation of what is “authentic” hip hop both enlivens and endangers the culture.

A framework of agency further assists in elucidating poems as objects in the mix of social and political space, as contestation points between actors, structures, and material realities. It helps to illustrate the ways in which poems display the constraints limiting agents’ actions
and the way that social and political forces shape action and individual and collective agency and identity. Massumi’s work on movement is meaningful for my understanding of politics and agency in poetry. He sees positionality – the individual’s roles and positions in society – as an emergent quality of movement, where the field of emergence for the agent is “open-endedly social.” With every move, with every change, there is something new to the world, an added reality so that the world is self-augmenting. Every experience carries a “fringe of active indetermination” (232). Just like those experiences related in a political poem, the sense of active indetermination centers a poem in public space, where the experience inside the poem is also in some sense outside it in public, social, political spaces, and with other readers, listeners. Political poems, I argue, often track a speaker’s awareness of what Massumi, James, Arendt, and Giddens all tackle – our awareness is always of an “already ongoing participation” in developing relations as “we become conscious of a situation in its midst, already actively engaged in it” (Massumi 231). For live hip hop this immersion is requisite for the creation of a vibrant political space and audience-performer interaction.

**Types of Agency in Political Poetry**

In the first chapter I discuss two types of poems that utilize personal experience as a political strategy. I group them under the chapter heading *embodied agency* because both *experiential agency* and *authoritative agency* rely on the speaker-poets’ lived experiences demonstrable through the human body and memory; as Massumi might say, human agency is bodily. Like my understanding of how poems can be “political,” my understanding of what experience *is* is broad. Simply put, these poems generally use the lived experience of real historical actors. As Walter Benjamin believed, personal experience is the content and “source” of storytelling. It can be “passed on from mouth to mouth.” For Benjamin, the
horrors of the twentieth century did much to endanger our “ability to exchange experiences” with each other through stories (83). Poems of experiential agency are acts of exchanging (and transforming) experience with readers.

My understanding of experience, moreover, is influenced greatly by the Latin American testimonio and its scholars. While I say more about the testimonio in the first chapter, here I want to make two points about experience. First, Latin American scholar George Yúdice says that testimonial writing “promotes expression of personal experience” that is through and through a “collective experience of struggle against oppression” (54 original emphasis). Many poems I write about suggest that the speaker-poet’s experiences are part of a larger collective experience. Experience, then, is not only personal; it can also be shared, exchanged, and lived together. However, as Santiago Colás writes, the speaking “agent is not identical to the other members of the community, precisely because he or she has chosen to speak” (166), in this case because he or she is a poet. As such, the speaker-poet is always somewhat apart from the community he or she writes about. Second, John Beverley shows that the testimonio is able to produce a peculiar sensation in readers that fiction cannot. He writes, “it produces if not the real then certainly a sensation of experiencing the real” (34 original emphasis). Poems that are centered by and in experience, unlike testimonios, do not seek to produce “the real,” but they can enter the reader’s mind with something akin to “experiencing the real.”

As I wrote earlier, “poetry is often seen as a ‘natural’ medium for the recounting and examining of personal experience” (Roberts 1), but a poetry of experience is not without predicament. Using personal experience in poetry is often seen as problematic and as a potential limit to creativity and innovation. In a recent article in Poetry, former United States
Poet Laureate (2001-2003) Billy Collins, who is often criticized for writing light verse, traces the limits of what he calls “memory-driven” poetry (281). He suggests that a poem based on past events must convey an awareness of its own unfolding in time in the present tense and an awareness of its own language if it is to be successful as more than a narrative of events (283). Memory, he insists, should serve as a springboard or a departure point for a poem rather than an end unto itself. He continues by claiming that “it is impossible to view the past” without implicating the remembering agent in the present remembering; for Collins, “the observer is an ingredient in the observed” (285).

Poems of experiential agency often foreground both personal experience and the perception, re-telling, and aestheticizing of personal experience, thereby preemptively acknowledging and tackling concerns like Collins’s and avoiding what Jed Rasula, borrowing from Jonathan Raban and Northrop Frye, calls “low mimetic realism” (318). Political poems of experiential agency usually employ self-reflexive narrators who consider the implications of poeticizing experience. This self-consciousness is a major part of this type of poetry. Some critics go so far as to claim that a first-person narrator who proclaims and stages the self as speaker is indispensable for political poetry. Ostriker, in a 2001 essay on “The Poetics of Postmodern Witness,” claims that any poetics that denies a self is useless; furthermore, she writes that this poetry needs a consciousness that suffers and chooses in order to stage an ethical and political model for readers. Indeed, she points out a major difference in socially and politically engaged postmodern poetry compared to high modernism – the poet must be present and located in the poem (35). The first chapter tracks how the poet inscribes the speaker-poet (the one with the experiences) in poems and the
effects it has on the political nature of the poems. In doing so, I try to tease out the ways that experience works politically in poetry and how it can make poetry political.

In the first half of the chapter on experiential agency I mostly consider first-person, lyric-narrative, free verse poems. Personal experience provides the power, justification, and a great deal of integrity to poems by Levine, Forché, Michael S. Harper, Komunyakaa, Gary Snyder, and countless other poets. For example, Komunyakaa’s Vietnam War poems have an added integrity derived not from aesthetic dexterity (of which they have plenty), but from the reader’s knowledge of Komunyakaa’s history as a soldier in Vietnam. His most anthologized poem, “Facing It,” in which the speaker visits the Vietnam War Memorial, is inseparable from the facts of the war and its 60,000-plus American dead. The reader knows that the poet is staging a voice, but one that speaks of the lived experiences that mark it. Instead, even if, as Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, and others have pointed out, the “I” in the text is different from the person who writes the text, an added level of integrity may be derived from Komunyakaa’s experience itself. Even so, this poetic strategy has been criticized by scholars and poets for being romantic, simplistic, and for glorifying witness or participation in events of extremity. Rasula, for instance, hints that many of Forché’s and Rich’s poems are “grounded in methods of emotional manipulation” (319). When a voice has too much of this kind of integrity there is always a risk of reader nausea, of being overwhelmed with the accomplishments and courage of the speaking “I.” Many of my colleagues cannot read Whitman because of his endless reiterations of his laurels and the first-person pronoun. Much “language” poetry works to decenter the self for this very reason, so that the speaking “I” remains in the peripheries, rather than being the proverbial center of attention.
In the second half of this chapter I explore the second subset of embodied agency – authoritative agency. The speakers of these poems insist on their abilities to know the conditions of others; they command the corresponding right to inscribe a type of enjoining authoritative presence. Adrienne Rich’s use of apostrophe to call forth a community of readers to action – which Mary K. DeShazer has pointed out is common amongst women “resistance poets” from South Africa to El Salvador to the United States – symbolizes the rigorous, relentless spirit of these poems. They are activist poems at heart, and they demand action. Along those lines, Anne Herzog calls Rich’s poetry a “poetry of shame [that] readies for revolution,” evoking community, guilt, and shame in order to bring about change (267), while Roger Gilbert points out her insistence on the “power to know the other’s pain and the injustices that produced it” (155).

Much the same can be said (often minus the shame) for confrontational poems, which few poets working in print still write. That mantle has been taken over by many hip hop artists. Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni have all written great confrontational poems that challenge their readers to act and to redefine their consciousnesses. Authoritative poetry, whether of Rich’s variety or like that which came out the Black Arts Movement and Chicano Movement, does not necessarily rely on empirical experience, events, happenings, or referents, which is not to imply that the poetry of experiential agency relies exclusively on a staunch model of factual history. As Goodman says in her discussion of a Harjo poem, “poetic evidence” is the only type of validation necessary for political poetry (45). Finally, authoritative agency often circumvents the usual channels of compromise and negotiation in social and political space, a strategy that has provoked the sensibilities of many critics, one of whom I write about briefly in this section of
the first chapter. At the end of the chapter, I write about a poem that successfully joins the strategies of both experiential and authoritative agency.

Poems of *equivocal agency*, which I explore in the second chapter, challenge poems of experience while maintaining a strategic political engagement, showing that political poetry does not rely exclusively on referentiality or experience. While the problems of memory are complicated by the poems in the previous chapter, those in this chapter rely on a different model of agency. Often influenced by surrealism, magic realism, and Native American traditions, the poems I examine here problematize notions of direct experience, while foregrounding equivocation, paradox, strangeness, irony, and rhetorical guises. This indirection can lead to a ghostly sense of absence in many poems. Poems such as Simic’s “Cameo Appearance,” as well as poems from Merwin’s *The Lice* and Forché’s *The Angel of History*, as well as others by Harjo and Sherman Alexie rely not on first-person speakers poeticizing personal experience, but on transpersonal experiences of loss and oppression, often evoked via multiple voices, discontinuous sequencing, and staged voices (often composite, ironic, or parodic). Other poems, such as Derek Walcott’s “The Season of Phantasmal Peace,” augur an imaginary strangeness, an alternative visionary moment nearly devoid of human presence. This kind of poetry separates the speaker in some capacity from the limitations of personal experience and the conventions that implicitly govern poems of memory, witness, and interiority. Jane Frazier’s essay on Merwin’s “disembodied narrators” shows how the poems in this chapter “lack a particular self so that they may make their quests without the burdens of the ego;” as such, the speakers’ actions “remain part of a journey or process” rather than discrete end points (341). In much the same way, many of the
speakers in the poems of this chapter are “disembodied narrators” who often move through their lines like ghosts.

In the third chapter I discuss a way of being political that foregrounds language itself and the linguistic and cultural differences between English and Spanish and its speakers. The primary source of agency in these poems is the materiality and mutability of language and the fluid borders between English- and Spanish-speaking cultures. Poems of *migratory agency* have bilingual textures that contest the primacy of English as the approved language for poetic, social, and political expression in the United States. In these poems language comprises a contestatory public sphere redolent with political ramifications. While the primary site of production for these poems is North America, their visions tend toward Latin America, the marginalized spaces of “American” culture, and the Spanish language. As Stephen Tapscott notes, the status of poetry in Latin America is vastly different than in the United States and the poet’s standing in many Latin American countries is more public and revered. He writes that Latin American countries often “nominate their writers to be diplomats, international attachés, or makers and administrators of public policy,” which “surprises” North American who often marginalize our poets (1). Gibbons points out the same dynamic in Cardenal’s commitment to revolutionary solidarity with the people of Nicaragua as it is a social responsibility he has inherited from the “Latin American tradition” (286).

Consequently, the Latino/a poems I discuss in this chapter are emblematic of the heightened possibilities for poetry as public discourse and as a way to create community, to call disparate languages and experiences into communion – a type of accord through discord. English alone is insufficient for the kinds of political and social work these poems attempt.
Rather than serve as a supplement to English, Spanish is a crucial partner in remaking “America,” where most people speak Spanish, not English. Moreover, in poems such as Jimmy Santiago Baca’s “Mi Tío Baca el Poeta de Socorro,” poetry itself has a palpable agency tied directly to being Chicano, to speaking Spanish – the speaker’s uncle’s “poems roused la gente / to demand their land rights back.” Poems of migratory agency, therefore, traverse geographical and linguistic boundaries and make apparent the political character of language, migration/immigration, and community.

In the fourth chapter I discuss what I believe can be the most powerful of all contemporary American political poetry – hip hop music. Some readers only familiar with the hip hop culture they see and hear on MTV, BET, and McDonalds commercials may be tempted to dismiss this claim offhand. My claim, indeed, requires qualification. Not all hip hop is politically progressive or resistant to corporate, governmental, and societal structures of oppression, poverty, violence, racism, and injustice. Much commercial hip hop music, especially the multi-platinum pop variety, could be said to embody an individualistic, hypermaterialistic and consumptive agency. It no longer scares politicians, pundits, or parents because it can seem ludicrous on its surface and because it implicitly supports many dominant American values concerning consumption and the pursuit of individual wealth. However, hip hop culture is richer, more varied, and much more complex than mainstream radio and cable television suggest. Many hip hop artists make incisive, creative, and sociopolitically-conscious music; these artists, I would argue, have their fingers on the pulse of the nation’s multicultural urban spaces more so than poets who work in print. Many of these artists’ lyrics and live performances display a powerful type of community-based agency, what I call a contestatory urban agency. These hip hop artists, moreover, challenge
not only the injustices of the larger American culture, but also what they perceive as the vacuity, ignorance, and greed of much mainstream hip hop. Even though KRS-One’s 1989 proclamation in my introduction’s epigraph that “the age of the ignorant rapper is done” has sadly not come to pass, much hip hop retains the promise of a dynamic art with resistant political power.

The impact of hip hop on generations of young people in the United States is palpable. Poetry, whether written by John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Langston Hughes, or a contemporary poet, may be a beneficiary. Houston A. Baker, Jr. writes that hip hop has revised the current generation’s expectations of poetry, which suggests the need for further work on hip hop as a dynamic, popular form of poetry. If printed poetry is to flourish in secondary schools and colleges, where many students listen to hip hop everyday, teachers could exploit students’ knowledge of hip hop as an entry way to other types of poetry. Baker’s understanding of poetry as “disruptive performance” and as a “sounding space of opposition” also opens up space for hip hop lyrics to be read as poems. Poetry, for Baker, is an “alternative space of the conditional,” a notion important in many formulations of “political” poetry (94-96). Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, too, claim that hip hop is “serious poetry” and the first music to begin creative work on the “threat of economic inequality to American ideals” (98-100).

Joseph Harrington opens up an additional space for the study of hip hop when he writes that “poetry” overdetermines poems. He claims there is no a priori essence to poetry; it is important, he insists, to look at non-institutional forms of poetry that “decenter and decentralize art-writing from the norms and sites of literary authority” (10-11). Of course, much hip hop is thoroughly institutional – the commanding roles that corporate
conglomerates MTV (owned by Disney), Viacom, Clear Channel, Sony, and others play in producing, promoting, commodifying and controlling much hip hop music co-opt large swaths of its cultural landscape. Moreover, Harrington writes that the cultural uses of poetry in the 1990s shifted as radically as they did in the Romantic period, an important point for a study that charts the strategies of political poetry, especially as I consider the ways hip hop has emerged as political poetry. He also notes that critics and poets tend to define poetry with reference to “the public” – “either as an alternative to or refuge from the public, as a vehicle or mode for participating in and engaging with the public, or as a way of negotiating or problematizing the separation of public and private spheres” (168). Much of the hip hop that I discuss can be seen as a counterinstitutional poetics as well as a poetic strategy for engaging the public.

In this final chapter I focus on three aspects of hip hop culture. In the first part of the chapter I explore what some hip hop artists are currently accomplishing that other poets are not. I discuss live hip hop shows as participatory spaces of potential collective agency and change. Michael Eric Dyson suggests that the rap concert “creates space for cultural resistance and personal agency” (5-6). Maria Damon makes a similar gesture in her claim that poetry slams comprise a “contestatory” public sphere capable of community-building (327), while Tricia Rose calls rap the “contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless,” claiming that rap groups use shows to address social and political issues (125, 134). I use these critics’ claims as departure points to argue that live hip hop shows at small clubs can carve out a space of interactive engagement, where dominant cultural values are contested and collective agency is created. The hip hop show, therefore, is an apt space for exploring the successes of a political poetry in the United States. To make this argument, I use Arendt’s
theory of “acting in concert” and the work of other public space theorists. I also draw from my personal experiences at hip hop shows and on conversations with a close friend, a Brooklyn-based freelance hip hop journalist, DJ, and owner/operator of an independent hip hop record label.

In the second section of the chapter I explore hip hop’s vibrant self criticism. I argue that “authenticity” is the primary contestation point in hip hop’s internal debates. In arguing that the thematic battleground of hip hop’s self-criticism centers on concepts of “authenticity,” I chart rappers’ critiques of hip hop, the larger American culture, and hip hop’s implied relationships with African American communities. In exploring varying notions of authenticity, I move away from any essential definition of hip hop. The culture’s most vocal critics (notably from far outside the culture) take on reductive views – for instance, styling MTV videos as the culture’s essence – and extrapolate negative conclusions about the culture as a whole. Like poets, rappers stage voices and personas in their work; as such, because “authenticity” is so self-consciously rhetorical in hip hop, it is a great way to understand connections between hip hop and printed poetry. Hip hop’s prevailing braggadocio is an apt counterpoint to the vulnerabilities and uncertainties many printed poems show, especially since the advent of the “confessional” poetry of Lowell, Plath, Sexton, Berryman, and others in the 1960s. But, as I show, some rappers are becoming more willing to reveal their (and their community’s) vulnerabilities.14

In the third part of the chapter I discuss hip hop’s contestatory urban agency, both in lyrics and in activism. I stay cognizant here of Baker’s discussion of “positive sites of rap” (59-60) and Dyson’s “enabling, productive rap messages” (7), where hip hop is oppositional cultural criticism. I imply then that many of the artists I discuss are “positive sites of rap” that exist as
alternatives to much acquiescent commercial hip hop. As in the previous chapters, I select songs that I feel best represent the various aspects of a contestatory urban agency. Rose points out that one of the most compelling struggles in hip hop music is the “discursive tension” between individual agency and structural oppression; she claims that they must be “joined at the hip” in order to show how so called self-destructive behavior is much more complex (142). The lyrics I discuss often try to work out this tension while making sharp sociopolitical comment. To reiterate, my choices of artists and songs are partially subjective and aligned with my knowledge base and aesthetics, preferring those types of hip hop that are politically and socially progressive rather than those that are mostly hedonist and wealth-obsessed. Throughout all three sections of the chapter, my implicit subject is the current state of hip hop. I try to engage what I see as its most critical issues, including those that center on live performance, authenticity, agency, and current debates about race and commercialization.

**Moving Forward**

As I often tell my students, all writing is about choice. The choices I made in writing this book reveal much about my biases, aesthetic preferences, and political commitments. As such, in the conclusion to this project I consider some notable exclusions I made in writing about the landscape of contemporary poetry and politics in the United States. I address my reasons for not including Language poetry, spoken word poetry, and other types of music – and I trust that this introduction helps answer why hip hop culture transcends mere music. It is lived culture(s), music(s), political commitments, and poetry all at once. Further, my basic categories of political poetry are not exhaustive. As such, in the conclusion I discuss a poem
that spans strategies – Rita Dove’s “The House Slave.” I also take on what has become one of the most powerful (but perhaps self-defeating) strategies for making art political – humor.

I hope that this book illustrates successfully the various poetic strategies contemporary Americans use to give their poems political life. I believe that hip hop music and printed poetry are vibrant and exciting aspects of contemporary American culture. In juxtaposition they can tell us much about each other’s vulnerabilities and competencies. However, I do not want to establish a stark binary between printed poetry and hip hop music, especially since I am going to be looking at hip hop lyrics on paper, where, unfortunately, they lose much of their power. They have many similarities as well that bind them together under the heading of “poetry.” I know, though, that some readers will find the juxtaposition of “high” culture with supposedly “low” popular culture disagreeable. Yet others may find that in the juxtaposition that a “counterdiscourse has become institutionalized” as Georg M. Gugelberger has written about the academy’s recent fascination with testimonio texts by Latin American campesinos and human rights activists (3). Whether I write about it or not, there will be a vibrant part of hip hop (and printed poetry as well) that will remain countercultural and contestatory as it must if it is to continue to challenge dominant discourses. Poets – whether they are Chinese T’ang dynasty exiles, English Romantics, Nicaraguans in the midst of coups and revolutions, Americans writing about Vietnam, women’s rights, and the World Trade Centers, or hip hop artists – have long tried to make their verse do political work. The following chapters attempt to see how they do so in multicultural, multilingual contemporary America.
CHAPTER ONE
Embodied Agency

It is “experience” that gives life to the law demonstrating...that the law must be compatible with how people actually arrange their lives. The way law stays alive is by keeping in touch with social contracts pieced together among real people on the ground.

–from Hernando de Soto, The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else (108)

Introduction

At first glance, the quote I chose to begin a chapter on political poems of embodied agency seems oddly discordant. Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto’s book about capitalism and the developing world does not mention poetry or even art at all. However, one need only substitute “poetry” for “the law” to make de Soto’s claim about on-the-ground experience a perfect gateway into the poetry of this chapter. The poems I discuss demand that we see that experience “gives life” to poetry. Poetry, moreover, “must be compatible with how people actually arrange their lives.” Most dramatically, poetry “stays alive” by “keeping in touch” with the dynamic, confusing, and sometimes horrifying ways that “real people on the ground” experience the world. Poetry, for the poets of this chapter, is not only about imagination and creativity, nor is it a calculated retreat from the empirical world. It is an engagement with lived experiences, their own and that of other people and the communities to which they belong. Poetry, they might argue, is political when it “keeps in touch” with experience; poetry, like “the law” for de Soto, works best when it is organic, when it responds to the ways that people live their lives in the world – when it works for people.
I want to return briefly to the definition of experience put forth in the introduction to this book. As stated there, the poems of this chapter portray the lived experiences of quasi-historical actors, of people living in history. Walter Benjamin believed that personal experience is the content and “source” of traditional storytelling because it can be “passed on from mouth to mouth” (83). Poems of embodied agency figuratively enact the exchange – and thereby the transformation – of experience with readers. My understanding of experience is also influenced by Latin American testimonio scholars. Although he claims that any attempt to define testimonio is “at best provisional, at worst repressive” because it is “by nature a protean and demotic form,” John Beverley offers one anyway. A testimonio, he writes, is a “novel or novella-length narrative” that is “told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts” (24). Most testimonios, moreover, are narratives of struggles against oppression that chronicle a fight on behalf of a group of people.

I return to this primarily Latin American form in the third chapter on migratory agency, but for now I want to make clear that the poems of this chapter are not testimonios. The testimonio, the poems in this chapter, helps outline the importance of narrative, a first person speaker, experience, and collective struggle. As Beverley notes, and which applies here, testimonio “is not so much concerned with the life of a ‘problematic hero,’” but “with a problematic social situation that the narrator lives with or alongside others” (27). His point suggests a movement away from the speaker-poet’s experience as an end unto itself and toward the collective context for that experience. Many poems I write about in this chapter suggest that the speaker-poet’s experiences are part of a larger collective experience. Experience, then, is not merely personal; it is a metonym for a larger group of other people’s
experiences. However, as Giorgio Agamben notes in his work on experience in the twentieth century, “nobody would be inclined to accept the validity of an authority whose sole claim to legitimation was experience” (14). Thus, poems of embodied agency are poems who gain authority from what Goodman calls “poetic evidence” (45), which is really a way of saying that poems have authority as poems first, testaments to experience second. They should not have experience as a “sole claim to legitimation”; if so, they would function better as memoirs.

Experience is crucial to poems of embodied agency, but imagination is also a key component of this poetry’s understanding of events in the world. Spanish poet Federico García Lorca knew all too well the bitter twists and turns of the world outside his doorstep. Nevertheless, he once wrote that “visible reality, the facts of the world and of the human body, are much more full of subtle nuances, and are much more poetic than what imagination discovers” (28). Lorca, it appears, believed that the visible world and the world of human experience are the greatest wellsprings for poetry even if for him the ultimate “facts of the world” were harsh, unkind, and sinister. He seemingly rejoiced in them up to his assassination in 1936 at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, murdered before he was able to write poetry during a war that would dramatically transform Spain into a fascist state. He was martyred before he was forced either to make poetry out of the context of war or, in the words of Wallace Stevens, to evade the “pressure of reality” on the imagination by ignoring the environment around him – to retreat inward or to take on the world’s horrors. Stevens’s lectures on poetry and politics suggest the early modernist’s estimation of the poet’s zero-sum game. According to Stevens, when the “pressure of reality” is great, such as it was
throughout Europe before and during World War II, the poet must turn either to “resistance” or “evasion” (cited in Des Pres 18).

In this view, then, the role of the referential world of social and political events, conditions, and observable realities is paramount in the writing process, even if the poet chooses to evade that world. The context in which a poet finds himself or herself living, writing, and observing both precedes the production of poetry and exists concurrently with poetic creation. Imagination, under such a formulation, is a reactionary force that responds to events, and this responsorial impulse is a critical aspect of the political poetry of embodied agency. However, the force of events in the world on the writing process does not prevent poets’ political imaginations from being preemptive, transformative forces of discovery.

Much of the twentieth century’s political poetry has been influenced by the experiences of war, whether the Spanish Civil War, World War I or II, the Vietnam War, civil wars in Latin America, or one of numerous other wars that marked the last century and continue to mark the current one. War, though, is neither the primary arbiter of nor the sole realm for political poetry; it must be considered just one ground of, one impetus for it. In this book, while I am careful not to elide poems’ contexts, my primary interest is poets’ rhetorical strategies for making context present as a political tool. However, many critics have customarily focused on war as a way of understanding and categorizing political poetry, and for good reason. A war can provide a relatively contained framework for approaching poetry, especially if the war has pervasive and far-reaching cultural, political, economic, and humanitarian impact. For these reasons, I begin this chapter on political poems of embodied agency with a brief illustration of how two contemporary poets have foregrounded their experiences of war. War, for all its complexities and paradoxes, can be a simple, boundaried context for explaining
some key features of embodied agency and how lived experience and poetic creation work together.

Carolyn Forché’s *The Country Between Us* (1981) and Yusef Komunyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) are two seminal volumes that deal intimately with poets’ first-person experiences of war, Forché as an Amnesty International aid worker in El Salvador, Komunyakaa as a soldier in Vietnam. Despite some critical differences, especially in their poetic gestation processes – Komunyakaa did not publish poetry dealing explicitly with Vietnam experiences until fifteen years after the war officially ended, while Forché spent 1978 to 1980 in El Salvador and then published the book in 1981 – the poems of the two volumes establish the speaking voice of first-person lived experience in similar ways. Two poems from these books illustrate a principal manner in which individual experiences anchor a poem’s meaning, context, language, and strategies for making political poetry. They both depict this experience as illuminating as well as confounding.

Forché’s “The Colonel” and Komunyakaa’s “We Never Know” are dramatically different poems formally, the first a prose poem, the second a brief imagist poem. While both poems turn on dramatic, visceral images, the self-conscious first-person speaker is the key component of both poems, as it is for many poems discussed in this chapter. Both poems, moreover, echo the observations of Samuel Beckett’s Molloy, a character whose internal monologue is inseparable from his interaction with the world and with other people. Molloy says, “I speak in the present tense, it is so easy to speak in the present tense, when speaking of the past. It is the mythological present” (34). Based upon past experience, these poems relate the details of the experience in past tense verbs, but personal experience and the experience of writing about it are both foregrounded via the present tense, “the mythological
present” of the poem’s production. This technique foregrounds the retelling and poeticizing of experience, as if highlighting any slippage or fissure the poet sees between the original event and the event of making the poem.

“The Colonel,” which relates the speaker’s experience of eating dinner at a Salvadoran army general’s house, begins with a blunt assertion of first-person experience and a demand for the reader to see the poem as “true”: “What you have heard is true. I was in his house.” The lines that follow include a selective, detailed description of the evening’s events and the house in which they occurred. The lines that anchor the self-conscious strategy move auspiciously from the poem’s most shocking images and its past tense verbs to the present tense: “He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like / dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this” (16 my emphasis). Here, the speaker recounts her experience in the past tense verbs typically used to describe past events; however, the speaker then enters the poem in the present to highlight the event of retelling. As a result, the poet is doubly present – as the person in the poem and as the person writing the poem. As Joann Gardner writes, the “journalistic matter-of-factness of Forché’s style acknowledges the primacy of event over verbalization” (412). Similarly, Sharon Doubiago points out that it is not the speaker that is confused or hesitant, but “the poet with the burden of her U.S. aesthetics” and the poetics “of the isolated, private self” that is incapable of turning experience into poetry (35-36). Experience, then, in “The Colonel,” is primary, and the verbalization of that event is secondary. The speaker’s agency, therefore, is a product both of her experience and of the way she recounts that experience. She makes explicit that the telling of experience – Benjamin’s “storytelling” – is a conscious rhetorical strategy that is purposefully transparent and confessional.
In “We Never Know,” Komunyakaa makes a similar move. He has said that poems are most effective when they are “formed from a composite of meaningful images” and that he remembers the war mostly as “internalized” imagery (Baer 6-7). Like “The Colonel,” his poem moves through a series of images that retell an experience with past tense verbs – a Viet Cong soldier “danced” in the “tall grass” after being shot, gun barrels “glowed white-hot,” and a “blue halo of flies” “claimed” the body. The middle of the short poem heralds the turn in voice. After finding a photograph in the dead soldier’s fingers, the speaker says, “There’s no other way / to say this: I fell in love” (26 my emphasis). Other than the contraction, Komunyakaa uses exactly the same line as Forché with similar intention and results. He seeks not a mere reportage of events, but a way to accentuate the speaker’s current struggle to verbalize the experience appropriately. Also, while the speakers’ experiences are the primary forces of these poems, their statements of presence inside the poems as well as inside the experiences anchor both.¹⁶

I see these two poets – who overall at these points in their careers had dissimilar aesthetics – as utilizing an intentional strategy to politicize experience while complicating its place in poetry. Their two poems clarify some significant points about political poems with embodied agency. First, Brian Massumi’s Parables for the Virtual indirectly illuminates the role of first-person agency and experience; he connects perceptions to actions, so that a perception is an action in its “latent state.” Drawing from Henri Bergson, he claims that “perceptions are possible actions” (91). In the above poems, perceptions of experience reinvest past actions with new imaginative possibility even as the poems themselves become new actions. Massumi’s suggestion that an action must “produce” an “outward effect” and “disengage possibilities” (106) is highlighted in these poems as they catalogue both their speakers’
interiority and the “outward effects” of both their actions and the actions of others. Additionally, according to Massumi, an agent’s movement is always primary and the positions in the social world he or she assumes are always secondary to movement. Any agent’s subject position, he says, “is an emergent quality of movement” (7-8). This notion allows for the primacy of experience in poems of embodied agency: poems can be thought of as “emergent qualities” of the poet’s/speaker’s experiences. As Massumi foregrounds the body in motion, so these poems foreground the speaker-poet in motion throughout the empirical world.

Second, although both Forché’s and Komunyakaa’s poems are based upon their experiences (albeit experiences they re-imagine in verse), the political poems discussed in this chapter – both of experiential and authoritative agency – do not necessarily assume that all experiences must be fully verifiable. In the introduction to her anthology of poetry of witness, Against Forgetting, Forché writes that poems of witness to events of extremity must be evaluated differently. She says that they should not be submitted to any test of “accuracy” or “truth to life.” Such poems, she reminds us, are de facto “evidence” of what has happened and may be “the sole trace of an occurrence” so that there might not be an independent account with which to verify whether or not the poem is “true” (31). In the case of “We Never Know,” where a Vietnamese man dies at the hands of an American soldier, it matters little if the speaker-poet’s own experience is verifiable because millions of Vietnamese were killed by American soldiers. Further, Forché’s formulation also rightly suggests that imagination, metaphor, indirection, and figurative language play key roles in poems of embodied agency. Experience may be the prime mover and wellspring for a poem, a tentacle that extends outward into the world of complicated socioeconomic and political conditions,
but it is only one tool at the disposal of the poets who write these poems. Poems, most importantly, are not newspaper articles; they are not by convention bound to accuracy, truth, or empirical verification.

**Experiential Agency**

Critic Hélène Cixous has long stumped for the primacy of experience both in literary texts and in our reading of them. Because even experiences of the same event or sensation “leave different marks” and “different memories” on individuals, she claims that what texts primarily do is transmit perceptions of experiences to readers (230). As such, she suggests that readers should read texts to gain insight into the experiences of others. She believes that texts must “establish an ethical relation to reality” since it is important that texts both have a message and “a relationship to humanity” (231). Consequently, poets who inscribe their experiences into poems as a primary strategy for making political poetry are implicitly establishing an “ethical relation” to their realities, their memories, their histories, and to the humanity of their audiences. As Charles Altieri has claimed, lyric poetry is capable of creating a bond between the speaking self and readers in that the speaking “I” can implicitly claim that its experience can be representative of others’ experiences (Self 22). Altieri’s claim dovetails with the basic assertion of the testimonio (and with a relatively fundamental tenet of some hip hop), but lyric poetry creates that bond partly through the skill of the poet.

Michael S. Harper’s “Deathwatch” represents poems that embody first-person experience even as they connect that intimate experience to a more expansive social context. Especially in Harper’s work, poems such as this one use personal experience as both the focus of the poem and as a departure point within the poem to do greater political work. Like many other poems that utilize personal experience as a strategy, this poem is an elegy. It is part of the
series of wrenching elegies in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* (1970) in which the poet deals with the deaths of his two infant sons. “Deathwatch” is probably the most political of these elegies, and because the anger the father feels over the death of his infant son is so understandable, the visionary leap he makes from one death to a broader American context is lucid and efficacious.

While each of the poems in this section have first-person viewpoints, the speaker in “Deathwatch” never refers to himself using the first-person pronoun “I.” In the first stanza, the speaker retells the words of his wife, who has just given birth to a premature son. These two lines are structurally simple – both start with “she tells me how” and end with his wife’s testimony about surgery and their baby (65-66). In both cases, the speaker is in an object position, and so uses the first-person object pronoun “me.” Further, when the speaker refers to himself elsewhere in the poem, he does so formally. When the wife refers to their son, she says that he is “strong, / like his father.” In the second stanza, when directly addressing his dead son, the speaker says that the infant had “the face / of your black father,” which is especially important given that Harper’s wife is white. In these cases, the speaker’s experiences are seen from two perspectives, both as individual father and as archetypal father, a tactic which serves to create a collective space of shared experience with readers as (black) fathers and parents.

Joseph A. Brown once wrote in an essay on Harper’s poetry that, for Harper, “no moment or matter is too private to be exorcised in a healing song” (215). While “Deathwatch” elegizes a sad private event, it is also an indictment of the United States and an exorcism of its racist history. The first two stanzas combine the poet’s experience in the hospital as a father and a former premedical student with knowledge of procedures and terminologies. The
cold, impersonal medical terms “episiotomy,” “placenta,” “adrenalin holes,” “autopsy,” and “disposal papers” convey a measured distance from their human implications. Jahan Ramazani, discussing another Harper elegy, writes that Harper’s interaction with his son “has been mediated and mutilated by the impersonal, objectifying discourse of the hospital” (Poetry of Mourning 257), and so it is here. When the poem connects discrete personal experience to broader sociocultural implications, it is subtle but pragmatic. The leap is necessitated by events – when the speaker and his wife “sign the autopsy / and disposal papers” the event is symbolically framed by the implications of dying black in a white country. The papers are “in black ink / on white paper / like the country” in which the speaker’s son was born. For Harper, personal experience is inseparable from politics and, as Ramazani points out, “death and mourning are bound to a grid of blackness and whiteness,” which gives the speaker no choice but to view the loss “through the lens of his racial experience” (258-9). Harper also summons a notion explained in depth by Leslie Catherine Sanders in her book on the development of African American drama (The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves 1988) – African American artists and citizens exist largely on white cultural ground. Although this condition may be changing with the abundant popularity of African American cultural forms such as hip hop and with the increasing Latina/o population, Harper’s lines suggest that this country has been written by, built by, and made visible by the arts, lives, deaths, labor, and blood of African Americans, with little recognition for their efforts apart from death certificates and disposal papers.

The poem’s speaker places his son’s death within the landscape of what Harper has called Americans’ “psychic weight of discovery” of racism’s horrors in a country ironically founded upon a Bill of Rights that promised equal rights for all (Antonucci 507). In the third
stanza, the speaker connects his experience to that of an earlier African American, W.E.B. Du Bois, and a letter Du Bois received from a student at Cornell, presumably after Du Bois’s own son died. In connecting his personal experience to a specific historical incident, Harper avoids the faults Robert von Hallberg finds with much Vietnam-era political poetry written by such poets as Robert Bly, Robert Duncan, and James Wright. When von Hallberg criticizes the techniques of what he calls “visionary political poetry,” he does so because it leaps from observation to visionary prophecy; he finds that its excessive oracularity does not “permit the exercise of analytical intelligence.” He also writes that rapid juxtapositions do not allow for concessions, qualifications, and “rational virtues” (*American Poetry* 139). Even if Harper’s technique did not circumvent such criticism in its specificity, the speaker-poet is not interested in concessions, qualifications, analytical intelligence, or other “rational virtues.” The death of infant sons and the brutalities of racism are difficult to make the subjects of concession and rationality, especially in the context of a letter that denies African Americans “a collective history of mourning” (Ramazani 259) and their essential humanity.

The primary political impetus of the poem, then, is perhaps what Niccolò N. Donzella has called “The Rage of Michael Harper.” The point of Harper’s rage, for Donzella, is “to introduce sleepwalking natives” to their lives as citizens within the complexities and paradoxes of America (806). This rage from lived experience is evident in the poem’s final stanza and three-line coda. Here, Harper refers to the poem as elegy: “This is a dedication / to our memory.” The speaker’s and his wife’s memories remind him of the letter Du Bois received at Cornell. Harper ends the stanza with the question asked of Du Bois: “‘Will you please tell us / whether or not it is true / that negroes / are not able to cry?’” The question is depraved and disturbing, but elusive, for even Du Bois is not “sure of the answer.”
The speaker, though, provides a de facto answer in the coda, which has a marked change in tone: “America needs a killing. / America needs a killing. / Survivors will be human” (original emphasis). These lines call for an exorcism that destroys the conditions and systems of thought that enable racism and help prevent people from seeing others as fundamentally human, capable of feeling pain and sorrow. This extrapolation from individual experience to a social conclusion based on that experience is both intensely personal and intensely political. It distills the speaker’s rage into a repetitive chant. However, as Ramazani suggests, Harper also “risks merely reversing the very scapegoating he condemns” (259) as his strategy refuses to succumb to the indignities of concession and qualification. For the speaker, infant death and racism deserve no concessions. Harper’s strategy makes individual experience political and gives that experience political agency, a strategy utilized in the following poem as well.

While Harper’s techniques in “Deathwatch” force readers to understand a discrete event of personal experience in broad political and cultural terms, Mark Doty’s “Homo Will Not Inherit” (Atlantis 1995) asserts the legitimacy of a countercultural personal experience, especially the human body’s experiences of pleasure and faith. Throughout the poem’s unrhymed tercets, the speaker calls forth his experiences as a gay man, especially in relation to strict interpretations of Christian doctrine. In 2005, when equal rights for gay people, especially in the form of gay marriage, are viewed by many conservatives as a great threat to the national security of the United States, the poem becomes even more politically charged, ideological, and haunting than when first published. Stephen Burt’s discussion of “the weak and the strong principles of public interest in poetry” is useful in understanding the changed dynamic for reading “Homo Will Not Inherit.” The “weak principle” asserts that
poems often “speak to public concerns” and that readers “can often learn from juxtaposing poems and public issues, even when the poems touch on those issues only glancingly” (550). While Doty’s poem does not allude to marriage rights, it confronts the very issues that drive some to lobby against equal rights for gay people. While my purpose is not to read the poem as a pro-gay marriage argument, it is important to recontextualize Doty’s rhetorical strategy in light of the current contentious debates. This is one way that poetry can gain in value over time and one way that its public reception can become more politicized.

In her essay on Sylvia Plath, Anita Rapone asserts that “Sylvia Plath’s poetry is political not because it is ideological but because it presents our experience” (407). In much the same way, “Homo Will Not Inherit” is political in that it presents the speaker’s experiences of being a gay man in a major American city. It does not matter if this particular experience of being gay is representative of gay experience in general, since it is fair to say that the poem speaks to the hatred and disdain many Americans have for homosexuals. But what of the question of ideology? Doty’s poem works precisely because it is both ideological and based on experience. Roland Barthes’s writings about ideology give context to the ways that experience itself can be ideological. According to Barthes, ideology is a system of thought that naturalizes what is cultural, that makes dominant social beliefs simply “the way things are,” unchangeable and natural. An ideology is any discourse that portrays something as natural that is really cultural. Barthes writes, “The Natural is never an attribute of physical Nature; it is the alibi paraded by a social majority” (130). Ideology understood this way disguises the “Violence of Prejudice” as natural rather than socially constructed by the powerful (47). Doty’s poem and the experience it presents can then be understood as a
counterdiscourse to an ideology that condemns acts of homosexuality and that makes the cultural prohibition of homosexuality natural, transhistorical, transcultural, and universal.

Doty’s first-person speaker systematically responds to a sign he sees on a downtown street. The sign refers to the first verse of Corinthians and features a “xeroxed headshot” of a “permed, blonde” Jesus; the sign’s “marker strokes” read: “HOMO WILL NOT INHERIT. Repent & be saved” (76-79 original emphasis here and below). The speaker’s first of four oppositional responses begins: “I’ll tell you what I’ll inherit.” Judith Butler’s work on identity, performativity, and agency illuminates the poem’s series of impassioned retorts to the sign’s notion of inheritance. She claims that “although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal,” “disidentification” also works well as a strategy of “democratic contestation” (4). The poem, therefore, does not rely on group identification with other gays; instead, the speaker consistently disidentifies with the sign’s notions of divinity, inheritance, compassion, and epiphany. He asserts that the gay experience is valid and holy while also disidentifying with hate and intolerance.

The speaker’s simultaneous disidentification with the sign’s message and his declarations of experience contest a lack of tolerance for gay people. The speaker owns his experiences as a gay man, both good and bad, because he believes “without judgment, without condemnation” that “in each body, however obscured or recast, / is the divine body.” So, while the speaker will inherit “the margins” and “stupidity, erasure, exile,” he believes he will also inherit both “the flesh and the word.” The speaker casts the body as divine when he says that he has “seen” flames “around the edge of the body” as in the Pentecost. By using religious terminology, the speaker does subversive political work, asserting that divinity is
not bounded by the pages of a book, but that it exists within all bodies, whether hetero- or homosexual. The speaker styles his experiences as divine and therefore political contestatory. The “anticipated / and actual memory, the moment flooded / by skin and the knowledge of it” are divine experiences not subject to the constraints subscribed to by the sign’s creator.

The poem showcases what Joanne Rendell calls in her study of Doty’s AIDS poetry “the potential of poetry to expose cultural and social norms.” Political poetry, she suggests, can contest “inequality, judgment, and intolerance” by disordering the ways that cultural formulations of negative otherness are “maintained and reproduced” (92, 95). While Doty’s poem exposes a source of discrimination, its contestatory position is also self-consciously undermined by the speaker’s willful retelling of a negative experience. Near the end of the poem, the speaker tells the sign’s creator “a dirty story” that he imagines the sign-maker has always wanted to hear. This sexual experience shamed him so much that he no longer “needs to burn in the afterlife.” By including a wide range of experiences, including one that is humiliating, he preempts conservative religion’s position that homosexual acts are always depraved, when it is *human* relations in general that are *sometimes* depraved. Also, such humiliation – the speaker’s earthly experience – shows him that “the spirit’s transactions / are enacted now, here.” In the final tercets, the speaker denounces a holy kingdom defined by judgment and hatred in favor of the here and now – the “failing,” “inescapable,” and “gorgeous” city written with “Babylon’s scrawl.” The speaker opts for worldly experience, its divine moments, and an acceptance of such essential human emotions as shame, guilt, fear, and desire. Doty, therefore, makes his experiences do political work. The final sentence is just such a testament to primary experience as a political and poetic force: “I have my
kingdom.” His kingdom is his continual experiencing of the divine in the world, not in a promised afterlife.

If “Homo Will Not Inherit” suggests the potency of experience and how lived experience can contest ideology, Galway Kinnell’s “When the Towers Fell” signifies its opposite, the impotency associated with an experience of helplessness. Kinnell’s poem first appeared in the September 16, 2002 issue of The New Yorker one year after the September 11 terrorist attacks. It deals directly with the experience of watching the attacks and their aftermath. For some critics, the poem’s appearance in The New Yorker may create substantial problems of reception. Marjorie Perloff, who notoriously doubted that poems in The New Yorker are capable of political force, once pointed out that W.S. Merwin’s eerie Vietnam poem “The Asians Dying” (1967), which I discuss in the next chapter, originally appeared “on a glossy page between those gorgeous ads for fur coats and diamonds and resorts in St. Croix” (“Apocalypse” 130). Cary Nelson disagrees with Perloff’s assessment that the poem’s placement obviates its political potency. He suggests that magazines such as The New Yorker have always been rife with contradictions (120-121). It is also possible that political poems are even more conspicuous and jarring when juxtaposed with luxury advertisements. After all, what media does not contain mixed messages? These often disconcerting contradictions abound in hip hop, a contradiction which I discuss in the fourth chapter. The context for Kinnell’s poem is also unique in that it speaks to New Yorkers about a New York event. It is difficult to find fault with the political ineptitude of its appearance in the quintessential New York periodical, even if it reaches a mostly elite audience.

In his discussion of Wallace Stevens and the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, Terrence Des Pres says that both saw the poet “as an outside observer distressed by the march of events”
but not “an inside participant overwhelmed and mute in the face of events themselves” (23 original emphasis). His formulation applies to the speaker-poet of Kinnell’s poem. In “When the Towers Fell,” the speaker is both an outside observer of the event and an inside participant (but not one literally inside the towers), as many New Yorkers would likely describe themselves. Des Pres goes on to say that the position of outside observer is the same position most readers occupy as distant from disaster “but well within reach of its shock waves” (23). Kinnell’s speaker struggles to give voice to the event, its aftermath, and his experiences of them. He makes clear that he is both apart from and a part of the gruesome scene, both an insider and outsider.

When the poem opens with the line “From our high window we saw the towers / with their bands and blocks of light,” the speaker immediately establishes his role as a witness, and thus an outside observer. But he also inscribes the experience as a collective one with the use of “our,” so he is an inside observer as well. While it is possible that Kinnell refers to himself and his partner in this line, there is no question that millions of New Yorkers could view the towers from their windows. Yet, this lofty vantage point also gives the poem a taint of wealth. Despite the fact that many housing project apartments had views of the towers, Kinnell’s speaker’s view seems from the penthouse; as such, his viewpoint is a unique one and one that he attempts to reconcile with populist principles later in the poem. After setting up the towers as a visible entity, he suggests the haunting surreality of their loss, of the observer’s inability to see them again, since they “grew so used to them / often we didn’t see them, and now, / not seeing them, we see them.” These lines construct a world in which disorder reigns and the senses are unreliable perceptors of experience. The loss of the towers,
the opening stanza implies, challenge our ways of experiencing the world, especially our ways of seeing it.

After the opening ten-line stanza in which the speaker sets up the vantage point of his experience, the second stanza takes two strange turns. It shows a poet struggling with, and succumbing to, the difficulty of writing about a widely-viewed event. The speaker contends with questions that challenge the existential status of an artist faced with disaster. What does a poet do when his experience is so drastically different from the experiences of New Yorkers who lost loved ones? How does a poet respond to such a tragic public event? Maurice Blanchot suggests that disaster makes writing a difficult if not impossible enterprise. According to him, the experience of disaster is an experience of being rendered completely passive. The disaster, moreover, is a pervasive and general experience of calamity that redefines the limits of human experience and what are signified as “disasters”: “disaster…does not have the ultimate for a limit: it bears the ultimate away” (28). Kinnell’s response to the terrorist attacks reveals both the difficulty of his task and the ways that disaster utterly redefines personal and collective experience.

The second stanza reveals the difficulty of that task. Here we begin to see Kinnell testing his populist, inclusive, democratic mettle. Kinnell begins with four listless, bathetic lines that show “The banker,” “Humberto,” “The trader,” and “The Mail sorter” at their tasks in the towers. Kinnell makes the intention of these simple sentences transparent in the next eight lines, which alternate between French and their English translations. They illustrate that the attacks killed “poor and rich” and “wise and foolish,” amongst other classes and types of people. The message is simple, undeniable: death was indiscriminate. Two pieces of Kinnell’s strategy stand out. First, the technique is heavy-handed, unnecessary, and a bit
contrived, although it is interesting that the only named person in the poem is a wage worker with a foreign name. Second, the use of French is perplexing. Perhaps Kinnell was thinking of the *The New Yorker* audience, but the immediate translations negate the need to read French. The French, however, is less appropriate than Spanish, which was spoken by countless thousands in the World Trade Center, especially by its wage workers. Spanish would have been more realistic and more true to life than French, and to this reader at least, less contrived. Kinnell, though, may have been bound by his knowledge and experience. If knowledgeable in French but not Spanish, he may have felt more comfortable with using the former to suggest the hundreds of foreign nationals who lost their lives in the attacks. The use of French may also resonate more given the conflict with the French about the war in Iraq. Though the conflict was not yet astir in September 2002, the poem’s French could be seen now by supporters of the Iraq war as denigrating the French for refusing to be part of the U.S. coalition, which I think would be a serious misreading of the poem.

If Blanchot believes that writing about disaster is an impossible task, Hélène Cixous provides a better, although disheartening, strategy for writing about disaster. For her, “things which are unspeakable” and that “take our breath away” should be addressed by “inscribing the question, signifying our impotence, our obligation, our memory of what is happening” (232). Kinnell does precisely this when he interjects a note of deflated hope after a series of eight lines that catalogue the ways that people died in the towers. All of the lines begin with “Some,” four of which follow:

Some died while calling home to say they were O.K.
Some died after over an hour spent learning they would die.
Some died so abruptly they may have seen death from within it.
Some broke windows and leaned out and waited for rescue.
The eighth in the series is the most abstract and lyrical and apparently the most painful for the speaker: “Some leapt hand in hand, the elasticity in last bits of love-time letting – I wish I could say – their vertical streaks down the sky happen more lightly.” This line is markedly different from the ones above, which are matter-of-fact and journalistic, especially the first, second, and fourth lines. These lines and the more lyrical one assert the speaker’s impotence and tortured memory, but in different ways. In the more distant lines the speaker gives rote reports, while in the eighth line the speaker interrupts himself with “I wish I could say.” Strangely, though, the speaker does say in the poem what he is unable to say in a reality based on his experience. As such, he signifies the feeling of passivity the experience gives him – the poem is then an intervention in the city’s memory of the event, but a failed one. While the line is the most lyrical of the eight, it is interrupted by dashes that signals the failure to transform memories and experiences into poetry, a strategy that is similar to Forché’s and Komunyakaa’s I discussed earlier. The repetitive lines makes the deaths vivid, but they also suggest the difficulty poets face when the attacks have been seen hundreds of times – on television and in memory.

The problem Kinnell faces in making poetry out of 9/11 is best understood in viewing connections between artistic and historical accounts of an event. In Private Poets, Worldly Acts: Public and Private History in Contemporary American Poetry, Kevin Stein discusses the perceived differences between “a poem about an event and an historical account of the same event” (6). He points out that objectivity is not the province of either form, especially in light of the debunking of the notion of historical “objectivity” and the “official story” done in much poststructural and postcolonial theory. Stein points out that Barthes’s “The Discourse of History” shows historical accounts as similar to novels, stories, and poems that deal with
history because they all are “constructed from fragments of experience” and pasted together to make “a unified ‘whole’” (6). “When the Towers Fell” is exactly that – “constructed from fragments of experience,” both the speaker’s and others’ experiences told by the speaker. But it is not a unified whole unless one considers a poem itself a unified whole, even when it pastes together perceptions, memories, images, and a frantic monologue.

Kinnell’s poem is different from historical accounts that purport to objectivity in that the experiences the poem includes are consciously subjective, disjointed, and fragmented. He does not attempt to create a unifying or objective narrative. Are poems about events such as this one always political? The answer must be yes in that they encourage readers to understand an event in a certain way. An affirmative answer does not denigrate those who lost their lives, nor does it necessarily suggest that Kinnell is using the event for political ends. It merely suggests that perceptions of the event and works about the event will always be political. There are, however, differences in strategy and political commitment in poems about events, as will be obvious in the next chapter’s discussion of Amiri Baraka’s response to the attacks and in two hip hop artists’ responses I discuss in the fourth chapter. “When the Towers Fell,” moreover, is politically subtle – unlike Baraka’s poem – in its allusion to a searchlight looking for bodies that “always goes on / somewhere, now in New York and Kabul.” Here, Kinnell takes the greatest risk of the poem. He moves from a confused lament for and witness of those who died in the World Trade Centers to those who die in what he implies are needless and meaningless wars and terrorist attacks the world over. More specifically, his implicit condemnation of the war in Afghanistan suggests that there are thousands of innocent dying there as well. However, it seems a risky strategy in that Americans roundly supported the effort to oust the Taliban in search of Osama bin Laden.
Kinnell does not flinch in his lament for those who suffer in tragedy, whether they are Afghans or New Yorkers, and his strategy reveals a willingness to run the risk of alienating part of his audience.

While Kinnell has won many prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize (1983), the next poet I discuss is less visible in the mainstream. Luis J. Rodríguez, a Los Angeles-born Chicano, brilliantly uses personal experience to detail the sociopolitical concerns of a Latina/o community. “Then Comes A Day” (1989), a reflection on his youth as a gang member, portrays experience differently than do the poems I have discussed thus far. The poem holds the memories of past experience up to the light of present experience and explores the ramifications of the two joined together. The speaker of “Then Comes A Day” appears to live by William James’s pragmatist credo: “I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them – I absolutely do not care which – as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude” (207). For James, all principles are potentially revisable based upon new experience. Everything about our experiences and our understanding of the world is subject to change. As James might have said, nothing outside the flux secures the issue of it. In Rodríguez’s poem, the speaker’s present experiences revise his perceptions and force him to reassess both past and present. Even though white, upper-class Brahmin James’s experiences were much different than a poverty-bound Chicano’s ways of (re)organizing experience are strikingly similar.

In “Then Comes A Day,” the speaker returns twenty years later to the neighborhood of his youth to face his violence-filled past. The primary political work of the poem comes in the
speaker’s perceptions of the collision of his past with his present experience. Rodríguez opens the poem with the speaker’s observations from within a confined, decaying space: “The Resurrection Cemetery is an oasis of green, / encircled by the rising structures of the Edison / Utility Company and new roads interwoven through / the felled homes that once flowered with families” (cited in Poetry Like Bread 209-210). The poem begins then from within a calm center, an oasis, the Resurrection Cemetery, which implies that death is the only place where peace can be had amid such decay. The two proper names, the only two in the poem, are also important in that they render the space knowable, local. The speaker’s reference to a specific community makes the poem not a general political poem about poverty and injustice, but a particular political intervention. Further, the proper names can be understood as a strategic use of Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal’s modus operandi: exteriorismo or exteriorism, which included proper names and places and concrete diction in response to the abstract romanticism of much Latin American poetry. In “Then Comes A Day,” the use of concrete diction and proper names locates the poem and the speaker’s experiences in a specific space so that its politics work locally first and globally second.

The first stanza reveals the poem’s abiding concern with experiences of loss and decay and their effects on community, a concern akin to the community-based aesthetic I explore in independent hip hop music in the fourth chapter. Rodríguez’s words for the “old neighborhood” are full of decay: “sprinkled,” “remains,” and “splinters” describe the “wood-frame shacks.” The speaker implies that in this context the issue of community fits under the larger official discourse of “progress,” a largely unquestioned principle often used to quell dissent about urban development projects in American cities. Rather than improve the community, “progress” and “gentrification” have “discolored” the neighborhood. The
community’s new “‘immigrants’” – a term the poet puts in quotation marks to question its meaning – are not poor blacks, Latinas/os, or foreign nationals; these “immigrants” are wealthy, gentrified, presumably white people. These wealthy “immigrants” suggest an urban renewal project prominent in city centers that often evict poor, actual immigrants to make room for wealthy people with no desire to live in mixed communities. Rodríguez’s clever play on the terms “progress” and “immigrants” calls into question the American doctrine of progress as a means to prosperity for all.

The manner in which the speaking “I” first appears anchors the poem’s experiential agency and its attack on “progress.” In the third stanza, the speaker points to the rift between his past experience and his current identity: “It has been twenty years since I roamed these / earthen streets. Coming back, I am as new, alien, / except in the old cemetery where many of my / friends are buried.” Here we see the prominence of the speaking “I,” which is the marker of many poems of experiential agency. Two decades later, Rodríguez’s version of this speaker is the walking dead as well as an “alien,” whose community is found only amongst headstones. His memories are also primarily of loss, as they call forth “so many funerals” and “revenge, / as thick as mud.” Moreover, none of his friends died of natural causes, but rather by drugs, gangs, police, suicide, car crashes, and “diseases / science conquered long ago.” The speaker’s experience is marked by loss, displacement, and isolation, but what the speaker does with these memories matters most.

During the final four stanzas, the speaker struggles with memories of dead friends and with rage produced by justice long-denied. When he says self-consciously, as if to himself, “I have carried the obligation to these names. / I have honored their voices / still reverberating through me,” the speaker is “not simply a phantom manipulator of words but a confused
actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow mirror and transcend” (Ostriker “The Politics” 35). This “confused actual person” is comprised of the lost voices of his fallen friends that course through his body; the speaker seeks both to reflect these voices and to use them to fight for justice for his dead friends. When Forché explains her reasons for writing poetry about the tragedies she witnessed in El Salvador, it is possible to hear the speaker of “Then Comes A Day”: “In my own life, the memory of certain of those who have died remains in very few hands. I can’t let go of that work if I am of that number.” For Forché, this process stems from memories that “arise from the exigencies of conscience” (Montenegro 36) and demand resolute action. While Forché is uncertain of the redemptive value of remembering, Rodríguez’s speaker implies that redemption, while difficult to achieve, is possible.

Ultimately the speaker of “Then Comes A Day” searches for justice and redemption even as the poem implicitly questions whether redemption can emerge out of death and decay. Natural processes suggest that redemption is indeed possible: the earth has the speaker’s dead friends’ fingers, “but not what they touched;” each death is “new life;” from wombs “revolution is birthed / through an open-mouth scream;” and in the final stanza, dawn breaks, bringing “first light” to the cemetery. However, these flickers of redemption occur only on the path of a constant search for justice, a “long, crevice-filled road / I’ve been stranded on all this time, / trying to reach a destination that climbs / uneasy over the horizon.” The speaker’s search for justice is uncertain, dangerous, and partly successful in isolating him in his fight against poverty and community dissolution.

For the speaker, however, this lengthy fight for justice can be redemptive if and when the “revolution” is fulfilled. His realization emanates from his personal memories of loss. Near
the end of the poem, the speaker discovers that “Twenty years come / that don’t make a day, / then comes a day / that makes up / for twenty years.” Two decades of defeat can therefore be redeemed in a single day in which revolution and justice become realities instead of distant possibilities. This revolution is both personal and collective; it facilitates a leap from individual experience to communal experience and from memory to reality. In this process, the speaker “leaps from the narrative to the visionary levels,” a “dominant” strategy of much 1980s poetry famously pointed out by Charles Altieri. For Altieri, this “scenic style” is firmly entrenched in the Romantic tradition where poems often “achieve closure” by a visionary leap. He criticizes this mode because it implies that the speaker’s discoveries are contingent upon events; thus, the self is “created rather than creative” (Self 15). For “Then Comes A Day,” where the speaker’s active experiential agency literally moves the poem, avoiding Altieri’s objections is important. While the poem “achieves” a type of closure in the speaker’s leap, “Then Comes A Day” is based on events in the speaker’s life; declining to use these experiences in order to achieve some type of closure would necessarily discount the primacy of the speaker’s experience and the ways that events shape lives. The speaker’s creative agency is after all an impassioned response to the very conditions of collective experience.

The preceding examples of experiential agency suggest that there are complex social frameworks for agency and that these poets try to elucidate these conditions in their political poems. Experience, for these poets, is a political force and a useful tool for writing political poetry. Further, the conceptions of agency in these poems are evolving, shifting, and constantly in play, which make any poem’s conception of agency difficult to capture. Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory shows that the reproduction of social practices, both positive and
negative, occurs through agents rather than through laws, institutions, structures, or principles; as such, since agents can be unpredictable and precocious and because their experiences can be confusing, this broad framework is always in motion.

Finally, like poems of authoritative agency, which often directly confront readers, the poems of experiential agency I just discussed do not recount an exhaustive range of American experiences. Rather, they are exemplars of a strategy unconfined to a type of experience or to a certain set of political and social engagements. I could have chosen one of numerous Philip Levine poems in lieu of “Then Comes A Day,” as Levine often employs similar strategies and time frames in his speakers’ experiences. Also, many recent and extremely visible poems, such as Eliza Griswold’s “Buying Rations in Kabul” (The New Yorker June 27, 2005) – which I return to in the conclusion in my discussion of formal poems – and Billy Collins’s “Statues in the Park” (The New Yorker July 25, 2005) employ strategies that could be thought of as experiential agency. These two poems rightly imply that political poems that use experience and a recognizable first-person speaker are the most prominent of political poems in the literary establishment and appear relatively frequently in magazines such as The New Yorker and in more academic journals such as The Virginia Quarterly Review. Experience, however, also has a prominent place in poems of migratory agency and in much hip hop, but as secondary factors of agency. Many poems in the next section are similar to ones I have discussed thus far, but with two important distinctions – tone and attitude.

Authoritative Agency

Political poems of authoritative agency are usually confrontational and often didactic; they are insistent, demanding, and unrelenting. Frequently grounded in their speakers’ experience,
they often claim a more encompassing sense of authority from experience than do poems of experiential agency. They challenge their audiences and often condemn the social and political conditions that make such poems necessary actions in the documentation of and resistance to those conditions. These poems, like many politically charged hip hop songs, seldom offer compromise or qualification. For this issue I want to return briefly to Robert von Hallberg, who claims that many poets in the Vietnam era wanted to “speak for the country, even at the risk of rhetorical rotundity.” He imagines that these poets eschewed “gradual change,” compromise, and concentration because these virtues “involve taking seriously differences that can be measured only with patience and discrimination.” Not only does he imply that poets who write authoritative poems lack patience and discrimination, he also claims that their poems “encourage a lack of proportion in political thought” (*American Poetry* 142). He is partly right for the following poems are not patient or compromising.

However, authoritative poems contest von Hallberg’s approach as incorrect and dangerous, even absurd, especially in the contexts of unjust war, attacks on the civil rights movement, and environmental destruction. In these situations, concessions and accommodations are ways to say “just wait,” “be patient,” and “stay in your place,” admonitions long heard by African American civil rights leaders and catalogued decades earlier in the stories of Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* and most powerfully in expatriate African American singer Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddamn.”24 The Black Panthers and the civil disobedience of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s sit-ins and freedom marches were not about concessions, nor are these poems. Von Hallberg’s admiration for poets who “register fine distinctions where other poets and people see none” and for poetry that speaks of “accommodation rather than
opposition” (*American Poetry* 228) clearly did not include many poems by Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, June Jordan, Carolyn Rodgers, Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, Thomas McGrath, Gary Snyder, or Adrienne Rich, whose poems often view accommodation as acquiescence to a status-quo that perpetuates racism, misogyny, imperialism, and corporate power. Yet, poems of authoritative agency do not simply catalogue speakers’ perceptions and feelings. They are often explicit calls to act, to revolt, to protest. They should not be understood solely as protest poems that are protest tools first and poems second, as I hope the following readings make clear.

The first poem I discuss is relentless and confrontational, unyielding and controversial. Nikki Giovanni’s first two books of poetry, *Black Feeling Black Talk* and *Black Judgment*, both published in 1968, contain many political poems of authoritative agency. After numerous readings, “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro” (*The Collected Poetry* 19-20) – hereafter shortened to “The True Import” – stands out to me as a premier example of a uncompromising and authoritative political poem, although not as her most successful. Its authoritative tone is a primary product of how the poem values life. Reginald Gibbons has noted that political poems must take a stand on the value of life itself; he writes, “It is no surprise when a great and political poem like Neruda’s ‘Alturas de Macchu Picchu’ prizes life over death, but a political (and especially a revolutionary) poem must also begin to say *whose* life” (288 original emphasis). In “The True Import” and other poems in Giovanni’s 1968 books, black life is infinitely more valuable than white life; her poems protest against the whites who are racist oppressors with scorn for African Americans. Giovanni’s political position – in many ways one representative of the Black Arts Movement
has created contentious debate, some of which I outline in order to contextualize the confrontational and authoritative rhetoric of Giovanni’s poem.

There are two primary schools of thought in regard to the confrontational and controversial elements of the Black Arts Movement. On one hand, critics such as J. Saunders Redding attack the 1960s Black Aesthetic for what he considers its hate and reverse racism (cited in P. Harper 239). This group would likely view “The True Import” as an unequivocal document of racism and anti-Semitism. This understanding allows – perhaps rightly so – no room for strategic rhetorical intent and generally offers no further depth. On the other hand, critics such as David L. Smith, while they do not apologize for anti-Semitic lines like those in Amiri Baraka’s “Black Art” or in “The True Import,” find a cogent social and political framework for the controversial rhetoric of the Black Arts aesthetic. Smith suggests that Baraka uses the term “Jew” in part because American culture “provides us with an effective language of oppression” but not one of liberation, and that “Jew” brings “emotional force” to the poem. This type of poetic strategy is an example of what Smith calls “an art which outrages by being outrageous” (“Amiri” 243-244). In the same vein, Phillip Brian Harper suggests the primary reason for the use of racist language in the late 1960s: the “enemy” of the Black Arts Movement was the white “establishment” (238) without differentiation and without apology. Smith’s approach provides a de facto consensus point I take from here on: “too often the work is marred by the swaggering rhetoric of ethnic and gender chauvinism” (“The Black” 93), which emblemizes an uncompromising rhetorical strategy pledged to revolution by any means.

The rhetorical strategy of “The True Import” falls squarely within this debate. The poem fails as anything beyond a fierce example of a poem of authoritative agency not because of
its refusal to compromise in a way that would please von Hallberg, nor because the poem is unequivocally racist as Redding would have it, but precisely because of the poem’s unyielding authoritative tone. This tone makes the poem appear as a literal appeal for blacks to kill white people rather than the figurative injunction pointed out by Jennifer Walters in her essay on Giovanni and Rita Dove. Walters implies that the notion of killing in the poem is both symbolic and literal such that the poem can be understood as advocating “‘killing’ the white values imposed on Black America” (214 my emphasis) rather than as indiscriminately killing white people. However, her claim is more wishful thinking than rigorous reading, as a brief exposition reveals.

The inflammatory rhetoric of “The True Import” scars the surface of the page. The lines are short, devoid of punctuation but for two resonant question marks, and very repetitive. The fifty-line poem includes “nigger” twelve times, “kill” twenty-four times, “you” twenty-five times, and “can” thirty times, rhetoric that clearly diverges from most poems of experiential agency. Giovanni’s experiences as an African American woman authorize her to address with vitriol her black male audience. She has claimed that her “vitality” (rather than “role”) as a poet is based on a “trust” borne of her personal experience. According to Giovanni, a poem says of its author “‘I saw this through my eyes’” (Elder 71), which is a claim that resonates with (and justifies) poems of experiential agency and with much of hip hop’s debates about authenticity, which I explore in the fourth chapter. From Giovanni’s experiential authority, the first three lines create a provocative tone: “Nigger / Can you kill / Can you kill.” Because the poem has no punctuation and it relies for its rhythm on the spoken voice, orality, and a fast pace, these lines challenge the audience with impatience. The repeated “Can you” creates an insistent oral demand within a “vernacular performance” as an
“immediate, communal form to be experienced in public” (Smith “The Black” 101). Here, the provocation twice reaches a spoken climax with a powerful “huh?,” not as markers of confusion but as demands for an answer as in a fast-paced game of the dozens that encourages immediate responsive action. These techniques seem to create a demand to act against white people rather than a figurative injunction to “kill” white institutions.

This claim appears fulfilled by Giovanni’s own comments. She has said that this poem concerns her distaste for hearing “talk of going out to die for our rights.” Dying, she says, “is not the hardest thing to do. It’s harder to go out and kill for your rights.” She claims that “The True Import” was written as “a protest against [any] attitude” (Giovanni 374) that puts a premium on dying for civil rights, as in these lines: “We ain’t got to prove we can die / We got to prove we can kill.” According to the poem’s speaker, her audience must learn “to kill WHITE for BLACK.” For many in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, compromise was not an option.  

Malcolm X’s famous declaration “By any means necessary” is the implied framework for many of Giovanni’s 1968 poems, including “The True Import.” But, to reiterate, it is not this attitude that makes the poem less successful than the following Giovanni poem; the poem’s very insistence on direct action makes it incapable of discriminating between action against oppressive white institutions and action against white people in general.

Phillip Brian Harper has shown that “The True Import” “expose(s) the logic of the Black Arts ethic that governs work from the movement generally” in its use of the second-person pronoun and is its complex address to two audiences – one black and one white (240, 247). But, Giovanni’s “My Poem” (The Collected Poetry 86-7), from Black Judgment, is a better example of authoritative agency even if it is less confrontational than “The True Import” and
less representative of the Black Arts Movement. If the speaker of “The True Import” sounds like an insistent but insecure bully peer-pressuring her friends to act, the speaker of “My Poem” sounds like a confident, convincing revolutionary proclaiming an inspiring belief in her cause. The repetition, orality, and fundamentally oppositional character remain but largely absent is the assaultive tone. As such, the first-person speaker plays a major role in “My Poem,” unlike in “The True Import” which contains not a single “I.” Here is the first stanza:

i am 25 years old
black female poet
wrote a poem asking
nigger can you kill
if they kill me
it won’t stop
the revolution

It is important that the speaker names herself and asserts her identity immediately; the lowercase “i” remains so throughout the poem, a technique that suggests the speaker’s identity is secondary to the revolution, to black lives in general. The poem gains a large part of its political vibrancy from the strategy of selflessness, itself a vital element of revolution. The simultaneous assertion and denial of individual experience makes the repetition throughout the poem of the first stanza’s final three lines powerful instead of redundant. For the speaker, revolution needs personal experiences to give it identity, but it needs more a willingness to sacrifice all that is personal.

The primary rhetorical strategy of “My Poem” gives authority to collective agency and action rather than to personal experience. Even the speaker’s poetry is expendable: even if she “never write(s) / another poem” the revolution will continue. Yet, poetry in general is not necessarily expendable just as black lives in general are not expendable. The poem’s
authority comes from the individual’s role as a single cog in a collective action, in which the individual could die but the movement would not. This notion emphasizes not the willingness to kill for the cause, but the willingness to be subsumed by the cause. The revolution, after all, “is in the streets” where people meet and move in unison, not in fifth floor apartments that isolate people from others.

The next poem of authoritative agency has a substantial shift in subject matter, but not one in the poet’s strategy for making a revolutionary political poem. Based solely upon subject matter, political engagements, and disparate personal backgrounds poems by Nikki Giovanni and Gary Snyder make for an odd juxtaposition. However, “Front Lines” – from Snyder’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Turtle Island* (1974) – has a great deal in common with the above Giovanni poems. It is confrontational, albeit more subtle than many poems of the Black Arts Movement, oppositional, and replete with violent images. Like “My Poem,” “Front Lines” foregrounds collective agency, here in the service of environmental activism. And, like “The True Import,” Snyder’s poem uses visceral imagery, a bellicose tone, and an enemy figure in order to create “front lines” in a war of environmental activism. This authoritative and oppositional tone likely led Charles Molesworth, a champion of Snyder’s work, to dismiss the poem and to say that poems like “Front Lines” had been written “better” by Snyder earlier in his career. Molesworth implies that the poem should only be read as an urgent message of environmental doom because it appears among the “primarily celebratory poems” (151) of *Turtle Island*.

“Front Lines” is better understood as an example of what Leonard M. Scigaj calls “ecopoetry” – poetry that engages environmental concerns, considers the environment an equal partner in the sustenance of human societies, and refuses to use nature as a benign
backdrop for human actions, emotions, and thoughts. In ecopoetry, “the preverbal experience is primary,” which results in poems that are the “verbal record” of the “poet’s originary experience in nature” (28-29, 80). As such, the poet’s experiences with the environment are the driving force of a poem’s creation. Experience, therefore, is primary and language is a “flexible tool” used to represent and transform these experiences into poetry (80). While Scigaj’s focus on the “referential base of all language” (5) would seem to take some of the creation out of poem-making, Snyder’s “Front Lines” employs both micro-level metaphors and an extended metaphor. This figurative language has the rhetorical effect of heightening the stakes for the environment. Also, while the poem does not explicitly refer to the speaker’s experiences, readers are likely familiar with Snyder’s history as a logger, fire lookout, and environmental activist.

Snyder begins “Front Lines” by personifying those who harm the environment as rapists and the environment itself as a woman practicing self-defense. The first line depicts succinctly what these rapists cause: “cancer” (18). He thus creates a strangely powerful mixed metaphor of rape and cancer. Like a metastasizing cancer, rapists spread across the land and destroy it. The depictions that follow of the rapists’ actions and their effects on the earth are unequivocal. In the second stanza, their actions are perverse: the “Realty Company” and its clients “say / To the land / Spread your legs.” Here, Snyder compares the depraved abuse of a woman with the greedy abuse of the land for profit. In the fourth stanza the rape imagery is more visceral and figurative. The speaker imagines the bulldozer as a man raping a woman; it “grind(s),” “slobber(s),” “sideslip(s),” and “belch(s)” “on top of” the earth and its bushes, which Snyder pictures as having “skinned-up bodies” (my emphasis here and
below). Snyder paints the wanton siege of the environment by greedy men and their machines as a stomach-turning rape scene.

All rapes are brutal, but they are doubly so when both men and machines are the rapists. The angry and intrusive machines in “Front Lines” point to a disturbingly problematic relationship between humans and the environment. The pathetic fallacies show how much agency humans have ceded to consciousless machines and further suggest that humans have become like machines in their unthinking (and programmed) abuse of the earth. “A chainsaw growls” like a predatory animal and “jets crack sound” overhead as if they are disturbing one of the basic senses of the natural world. Under the influences of such predatory machines there can only be “foul” breezes. More disastrously, the poem suggests that such a proprietary and destructive relationship with the land leads to or is symbolic of the overall “sickness” of America. As Katsunori Yamazato has claimed, Snyder “indicts” an entire civilization “devoid of sensibility of and respect for other life forms, mindlessly engulfed in its own destructiveness” (235).

The poem is most encompassing and oppositional when Snyder draws a parallel between environmental destruction and sick country. When the “jets crack sound overhead,” the speaker responds with the startling “it’s OK here” as if the jets represented a sustainable natural order. The remainder of this stanza, though, shows a much different reality: “Every pulse of the rot at the heart / In the sick fat veins of Amerika / Pushes the edge up closer.” This “edge” is the cancer that “swells” across the land in the first line of the poem; America is rotting due to our disregard for the earth. This “rot” is not only visible on the earth’s scarred surface; it is also an internal condition that makes sick the earth’s circulation, its ability to sustain itself. Here, Snyder is prescient in his claim that America’s development is
not sustainable, currently the buzz-word and development strategy par excellence among environmental scholars and activists. “Front Lines” suggests that America’s reckless development practices are unsustainable and violent.

Snyder’s poem is obviously confrontational, especially in its visceral, unforgiving imagery and in its extended metaphors of rape and war. But the way that Snyder frames this opposition in terms of political agency is his most effective technique. Rather than simply outrage readers, many of whom are probably already environmentally conscious, Snyder opens and closes the poem with the language of collective agency. In the first stanza, “we feel / a foul breeze” from the cancer. This “we” makes the outrage collective and the agency needed to oppose it collective rather than individual. As most environmental organizers claim, a single individual modifying her behavior, consumer decisions, or practices will not impact environmental issues. If I refrain from driving a car it will have no discernible effect on global climate change. Any such effect would result only from wide scale policy decisions and enforcement – collective action.

Snyder concludes the final stanza with a call to collective action in the front lines of environmental activism. On one side of this well-marked “line” is “a forest that goes to the Arctic / And a desert that still belongs to the Piute.” On the other side, bulldozers, chainsaws, and realty companies rape the land. The line that must be drawn is obvious. The speaker imagines a collective of environmental defenders standing with the forest and desert behind them. According to the speaker, it is “here” that “we must draw / Our line.” Snyder’s “we” both creates an authority more powerful than a single speaking “I” and a collective and mobilizing framework for environmental action in opposition to rapists who do not allow the “trees [to] breathe.” This rhetorical strategy foregrounds collective action and, in the words
of Scigaj, it works “to revise perceptions and coax sustainable actions in readers” (277). If
the poem is successful in equating those who harm the environment with rapists, then it
suggests a potential shift in how we think about humans’ relationship with the environment.

Like Snyder’s “Front Lines,” Adrienne Rich’s “For the Record” (Your Native Land, Your
Life 1986) employs an authoritative, confrontational strategy. Rich, unlike Snyder, is well-
known for politically and ideologically charged poems that have displeased a variety of
critics and reviewers, some of whom Anne Herzog discusses in her article on Rich (258-261)
and to whom I refer readers in search of sources more critical of her work. While “Front
Lines” implicitly challenges readers to act as a collective to protect the environment and to
revise their perceptions of its destruction, “For the Record” forces readers to account for their
actions and to revise perceptions of inaction. But, in both poems, an authoritative tone, not
necessarily borne of experience, shows that readers cannot blame the environment they live
in for their problems. Instead, both poems challenge readers to see themselves as sources of
the world’s problems.

The authoritative tone of “For the Record” is generative of Rich’s insistence on “her power
to know the other’s pain and the injustices that produced it” (Gilbert 155), a hallmark of
poems of authoritative agency. The poem’s speaker, therefore, does not hesitate to call forth
those injustices and blame readers for them, nor does she flinch in spanning the globe to
catalogue horrors, injustices, and apocalyptic upheavals. The first five stanzas interrogate the
human tendency to project anger upon the visible manifestations of problems rather than the
ultimate source of injustice: ourselves. In doing so, the poem gives no hint of qualification or
excuse. Rich shows that attributing poverty, war, riots, environmental devastation, suffering,
and oppression to neutral things, such as clouds, stars, mountains, trees, houses, buildings,
and barbed wire, is absurd. The poem further suggests that the environment is but backdrop to human choice: “if the mountains spewed stones of fire into the river / it was not taking sides / the raindrop faintly swaying under the leaf / had no political opinions” (31-2). Natural resources are also innocent, but not the people who manipulate them for violent means: “The trees didn’t volunteer to be cut into boards / nor the thorns for tearing flesh.” Man-made structures are incidental to social injustice as well.

By showing that “things” are forcibly involved in terror as instruments of human cruelty, the poem places blame directly on each human “whose signature / is stamped on the orders, traced / in the corner of the building plans.” The evocation of the South African homelands of Apartheid (“barbed-wire / stretched around crouching contemporary huts”) suggests that terror is often systematically conducted under the auspices of convention and order. In its totality, this epic catalog of injustices is a streaming sequence unbroken by a period, a strategy used to overwhelm the reader with a sense of injustice. However, it also makes the problems global; as an unintentional side-effect, individual action seems futile in light of pervasive, global suffering.

For Rich, attributing injustice to human conventions, material creations, the environment, and social and political practices instead of to human actions and decisions is cowardly and dangerous. “For the Record” – the title gives her claim rubber-stamped (and ironically, institutional) authority – insists that all individuals are responsible, including those who do not act. It is unacceptable, according to the poem, for any person to respond to human atrocity with a dismissive that’s just the way the world is and there’s nothing I can do about it. In this poem, the issues are decidedly not too big for people to do something about them, which somewhat belies the lengthy catalog of problems the speaker outlines. The poem
implies that even those who cause no harm but do nothing about these horrors are just as worthy of blame as those who commit the acts.

The final seven lines of the poem make clear Rich’s rhetorical strategy, authoritative agency, and desire to incite readers to act:

Look around at all of it
and ask whose signature
is stamped on the orders, traced
in the corner of the building plans
Ask where the illiterate, big-bellied
women were, the drunks and crazies,
the ones you fear most of all: ask where you were.

Here Rich directly challenges readers to ask who is responsible for the suffering catalogued in the poem. “Look around at all of it” commands readers to act by refusing to ignore suffering. This command reaches its pinnacle in the final line in Rich’s use of apostrophe (“you”), which is the crucial cog in the poem’s rhetorical strategy even though it does not appear until the final line. Two critics help to understand how apostrophe operates in Rich’s work. For Terrence Des Pres, Rich uses apostrophe to subvert the humanistic “we,” which he says has been “one of the more successful illusions of high culture” when used to refer to “all of us or ‘man’ in general.” He points out that this “‘we’ has always been the property of an educated elite, male, white, and eurocentric” (357-358). Unlike Snyder, who uses “we” in “Front Lines” even though the poem works against “man’s” destruction of the environment, Rich uses “you” as a direct injunction to readers and to challenge the ways we speak of the collective, of community. For Alicia Ostriker, on the other hand, feminist poets use apostrophe “to challenge the neutrality of the reader” and to address “a ‘you’ who is perceived as an antagonist” (“Dancing” 215). In “For the Record,” Rich claims that no
individual is neutral in the suffering of others; further, “you” are an antagonist if you do not act against injustice.

By grouping “you,” the reader, with the marginalized and stereotypically destructive elements of society, the poem styles all people as responsible for fighting social ills. As such, the poem attempts to induce guilt in its readers. Anne Herzog suggests that “For the Record” evokes shame and guilt in the last seven lines, but not in a “self-righteously accusatory or self-flagellating” manner. Instead, she claims that “they are spoken in a communal context” (267). While the final lines are a communal call to action by means of an individual recognition of complicity, they are undoubtedly accusatory and self-righteous. The speaker does not ask herself where was I? and thus remains above contempt. Nick Halpern explains that Rich’s “prophetic mission” places her in but mostly above her poems: “She writes poems in which she imagines herself as a solitary figure in the sky.” While she does write poems in which she “represents herself as a figure in the city, in the streets,” Halpern notes, “too often” she is “not like someone who is leading an everyday life but someone who is walking the earth” (184-185). This seems to me exactly the dynamics of “For the Record.” The speaker-poet simultaneously walks the earth and hovers above it in the sky, seeing all and demanding that those who lead “everyday” lives take responsibility for what they do. Her blistering, authoritative tone attempts to spur readers to forgo indifference for socially motivated action, but it may turn off some readers. This didactic quality is present in many poems of authoritative agency and may seem heavy-handed to these readers. Yet Rich’s strategy makes it difficult for even these readers to extricate themselves from the implications – the juxtaposition of “the ones you fear most of all” with “you” forces readers to reconsider their actions as indistinct from fear-invoking villains.
If “For the Record” is confrontational, authoritative, and righteous, Amiri Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America” is all of these with added doses of aggressiveness, defiance, and controversy. Many readers are likely aware of the controversy surrounding the poem, so it is unnecessary to review with depth Baraka’s career as a “persistent chronical of controversies, most of them having been provoked by Baraka’s own deliberately incendiary polemics” (Smith “Amiri Baraka” 235). The poem, written in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, was first delivered to the public on September 20, 2002 at the Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo, New Jersey, where it created a maelstrom of complaints and accusations, most of which focused on the poem’s commentary on Jews and Israel. At the time of the reading, Baraka was Poet Laureate of New Jersey. Governor Jim McGreevey, two years prior to his own controversy, asked Baraka to resign. Baraka refused to do so, creating more controversy with his remark that “If you criticize Israel, they hide behind the religion and call you anti-Semitic” (Purdy B1). While it would be disingenuous to ignore the poem’s criticism of Israel or its lament for the genocide of European Jews during the Holocaust, I focus on its rhetorical strategy and authoritative agency. While such an approach could be seen as ignoring, overriding, or even exacerbating the anti-Semitism, it is important to look at a poem that ignited such controversy due to its rhetoric in a study of the rhetorical strategies of political poetry. Inflammatory rhetoric, after all, is a crucial element of many political poems of authoritative agency and many in the Black Arts Movement, although it is folly to ascribe to what James Smethurst calls a “great-man theory in which Baraka’s work becomes a metonymy for all Black Arts literature” (261). This poem, moreover, is meant to incite, to be an uncompromising, authoritative utterance that may anger many.
Overtly confrontational poems such as “Somebody Blew Up America” are unusual in contemporary American poetry. Many hip hop artists – albeit fewer in the mainstream on major record labels than in the late 1980s and early 1990s – have taken up the mantle assumed in the 1960s by GI poets opposing the Vietnam War, and by Black Arts Movement and Chicano Movement poets opposing the institutionalized racism of the United States. Baraka’s poem was not published until the summer of 2003 by the *African American Review* (37.2/3), which I believe is attributable in part to its controversy and its rhetorical form. Not only is the poem’s strategy relatively atypical in written poetry now, its length (233 lines) departs significantly from many contemporary political poems, unless it is considered as a spoken-word performance piece or a hip hop song, which are usually longer than written poems. Further, in the United States, unlike in many countries in Latin America, where poetry is a “fugitive means of expression” and offers the practical advantage of being easier to copy, distribute, memorize, and chant or perform publicly than fiction (DeShazer 13), Baraka’s poem, especially given its use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), has more in common with many hip hop songs, the American “fugitive means of expression” par excellence.28 Even so, its form, length, and rhetorical strategies make it a sprawling litany of accusations, collapsed historical contexts, and conspiracy theories, all of which combine to make it a fascinating, provocative mess.

Surprisingly, “Somebody Blew Up America” does not open with controversial lines. The first seven lines, which differ in style and voice from the rest of the poem, serve as prologue and de facto justification for its oppositional nature. In prosaic English the speaker says matter-of-factly that “All thinking people / oppose terrorism / both domestic / & international,” but that “one should not / be used / To cover the other.” These calm, measured
lines are enclosed in parentheses to separate them from the invective that follows; they seem a strange prefatory apology for that invective. Cleverly, though, they proclaim the speaker’s opposition to the terrorist attacks, but set up his opposition to “domestic” terrorism, which alludes to his attacks on American corporate, imperial, and governmental powers.

After the prefatory remarks, Baraka proposes an oppositional agenda that confronts the official public discourse about the attacks. He sketches a somewhat abstruse enemy whose claims he questions throughout the poem: “They say it’s some terrorist” (my emphasis). Even though “they” is difficult to parse because Baraka collapses a large variety of global, historical, and geopolitical contexts in order to assume a far-reaching purview of oppressive and violent forces in the last three centuries, it certainly refers to the white, Euro-American imperial power the poem rebels against – perhaps more specifically the military-industrial-corporate complex. One aspect of “they” is pointed out explicitly by rap group dead prez – currently the only revolutionary, political hip hop group with a major label record deal (the rest record on independent labels) – in the song “‘they’ schools,” which catalogues the abuses and shortcomings of the American public school system (*lets get free* 2000). Dead prez notes that the “same people” who run the school system run the prison system; it is no wonder, they suggest, that more African Americans find a home in the latter than in the former. For Baraka’s speaker as for dead prez, it is dangerous to trust anything “they” say or do.

Beginning in line twenty-five, after the speaker doubts that “American terrorists” such as the Ku Klux Klan, Skin heads, “the them that blows up nigger Churches,” Trent Lott, David Duke, Rudy Giuliani, and Jesse Helms were not responsible in some way for the attacks, Baraka begins the major rhetorical strategy of the poem. Line twenty-five reads, “They say
(who say? Who do the saying.” This parenthesis remains open for the entire poem and structures nearly every line thereafter. All but 44 of the final 207 lines of the poem begin with the word “who.” These lines combine relative clauses and questions that simultaneously refine the actions and history of “they” while also questioning them. Some are very specific, such as “Who genocided Indians,” “Who invaded Grenada,” and “Who blew up the Maine,” even as others are general, such as “Who tell the lies,” “Who the biggest executioner,” and “Who make money from war.” It is important not to read each “who” as either an interrogative pronoun that introduces a question or as a relative pronoun that introduces a subordinate clause. Baraka brilliantly does both at once – defining “them” also questions “them.” The repetition of “who” clauses creates an owl sound that mimics a night owl keeping watch on events that pass under her perch.

The repeated “who” phrases feature historical figures, most of whom are revolutionaries, civil rights activists, assassinated leaders, leftist freedom fighters, and the pariah figures who oppress them. The huge number of names – both heroes and enemies – is overwhelming, but it give the poem a strange texture of both historical particularity and undirected rant. David L. Smith claims that Baraka’s poems are best as political art when they are “grounded in historical particulars” and worst “when based on abstractions, generalized attacks, and broad exhortations” (“Amiri Baraka” 236). Somehow “Somebody Blew Up America” manages to do both on a large scale. September 11, 2001 gives the poem particularity while the preponderance of historical and geopolitical contexts fulfill Smith’s claims about Baraka’s least successful political poems and potentially compromise his credibility as a rational voice. However, the numerous historical and geopolitical contexts are strategically convincing in one important manner – to show the global reach and influence of American
power. The poem’s implicit text suggests that the world’s disastrous events over the last century contain American fingerprints. When the speaker simultaneously asks and declares “Who killed” Malcolm X, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Steve Biko, Salvador Allende, Che Guevara, Laurent Kabila, Patrice Lumumba, Huey Newton, Medgar Evers, and Rosa Luxembourg, it sounds like conspiracy theory, but also like the result of a white capitalist global power structure that destroys progressive voices. Even if Baraka cannot claim that the CIA was directly responsible for the assassinations of these figures, he can declare that American policy, influence, and fingerprints were on the weapons that killed them.

Baraka’s sweeping indictment of American power and racism covers not only slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the infamous incident at Tuskegee, but also American corporate and cultural imperialism. This scathing critique includes a functional rejection of a corporate concept of ownership, especially as it concerns natural and human resources. For the speaker, there seems to be little difference between the ownership of slaves and the ownership and exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of the rich few. Lines such as “Who own the oil,” “Who own the soil,” “Who own the air / Who own the water,” and “Who own the ocean” suggest a malicious intention to commodify the very materials that sustain life and to control every citizen’s fundamental ability to breathe and eat. Further, lines such as “Who define art / Who define science,” “Who own this city,” and “Who make the laws” imply that American corporate powers control the structures that define the world and determine right and wrong. Further, “they” “make money from war” and “want the world” to be “ruled by imperialism and national / oppression and terror / violence, and hunger and poverty.” These lines sum up Baraka’s strategy – to subvert the official public discourse in a war on terrorism that America fights to bring freedom, democracy, and peace to the
oppressed places of the world. Instead of a “war on terror” and “war on poverty” the poem claims that there are wars to maintain terror, poverty, oppression, and the vast power inequalities they enable.

The sound effects of “Somebody Blew Up America,” especially its AAVE, repetition, and rhyme, oppose the authority of elitist, commodified corporate language (unless of course one claims that hip hop language has been thoroughly commodified, a claim that I hope to dispel in the fourth chapter). Three lines near the end of the poem illustrate these features; here the speaker ridicules three prominent black conservatives for their support of these imperial power structures: “Who do Tom Ass Clarence Work for / Who doo doo come out the Colon’s mouth / Who know what kind of Skeeza is a Condoleeza.” First, “Who do” and “Who know” highlight one prominent feature of many AAVE varieties, including those used in hip hop culture – the absence of the 3rd singular suffix –s. In Standard American English (SAE), these lines would read “Who does” and “Who knows.” By eliding these suffixes, Baraka not only implicitly challenges public discourse delivered in “proper” English, he also uses the dialect of young African Americans in the hip hop community. Additionally, in using “Who do” and “Who know” instead of SAE Baraka increases the poem’s orality. “Who do” creates a fluid rhyme whereas “Who does” sounds stilted; “Who know” combines with other similar structures to create a fast-paced invective meant to be read aloud. Baraka is also unafraid to employ simple – although here he regretfully taps into hip hop culture’s relatively pervasive misogyny – internal rhymes such as the one between “Skeeza” and “Condoleeza” in order to increase oral effects. AAVE, rhyme, repetition, and syntactic parallelism anchor the poem, elements that have long structured political speeches, sermons, and revolutionary pronouncements. Finally, however, Baraka uses all of these techniques almost as ends unto
themselves rather than to engage his audience initially in order to turn their attention to some greater conclusion.

Baraka erases historical, cultural, and geopolitical differences and speaks of events about which he does not have intimate experience in order to create a sweeping indictment of American misdeeds. His authority is partly borne of his experiences as a member of a minority group subject to oppression, but it is more a product of a refusal to compromise or to fear retribution. The differences between this poem and Kinnell’s 9/11 poem are obvious and need no further explanation, as will be its differences from the hip hop songs about 9/11 I discuss later. The differences between Kinnell’s poem of experiential agency and Baraka’s poem of authoritative agency beg a question: Are there political poems that successfully combine experiential and authoritative agency?

Synthesizing Experiential and Authoritative Agencies

Carolyn Forché’s “Return” (1981) successfully combines the strategies of experiential and authoritative agency. This first-person, lyric-narrative, free verse poem is the premier example of embodied agency. It synthesizes first-person experience, memory, and poetic authority via an interplay of voices that Michael Greer calls a “dialogue in verse” showcasing “the poet’s self consciousness about her own political role” (172). The primary rhetorical strategy of “Return” is a staged dialogue interrogating experience, authority, and their consequences on an individual’s political commitments.

“Return” and the other poems in The Country Between Us, which was the Lamont Poetry Selection for 1981, have been written about by a number of critics. I attempt to depart from critics who have been interested primarily in the poem’s content, politics, and insight into war’s effects on its intimate observers. Instead, I am primarily concerned with the poem’s
rhetorical strategy and embodied agency. Some background is necessary, though, to introduce the poem. As I mentioned earlier, Forché was as an Amnesty International aid worker in El Salvador during the late 1970s and early 1980s during that country’s civil war. The United States government provided aid, intelligence, and funding to El Salvador and its paramilitary death squads, who were likely responsible for tens of thousands of desaparecidos (disappeared persons), most of whom were innocent peasant farmers sympathetic to the leftist guerillas. The specter of communism encouraged American support for the brutal military dictatorship and left the country ravaged by a confusing and bloody twelve-year civil war. The backdrop for “Return” is the speaker-poet’s re-entrance into life in the United States after her two years in El Salvador.

These two disparate worlds keep the poem in a state of suspension where any separation between time and space is dubious. The poem radically disorders these two worlds, so that they vector into and out of utter difference and utter sameness. Forché’s sophisticated uses of voice and authority in the poem make this suspension possible. The poem has two alternating first-person speakers – one the poet, the other her friend, Josephine Crum, to whom she dedicates the poem. The speakers directly address each other using the second person “you” so that their conversation appears somewhat staged and exaggerated. This strategy stresses the dialogue between the two friends in order to remove the conversation from public discourse to a quiet interchange between old friends. When Josephine first speaks, in the thirteenth line, she says, “So you know / now, you” (my emphasis). In the next four lines, she repeats “you” five times, each phrased in order to repeat what the reader has not heard the speaker-poet say. Phrases such as “you know,” “You’ve seen,” and “You’ve heard” show Josephine speaking for the poet about her experiences in El Salvador. This technique allows
Forché to avoid outright demagoguery, the arrogance of bragging about hardship survived, and the consequences of sensationalizing violent events. When the conversation is between friends, readers overhear instead of being the subjects of pompous preaching.

This dialogic strategy allows the poet to maintain authority without proselytizing or presuming to speak for others. Forché is acutely aware of the questionable ground of authority she trod in writing of the horrors in El Salvador. She has spoken at length about the creation of a quasi-fictional, first-person voice as speaker of a poem. This voice, she says, stages a “self” that speaks of “its own sensitivity,” which may be “an inappropriate act, if the self derives its authority from its privilege over the ‘other,’ whether this be the privilege of knowledge or experience, and whether the ‘other’ be the implied reader or the one to whom the poem is addressed” (Montenegro 35). For Forché, rejecting a hierarchical relationship between a poem’s speaker and its audience and subject allows the poet to write of what she has seen and experienced. Also, she uses a poetic self that exists on an equal basis with those she writes for and about – the poem does not disclose a “privilege of knowledge or experience.” The voices in “Return” reveal their fragilities and obsequiousness when they reject the privilege of speaking to an audience; they assume that there is no audience. Instead, the two voices speak to each other, which gives each of these voices the authority of friendship. After all, it is easier to be frank, condemnatory, and demanding with a friend than with the public at large.

Despite Forché’s claims, this conversation between friends is certainly an inequitable one. Of the poem’s 125 lines, the speaker-poet has 47 lines while Josephine has 78 lines. On the surface Josephine’s perspective as an American greatly outflanks Forché’s perspective influenced by her years in El Salvador. However, many of Josephine’s lines restate what the
poet has presumably told her about the time she spent in El Salvador. Thus, the poet’s experiences in war-torn Salvador give the poem its primary agency, even if that agency is first passed through the prism of a conversation in which the friend, and not the speaker-poet, takes on an authoritative agency.

The speaker-poet’s and Josephine’s manners of speaking vary greatly even though they both speak of the poet’s experiences. The speaker-poet attempts to reconcile her experiences in El Salvador with her life in the United States. She struggles to make compatible the fear of driving “those streets with a gun in my lap” with the order, cleanliness, and comfort of “the Safeway” and the “fine white / hands” of American men. The stark contrast between the two worlds leaves the speaker unable to talk about her experiences – “all manner of speaking has / failed” – and seemingly unable to “keep going.” The conflict between order – “clean toilets” and “iced drinks” – and disorder gives the speaker vertigo and a shattered equilibrium, making her realize that her suffering is inextricably linked with the suffering of Salvadorans, not North Americans. Unable to rest, to speak, to feign normality in a supermarket, or to connect with her fellow Americans, the speaker-poet is overwhelmed by guilt. Guilt and grief create a hyper-responsibility that extends to the most mundane realities – a trip to the supermarket and simple conversations with North Americans: “I cannot, Josephine, talk to them.”

Despite the poet’s inability to talk to other North Americans from her state of suspension, the poem speaks when the poet cannot. The speaker-poet’s inability to speak belies the material reality of the poem itself because the poet’s personal experience in both worlds forms a bridge between the people of El Salvador and the people of the United States. Like the oppressed Salvadorans, the “remnants” of the speaker’s life “continue onward” despite
her inability to give sufficient voice to her experiences. In associating the speaker-poet’s plight with that of Salvadorans, the poem collapses the gap between two worlds. Poetry, then, creates *The Country Between Us* – the poem is the bridge that brings together two countries, two friends, and two divergent experiences. This notion of joining two different Americas – south and north, poor and rich, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking – is greatly expanded in the poems of the third chapter.

If the speaker-poet’s voice is uncertain and timid, Josephine’s voice is authoritative. She speaks directly of the brutal events in Salvador that the poet witnessed but largely refrains from speaking of in “Return.” Josephine, then, is the mediator between the poet’s experience and the audience. She speaks of two irreconcilable worlds – not between the United States and El Salvador – but within El Salvador that the poet saw first-hand – “the pits where men and women / are kept the few days it takes without / food and water” and the “cocktail / conversations on which their release depends.” These contrasting experiences reveal the violent detachment of those in power from the people who are the subjects of “torture reports.” The conspicuous repetition of “men and women” – once in the body pits and once in the position of detached observers who “read / torture reports with fascination” – makes explicit the connection between the suffering and the comfortable, even while those in power imagine themselves as apart. This strategy makes reading “torture reports with fascination” grotesque and absurd, as if the “men and women” are reading their own torture reports with detachment.

Here the poem explores what Greer calls “the re-representation of world as spectacle” in the American media. He argues that images of violence from distant places allow viewers to remain detached from injustices. Josephine’s later lines interrogate what Greer calls the
“conversion of history into a domestic spectacle” (175). When Josephine addresses the speaker-poet about North Americans’ taste for violence she says to her: “Go try on / Americans your long, dull story / of corruption, but better to give / them what they want.” Josephine does not hesitate to tell the speaker-poet in harsh detail what Americans want. According to her, Americans want details about: “Lil Milagro Ramirez, / who after years of confinement did not / know what year it was, how she walked / with help and was forced to shit in public;” “Jose…waving his stumps / in your face, his hands cut off by his / captors and thrown to the many acres / of cotton;” and “a labor leader…cut to pieces and buried.” The cunning strategy in these lines simultaneously denounces sensational, ungrounded violence as perverse entertainment even as Josephine gives readers exactly what she denounces.

Because these disturbing lines are given to Josephine, Forché is able to deflect accusations that she has succumbed to sensationalism. But, if the speaker-poet is able to escape blame, Josephine’s authoritative, condemnatory tone does not allow other Americans to do so. Josephine’s condemnation suggests a similarity to Rich’s “For the Record” – that all Americans are complicit in the suffering of Salvadorans and that a superficial interest in their misfortune is disgraceful. In his essay on Forché, Larry Levis claims that when art shames its readers, it makes them “more conscious, more human, more capable of bearing pain and perceiving the beauty of bearing it” (11). Yet, are shame and guilt unsustainable short-sighted ways of pursuing social change and justice?

While Josephine indirectly chastises North Americans, she reserves her direct attacks for the speaker-poet’s insularity and arrogance. In her first lines, Josephine tells the poet not to “flatter” herself because all people suffer. In the last thirty-one lines of the poem – Josephine,
it is important to note, gets the final word – her attack on the speaker-poet deconstructs
American complacency and privilege. Here, Josephine’s authoritative tone is at its most
tenacious. She says to the speaker-poet:

Your problem is not your life as it is
in America, not that your hands, as you
tell me, are tied to do something. It is
that you were born to an island of greed
and grace where you have this sense
of yourself as apart from others. It is
not your right to feel powerless.

Privilege, according to Josephine, is a cultural convention that makes Americans believe we
have the capacity to live as though any individual is capable of insulating herself from the
well-being of others. For Josephine, rugged individualism is a myth built on fear and
selfishness. Lee Zimmerman writes that “overcoming” disconnection and helplessness in this
poem requires “opening to voices and visions that, rather than substantiating the self, threaten
to demolish it” (96), which is exactly what Josephine does here. She demolishes the speaker-
poet’s sense of an isolated self “apart from others;” she also crushes the speaker-poet’s self-
indulgent lamentations of her difficulties after returning home. The speaker-poet’s earlier
complaints pale to Josephine’s incisive remarks about the poet’s “hands,” which connect to
Jose’s hands “cut off by his / captors and thrown to the many acres / of cotton.” Unlike Jose
and other Salvadorans, the poet and many other Americans still have hands with which to
fight injustice. For Josephine, people with “hands” have no “right to feel powerless” – this
right is reserved for those who are actually powerless.

Forché’s rhetorical strategy in “Return” is sophisticated and artful. The poem’s
experiential agency resonates with the credibility of blood, agony, and hardship in El
Salvador, but without romanticizing her experience. She utilizes a clever conceit in her
willingness to give authority and control to Josephine, who admonishes the speaker-poet for her arrogance and complacency. These techniques circumvents what Charles Altieri’s suggests is the transparency of lyric poetry. For Altieri, a poem can claim that its speaking “I’s” experience represents human experience in general, but the speaking “I” is always on a “constructed stage” that reveals its status as an imaginative creation. Consequently, poetic authority is always provisional (Self 22). In “Return,” Forché’s strategy implies that the poet does not have this authority, but her friend does, and in abundance. While the speaker-poet’s agency is derived from her experiences of extremity, the poem’s agency is largely derived from the authority embodied in Josephine’s powerful recriminations and recontextualizations of the poet’s experiences. Alicia Ostriker’s essay on postmodern poetry of witness best sums up the crisis Forché deals with in “Return”: “the simultaneous impossibility of objective witness and of subjective wholeness” (“Beyond” 39; original emphasis). Forché’s rhetorical strategy makes this point resound as she needs Josephine’s struggle for “objective witness” and a speaker-poet struggling for “subjective wholeness.”

**Summary and Conclusions**

When I was defending my MA thesis on the political poetry of Forché and Rich several years ago, one of my committee members asked me how I would respond to the notion that poets such as Rich and Forché often unwittingly subscribe to a romantic heroism that makes the poet appear brave, unyielding, and risk-averse in her pursuit of justice. These poets, he suggested, tacitly support a conception of romantic individualism that their poetry largely works against. I responded somewhat naively with Forché’s justification for writing about events she witnessed in El Salvador: “If I did not wish to make poetry of what I had seen, what is it I thought poetry was?” (“El Salvador: An Aide Memoire” 257). While Forché
certainly justifies a political poetry of experiential agency, does she also reductively justify the appropriation of others’ suffering, the poeticizing of the horrific, and romanticize the poet’s role as dramatic witness? While she gives authority to personal experience and a justification to agency borne of experience, she also suggests that poetry is a type of referential reportage. But, most crucially, for present purposes, her quote points to a conservative, reactionary element present in much contemporary political poetry, especially poetry of embodied agency – many political poets want the self back. After the doubts poststructuralism and postmodernism have cast on the “self” and the work poets such as John Ashbery, Jorie Graham, and the Language poets have done to fracture, question, and disorder the “self,” many political poets want to make sure that the self, individual identity and personal experience – and the agency and authority derived from them and the sense of community they are part of – remain vibrant elements of poetry. The poems I discussed in this chapter insist that using the self’s experience is a primary strategy for making poetry political.

Forché’s justification, with all its bravado and swagger, is bettered by Robert Hass’s response to a similar question; if I were able to travel back in time I would use his qualified claim for a political poetry of witness in lieu of Forché’s. Hass has often said that presenting images of justice is the best way for poetry to be political, a claim that echoes Martín Espada’s later in this study. In a 1991 interview with The Iowa Review, Hass said that the task of poetry is to “make images of a livable common life” and “to make images of justice,” “ideal images,” “outraged images” or, he continues haltingly, to “just do witness.” Hass echoes Stevens’s claim that a poet must choose between resistance and evasion when he says that a poet must choose either discomfort or silence. Hass says, “It’s [witness] part of the job
of being a poet, but you’ll always feel a little bit like a voyeur and a tourist writing those poems. And a little uneasy reading them. But the choice is that or silence, and so you do it.” For Hass, who perhaps unwittingly takes on a more subtle embattled stance, poems that engage sociopolitical issues and that deal with justice, witness, and outrage will produce conflicted “uneasy” feelings in both poet and reader. And there is the rub: we are uncomfortable when we read about disturbing and upsetting things. As long as the speaker-poet understands that and inscribes it in her poem, it will be difficult to suggest that the poet is assuming an embattled, heroic stance. However, as I hope the following chapter shows, poetry does not need the self for it to be political. The poems I write about in the second chapter on equivocal agency are not poems of witness and often not of outrage, but they are definitely not the province of silence.
CHAPTER TWO
Equivocal Agency

Hamlet: Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”
‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
-William Shakespeare, Hamlet 1.2.76-86

There is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed.
-Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried (78 original emphasis)

Introduction

If the poems of embodied agency in the first chapter have models of agency that style personal and communal experience as politically and poetically viable, the poems in this chapter largely bypass questions of specific experience. Political poems of equivocal agency do not focus on the first-person experience of an event or on the retelling or memory of an experience. Nor do they focus on the authoritative voice that comes from a faith in one’s knowledge, experience, or righteousness. Instead they generally center on a speakerless scene, create a fantastic picture, or imagine a world that may or may not exist referentially. They exaggerate, stretch, invent, and play with the world as it is in order to create worlds as they may be in the future or as they seem in the present. In Hamlet, Shakespeare foregrounds
a dialectic between appearance and reality, between “seeming” and “being.” In his response to Gertrude, Hamlet expresses discomfort with her refusal to acknowledge that his grief is authentic rather than staged. However, Hamlet’s words also reveal a certain irony in that he consciously takes on and performs an antic disposition throughout the opening acts of the play even though he claims that he has “that within which passes show.” The infinitives that define the play – “to be” and “to seem/appear” – are useful for beginning to understand how political poems of equivocal agency work. In these poems there is no strict “to be;” instead, they utilize something akin to what Tim O’Brien calls a “surreal seemingness” that stages the power of imagination and calls into question any strict divide between truth and falsity, being and seeming.

The poems I discuss in this chapter problematize direct notions of experience, while utilizing equivocation, paradox, strangeness, irony, and rhetorical guises. The strategies of these poems reveal the importance of the speakerless scene, abstract language, non-specific diction, and non-concrete references. These are often the poems that intimidate students looking for definitive answers about poetry and for answers to questions such as *What does this poem mean?* and *What is this poem about?* Often these poems defy simple interpretations, which poses a challenge to any critic attempting to tease out patterns of rhetorical strategies between poems. Further, while these poems are clearly political, their content, especially for a poem such as Joy Harjo’s “A Postcolonial Tale,” may require a more intense interpretative endeavor, a deeper engagement from readers, and a willingness to suspend disbelief and strict notions of a referential world. As such, the subject may be injustice or poverty writ large rather than specific.
In the introduction to *Against Forgetting*, Forché points out that poetry of witness often uses paradox and equivocation. She suggests that the language of the everyday can be inadequate for poems of witness in light of the violent and repressive contexts in which they are produced. She writes that when the “quotidian has been appropriated by oppressive powers” so that language becomes unusable for protest, poets must pursue truth through indirection (41), a claim that connects subtly with Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s notion that poems that highlight their differences from normal speech can be the most politically adroit. So, too, poems of equivocal agency generally rely not on first-person speakers poeticizing experience, but on indirection and on transpersonal experiences, sometimes evoked via parodic, staged, distant, and multiple, discontinuous voices.

While political poems of embodied agency such as Michael S. Harper’s “Deathwatch” and Galway Kinnell’s “When the Towers Fell” refer to verifiable personal and historical events, the poems in this section may not refer to a discrete event or to a historical period. For example, the two Charles Simic war poems I discuss do not refer to a particular war or sociopolitical context; in contrast, most of Yusef Komunyakaa’s Vietnam poems are bounded by that war and a soldier’s experience of it. Further, Robert Bly’s poems about the Vietnam War do not rely on experiential agency from combat experience. Instead, his protest poems are surreal, imagistic pieces with startling juxtapositions and strange disconnections from any simple referential reality.

There is also a sharp divide within political poems of equivocal agency. While many have an obvious referential context that can be discerned from the poem’s content, subject, title, or strategic placement in a volume of poetry, others do not have a specific context or subject. To utilize the above examples, Komunyakaa’s Vietnam war poems appear in a volume of
exclusively Vietnam poems, *Dien Cai Dau*, where the title is in Vietnamese. Further, the front cover features photographs of soldiers, the back cover a photograph of Komunyakaa in uniform, the epigraph is dedicated to his brother “who saw The Nam before” Komunyakaa did, and the first line in the volume is “We tied branches to our helmets” (“Camouflaging the Chimera”). In contrast, even though many readers may know that Simic grew up in German-occupied Belgrade during the 1940s, “Paradise Motel” (*A Wedding in Hell* 1994) and “Cameo Appearance” (*Walking the Black Cat* 1996) – the poems I discuss here – do not have specific contexts as part of their rhetorical strategies. These poems gain the primary force of imagination and the breadth of the poet’s creative potential in their suspension from any specific place and time and in their divorce from realistic personal experience.\(^{32}\)

There are two primary rhetorical strategies in poems of equivocal agency. The first strategy is *comprehensive*. Here, the poet’s chief strategy is to divest the poem of identifiable context in order to create a more encompassing and inclusive vision of a sociopolitical reality or issue, which is not to suggest that these poems are authoritative statements on sociopolitical realities. They are largely imaginary interventions; as such, they are not bound by the limitations of strict context-formed discourse. To continue with the war example, these comprehensive poems are about war in general or some aspect, result, or effect of contemporary warfare. The second strategy is *particular*. These poems are directed at and comment on a specific context, situation, or dynamic. They are not about war or about poverty; they are about a war in Vietnam or poverty *in* Detroit. There is, however, a substantial area of overlap between the two subsets of equivocal agency. Both types of poems employ similar strategies, but their intended interventions are divergent. A poem that speaks to racism in general uses a different strategy and perhaps has potentially different
effects than one that speaks to racism in South Africa. While I do not wish to hold onto a strict universal / local dichotomy, it is useful to differentiate between poems that aspire to general political work and ones that comment on specific contexts, even if it is impossible to predict or measure the political effects of art.

For both types of equivocal agency, the speaker is usually separated from the limitations of personal experience and the conventions that implicitly govern poems of memory, witness, and interiority. Unlike political poems of personal experience, these poems often employ what Jane Frazier and Charles Molesworth call “disembodied” narrators. In an essay on W.S. Merwin, Frazier writes that “Merwin’s narrators betray little or no personal identity and often seem as if they are voices speaking free of the body” (341). Although the rhetorical effects of Merwin’s strategy differ from those of the poems in this chapter – Frazier suggests Merwin’s narrators evince a desire “to join the self with the universal” (342) – the concept of disembodied narrators illuminates the ways that poems of equivocal agency move away from the readily identifiable, prominent, involved, fully embodied, and mostly first-person narrators in poems of experiential agency. Poems of equivocal agency move away from the narrative impulse that forms much of – though not all of – the shape and logic of experiential agency.

In addition to a move away from the narratives of first-person experience by an identifiable speaker, poems of equivocal agency also move away from the readily recognizable world. Robert Pinsky suggests that such a move might be part of the poet’s “responsibility” – to re-present the world to readers from a unique, wholly new angle, one that does not square with simplistic views propagated in various media and widely accepted as accurate and unimpeachable. Pinsky asserts that “before an artist can see a subject” she
must first “transform it” in order to “answer the received cultural imagination of the subject with something utterly different.” Pinsky believes that, as I mentioned in the introduction, transformation “comes before everything else” in the writing process (“Responsibilities” 9). While it is debatable whether or not this step is first, utterly transforming the referential world is a key rhetorical strategy in poems of equivocal agency as well as a key element of poetry as countercultural discourse.

Poems of equivocal agency are part of a larger movement in scholarship and literature since the 1960s. I want to make a brief digression to tease out this relationship. “Transforming” traditional referential history and “the received cultural imagination” became imperative for many writers beginning in 1960s. Since the decade that saw the assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and others many postmodern fiction writers and poststructural literary and cultural theorists have rigorously scrutinized the validity of previously unquestioned historical accounts and the role of language in not only reflecting but in creating history. A key philosophical underpinning of much postmodern theory and literature – a suspicion of the “official story” and its master narratives, especially those that emerged out of enlightenment reason and the narrative of progress – helped to shape an environment in which many academics, journalists, fiction writers, and poets began to reexamine history and narrative in their works. The “breakdown of the ‘official story’ created space for other stories and other voices” (Geyh et. al. xiii) in texts as diverse as Gloria Anzaldúa’s revision of the myths that have informed understandings of “America” and Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961). In Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), Anzaldúa suggests that a new oppositional consciousness develops only by revising
received historical traditions and rewriting religious and cultural myths that subjugate women and indigenous people.

One of the most powerful results of the questioning of the “official story” and received historical accounts has been the advent of nuanced, creative models of history and memory that diverge from appeals to experience and strict western logic. These models take as a given that historical models always omit something important, whether it is marginalized and oppressed voices or geopolitical complexities. In Latin America “el boom,” which included fiction works by Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia, Julio Cortázar in Argentina, and later Cristina Peri Rossi in Uruguay, among others, introduced realismo mágico, magic (or magical) realism. Magic realism combines elements of literary realism with elements of the supernatural. The fiction of magic realism favors the “truth of sensation” over the “truth of fact” and stresses the supernatural ties of the past to the present, both of which suggest that history is never really past and that people often feel historical forces such as racism and colonialism as sensations as much as “facts.” Their alternative visions of historical forces countered the oppression, dictatorial power, disappearances, and skewed histories promoted by many Latin American governments.

Many poems of equivocal agency take the motives and ideals (if not the style) of magic realism as their implicit baseline. For them, the truth of sensation is more compelling and powerful than the often co-opted and erased facts of experience and event. As such, their rhetorical strategies often (but not always) merge with American novels such as Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony (1977), Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1986), and Sherman Alexie’s Reservation Blues (1995). These novels utilize techniques similar to Latin American magical realism to “thematize the fragmentary, disjunctive, and often contradictory nature of
historical evidence…rather than presenting history as a continuous, unified story” (Geyh et. al. xxiv). Similarly, the narrator of O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story” (The Things They Carried 1990) distinguishes between “story-truth” and “happening-truth” where a story about an event that includes the sensations and feelings of its participants can be more truthful and insightful than the rote retelling of what happened during an event. The “what happened,” O’Brien implies, always misses the spirit of events and the marks they leave on participants.

In addition to these alternative models of history and experience, theoretical accounts of history such as that put forth by Walter Benjamin in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” appeal not to experience but to a feeling or mood concerning history and the wide-ranging effects of historical events and movements on people. These alternative approaches to history and collective experience have generally been utilized in fiction and theory. However, such techniques are not simply within their purview – many political poems, especially those I discuss in this chapter, forgo unified narratives and traditional historical perspectives, preferring instead surrealism, magical realism, equivocation, visionary strangeness, and multiple rather than singular authoritative voices. The poems in this chapter, moreover, showcase the limitations of traditional historical approaches. In Private Poets, Worldly Acts: Public and Private History in Contemporary American Poetry, Kevin Stein discusses poetry “which acknowledges the inadequacy of ‘official’ or ‘objective’ histories” and which “juxtaposes its own in opposition” (19) to those histories. While poems of equivocal agency sometimes utilize their “own” histories, they usually and implicitly acknowledge that “official” histories are inaccurate representations that often serve dominant cultural and political interests.
While these poems loosen the strictures of history and realistic narrative, the most important rhetorical move they make is one away from the potential limitations and pitfalls of lived experience as the decisive arbiter of knowledge, vision, and political power. Experience, they seem to say, must never bind poetry. It must remain independent from “reality” and thus mysterious. While poststructuralism reveals flaws in western logic, a brief digression into the claims and failures of trauma theory helps illuminate some important techniques in poems of equivocal agency. According to trauma theory, traumatic events are not remembered in the ways that normal events are. A traumatic experience, the theory goes, is a “missed” experience that is inaccessible to normal memory and thought processes. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). While I do not intend to belabor the intricacies of trauma theory, I do want to suggest that a possible factor in some critics’ aversion to poetry of witness and experience is partly due to the suspicion of experience and memory caused by the prominence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma theory, and the issues surrounding recovered memory. In addition to critics’ explicitly stated concerns about poetry of experience as a mere mimetic exercise in which the poet is a simple recorder of the world, trauma theory suggests that “experience” itself is a questionable signifier.

Trauma theory, though, is rife with problems. In “The Trauma Trap,” in the March 2004 New York Review of Books, Frederick Crews outlines some major difficulties with trauma theory that render many of its main claims void. He summarizes some problems with recovered memory: How is it possible that some memories (those recovered during
regression) are more legitimate than others? How is it that the memory of trauma does not stand apart neurologically from normal memory? Crews points out that there is zero evidence of memory repression in any study of holocaust survivors. On the contrary, he shows that memories of traumatic events are actually better remembered than ordinary ones. Most importantly, the idea that an agent cannot know his or her experience must be firmly abandoned. Our own experiences must not be thought of as inaccessible to us; especially in poems of equivocal agency that depart from “true” experience, we must first be able to know our experiences before we depart from them.

Although I believe it is imperative to discount any notion of trauma as a “missed” experience unknowable by an agent except through recovered memory therapy or psychotherapy, the connections between trauma theory and the rhetorical strategies of poems of equivocal agency are instructive. In We Heal From Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa, and the Poetry of Witness (2000), Cassie Premo Steele claims that trauma is not recorded in the usual, narrative way we remember experiences; instead, they are “encoded” in images and feelings that give us “insight into the questions of ‘experience,’ so often deadlocked between praise from humanist feminists and rejection from poststructuralists” (3-4). Like the memory of a traumatic experience, which may be disjointed and disordered, the political poems in this chapter often shift and displace any simple narrative of experience. They often fracture – or refuse to use – the unified, singular speaking voice and opt instead for the primacy of images, sensations, and sounds. As Steele claims, poems are like memories in that they are comprised of images, feelings, rhythms, sounds, and physical sensations of the body as “evidence” that transforms experience into poetry (5). Poems of equivocal agency highlight and cut short that transformation, refusing to move completely from image into
narrative coherence or closure, preferring instead to leave images open and ungrounded in personal experience.

Poems of equivocal agency, therefore, are usually indirect; they tend to approach a subject – indeed, the very notion of a subject – indirectly, from oblique angles. In contrast to Forché’s “The Colonel,” Kinnell’s “After the Towers Fell,” Snyder’s “Front Lines,” and other poems of experiential and authoritative agency in which the speaker approaches the subject in a relatively transparent and direct manner, the poems in this chapter approach their political subjects with a set of very different lenses. Whether in the surreal space of a Simic citiescape, or in the haunted, ubiquitous presence of ghosts on the reservations of Alexie, or in the vague, hovering threat in Charles Wright’s America, these poems forgo certainty for atmospheres redolent with suspended presence.

These poems are thus often unbounded by strict temporal and spatial considerations, and are therefore removed in part from any conception of agency that explains experience. Any account of human agency, for Anthony Giddens, has two imperatives: “An adequate account of human agency must, first, be connected to a theory of the acting subject, and second, must situate action in *time and space* as a continuous flow of conduct” (2 my emphasis). Giddens outlines precisely why and how the political poems of this chapter challenge the frameworks for agency. In these poems there is often not a singular, identifiable acting subject with the characteristics of a real person in the world. They do not contain a continuous flow of actions in time and space. Because they are freed from the constraints of human agency – which must always operate in time and space not in discrete moments but continuously in response to conditions, situations, and other actors – these poems are able to make grander, more spectacular (and often more imaginative) political statements.
Comprehensive Equivocal Agency

The poet whose work best represents the politics of comprehensive equivocal agency is Charles Simic. The prevailing critical sentiment about his unique voice centers on its enigmatic, minimalist, riddling, and surreal character. Bruce Weigl, editor of *Charles Simic: Essays on the Poetry*, has written that Simic “remains an enigma, even within the eclectic tradition of postmodern American poetry.” His poems, moreover, differentiate him from other contemporary poets because of their “particularly inclusive and worldly vision” (1), a quality also key to most comprehensive political poems of equivocal agency. Further, the speaker in many Simic poems is “oddly anonymous, a self without a self – a passerby, comfortable in his self-imposed exile” (Engelmann 46). And Simic, who grew up in Belgrade, Yugoslavia during World War II, does not “assault” readers with his “personal history” (Sack 134). As such, he does not heroicize his experiences of war and fear. His experiences may inform his poetic sensibility, but indirectly rather than in concrete details; Lisa Sack points out that Simic is “a master of indirection” who “selects and juxtaposes a few striking images” (134) in order to create mysterious, anguished atmospheres. In the poems I discuss here these atmospheres are sustained through indirection, surreal images, and a detached, parodic tone rarely used in poems of embodied agency, where the tone is usually grave and urgent.

The first line of “Paradise Motel” anticipates a vast, irreproachable world where no one is spared torment. Two simple phrases separated by a semicolon join utterly violent, demented, and irreconcilable spheres: “Millions were dead; everybody was innocent” (75). In a world without accountability and marked by hyperbolic absolutes the speaker is a distant, unreal, cloistered figure. He says calmly: “I stayed in my room.” This juxtaposition suggests that
“paradise” in the contemporary world is a suspended purgatory, an illusion of disinterested, bourgeois individualism and that denouncing responsibility for the world is cowardly. These three terse, clipped phrases are hallmarks of Simic’s minimalism, elision, and refusal of geopolitical context. The poet provides no details that render the scene local, knowable, and thereby less frightening. Helen Vendler claims that a Simic poem often creates “an unbearable tension [that] darkens the air” and turns readers into “prisoner(s) within its uncompromising and irremediable world” (“Totemic Sifting” 119-21). And so it is in the first line and a half of “Paradise Motel.”

Another figure – the de facto foil to the speaker – enters the poem in the second part of line two. Even though the poem is without specific context, “The president / Spoke of war as of a magic love potion” (my emphasis). As Vendler points out, Simic tends to use “menacing” definite articles (“Totemic Sifting” 119), and this one here cedes all parodic and ironic authority to this president. Further, if the speaker is essentially without identity, without use – in a mirror his face appears to him as “a twice-canceled postage stamp” – this president is the president, the merged identity of every president in history who has spoken of war as a solution to the world’s woes. The president’s “magic love potion” is seemingly able only to make the “refugees crowding the roads” “vanish[ed] / With a touch of the hand.” The most unnerving aspect of this disappearance is the speaker’s parodic tone – not only do the refugees vanish, but it happens “naturally.” Does this tone imaginatively manifest the depraved wish-fulfillment of countless presidents who see refugees as thorns in their sides? Even more menacing than this implication is the one that “History” – personified by Simic as a carnivorous predator – has eaten the refugees as it now “licks” “the corners of its bloody
Simic’s vision of this horrifying world of “paradise” is so expansive that it includes the very lens through which we understand that world – history.

“Paradise Motel” has a biting, parodic tone that renders absurd war, isolated individualism, and any notion of contemporary “paradise.” After all, every paradise requires large swaths of disaster, horror, and abuse elsewhere in order to make it identifiable as a paradise, each of which is necessarily apart from less-desirable places. Further, entering paradise requires an individual to isolate oneself from those parts of the world where refugees suffer and presidents make them disappear. Finally, a paradise such as a postcolonial island in the Caribbean is only paradise to visitors, not to the indigenous people who drive taxis, clean hotel bathrooms, and live in shacks.

“Cameo Appearance” also has a comic tone, but one that evinces desperation. Its first-person speaker plays a more prominent role, but he is an unreal amalgamation of all war-torn refugees the world over. In other words, the speaking “I” does not rely on individual experience, but on a depressingly comic and surreal displacement characteristic of refugee experiences in general. Vendler’s assertion years ago that Simic is “the best political poet, in a large sense, on the American scene” is borne out in this poem. For Vendler, Simic’s poems are “more terrifying in their human implications than explicit political documentation” (“Totemic Sifting” 131-2) based on experience, ideological commitment, or the direct protest of sociopolitical ills. Simic’s grand vision is thus haunting precisely because it is not grounded in experience or context.

“Cameo Appearance” has many similarities to “Paradise Motel” – a conspicuous absence of geopolitical context, a war-torn world, a caricatured leader, and refugees – but it has a more prominent first-person speaker. However, this speaker is again a non-entity who cannot
recognize himself in the world of the poem. “Cameo Appearance” takes its cue from a Theater of the Absurd as practiced in the mid-twentieth century by – among others – Antonin Artaud in France, Edward Albee and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in the United States, and Osvaldo Dragún in Latin America. The poem shows the speaker playing a stereotyped role as “one of the / Bombed and fleeing humanity” from a war-torn “burning city” (97). The speaker, moreover, quite literally performs this role. The poem begins with a self-consciously absurd assertion: “I had a small, nonspeaking part / In a bloody epic.” Immediately, Simic creates a remarkably expansive context; the speaker laconically confuses any divide between reality and fiction, dramatic actors and real-life agents. In the process, Simic suggests an aspect of all social relations. Giddens writes: “All social reproduction is grounded in the knowledgeable application and reapplication of rules and resources by actors in situated social contexts…social systems are chronically produced and reproduced by their constituent participants” (114). In Simic’s poem, the speaker disturbingly applies the rules of the refugee in the “situated social context” of a burning city; he ironically and sadly reproduces the refugee’s nameless, placeless suffering. Within this “epic” the speaker’s place is so miniscule and insignificant that he vanishes before his own eyes as the reader soon sees.

The overarching conceit of the poem, over and above the speaker’s role as refugee, is the speaker’s viewing of the fleeing refugees on a videotape. He is showing the videotape of the incident “to the kiddies,” but even after rewinding the tape a “hundred times” the kids cannot “catch sight” of the speaker/refugee. Despite the speaker’s certainty – “I know I was there” – in the words of “honest” Iago, the villain of Othello, there is no “ocular proof” to confirm that the speaker was actually present. Throughout the poem Simic parodies the American media’s tendency to play and replay film clips of distant disasters. In his criticism of the
media’s “re-representation of world as spectacle” – as I discussed earlier in regard to Forché’s “Return” – Michael Greer suggests that the American media’s penchant for continually broadcasting sensational images of violence desensitizes viewers (175). In “Cameo Appearance” these disturbing, violent images are archetypes of poor, suffering indigenous people; refugees and victims of war or famine, they plead to the camera, to their god, or to a rich country halfway across the world. In looking for himself on the videotape, the speaker thinks he is “squeezed between the man / With two bandaged hands raised / And the old woman with her mouth open / As if she were showing us a tooth / That hurts badly.” Everyone who watches network news in the United States has seen these two people. Their poses and ministrations are well known, but the people themselves are not. They are simply images of suffering, abstractions in services of an idea – compassion for residents of East Timor, Rwanda, Niger, or Bangladesh, people whom Americans will never see face-to-face.

In the final calculation, for all of its disturbing strangeness, the poem’s Theater of the Absurd stages a world not unlike our own. The “great leader” may or may not be who he purports to be. When the speaker sees the great leader “in the distance,” he wonders if it is indeed the great leader, or “a great actor / Impersonating our great leader.” As in the referential world, it is difficult to sort out what is real from what is fabrication, especially in a country in which one of our most revered presidents was a Hollywood actor.

The speaker’s question also shows a keen understanding of Shakespeare’s most pliable conceit: the *Theatrum Mundi* (Theater of the World) trope, in which “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*). Shakespeare put this notion to great use and so does Simic; in “Cameo Appearance” the world of suffering is a stage viewed from afar. Tragically, however, in the final stanza the speaker points out that disaster
is not within the purview of this trope. In this burning city “one take / Is all they had time for.” What is really absurd, according to “Cameo Appearance,” is that after the planes leave the burning city, the cameras leave as well. The refugees stand “dazed in the burning city, / But, of course, they didn’t film that.” When the sensational events are over and the requisite images captured, those wielding cameras leave and the suffering continues unabated, unnoticed.

Simic’s rhetorical strategy in these two poems is inclusive. He elides context and specificity for a rounder, ironic indictment of the ravages of and justifications for contemporary warfare. If either of these poems had a definite geopolitical context – if the president of “Paradise Motel” had been General Augusto Pinochet, Robert Mugabe, or Slobodan Milosevic – they would forfeit a large amount of their power to unsettle and disturb. As such, these poems rely on the reader’s experiences and on her ability to imagine a context, rather than on the speaker-poet’s experiences. In her seminal work on closure in poetry, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith asserts that a poem “cannot be regarded as totally independent” of the “reader’s extrinsic experiences,” which include experiences of “language itself.” She continues, “It is upon our past linguistic experiences that poetry depends for its most characteristic effects” (97 original emphasis). Therefore, a reader brings her experiences to a reading, thus making the lack of specific leaders in Simic’s poems not problems but encompassing ways to reference readers’ experiences. Further, a reader’s experience of language – of imagination really – allows the poets in this chapter to approach subjects elliptically because they assume that readers have imaginations with which to leap and bound alongside the poems.
In “A Postcolonial Tale” (The Woman Who Fell From the Sky 1994), Joy Harjo imagines imagination as a primary tool for social change. In her customary form – the prose poem – Harjo’s first-person plural speaker delivers platitudes about creation and imagination. Unlike Simic’s terse, laconic lines, Harjo’s long, prophetic lines style imagination as having the political power to change the world. In his essay on Harjo, Azfar Hussain calls Harjo’s “highly political imagination” a “weapon in an anticolonial national struggle” that works to “decolonize our very spirit otherwise hegemonized” (52). Harjo uses imagination as – in the words of Frantz Fanon – “a historical process of becoming” (28) and the postcolonial tale she writes describes the process of recreating community not through television and guns but through dreams and imagination. As such, “A Postcolonial Tale” re-imagines myths – first the creation story and second the colonial encounter, presumably between white settlers and Native Americans.

Like other poems of comprehensive equivocal agency, Harjo opens the poem with an immense, global horizon, but with a difference – she makes it commonplace and grandiloquent: “Every day is a reenactment of the creation story” (104-105). Because the “creation story” happens daily, it is the source of knowable community, but it also remains a source of mystery. In the poem’s second sentence, “We emerge from / dense unspeakable material, through the shimmering power of / dreaming stuff.” The language here is elusive, fantastic, and consciously enchanted, but not haunted as in Simic. We know immediately that the speaker, who remains a “we” throughout, is concerned with community, collective experience, and a world of imagination. However, this story or “tale” is not the key to unlocking another world or an afterlife – “This is the first world, and the last.” In the poem’s
cosmology, the stakes are high because there will be no redemption in a world beyond this one.

While imagination may be highly compartmentalized in a white Euro American worldview, in many Native American traditions it is closer to boundless. Goodman, amongst other critics, points out that Harjo, a Muskogee Creek Indian, uses Native American traditions “that expand narrow definitions of political poems” (49). As part of her mythopoeic ethos she uses iconic figures such as the trickster crow; indeed, in the imaginative construct of “A Postcolonial Tale,” “we” are never “far from the trickster’s bag of tricks.” The trickster, most importantly, is seemingly able to restore order to the postcolonial world by freeing it from western Enlightenment reason. Thus freed, the community is at liberty to imagine itself anew.

Before there is a possibility of redemption via the imagination, there has to be a fall, not from original sin, but from the sins of colonization. In “A Postcolonial Tale,” the colonial encounter itself is a new creation story and a grand heist. During colonization a new world is created and cultures are transformed. The people, Harjo writes, were “stolen” and “put / into a bag carried on the back of a white man who pretends to own / the earth and sky.” The people in the bag – trapped in the postcolonial world – fight until there is a hole in the bag, then fall to the earth even though they are “not aware of falling.” Once they have punctured the “bag” of colonial rule, they land “somewhere near the diminishing point of civilization” where schoolchildren are “learning subtraction with guns,” a likely allusion to the American obsession with guns. When the speaker imagines creation and the resulting world this way, she does not – as Goodman points out about another Harjo poem – show any “nostalgia for a mythic Native American past before the Europeans stepped onto the continent” (50). The
poem does not simply reject western creation myths and culture; instead, it re-imagines the colonial encounter as one that can be reinvented and redeemed through imagination. Moreover, “every day” the creation of the world is “reenacted” by us and is thus ameliorable by us because “we” are not merely captive agents incapable of acting outside the “bag.”

The final third of the poem has a critical change in voice similar to the sestet of an Elizabethan sonnet. This three-stanza resolution gives a “solution” for the problems of colonialism and the world created by it. Its chantlike repetition suggests a building optimism. The two lines that signal the change indicate that imagination is both divine force and human product: “The imagining needs praise as does any living thing. / We are evidence of this praise.” Even though imagination is a transformative force that helps children shun violence (“children put down their guns”) and all people take on a compassionate community-based ethos (“We imagined tables of food for everyone”), imagination’s products (“story” and “song”) are unable to “translate” either “the full impact of falling” or “the power of rising up.” Imagination, then, is the primary means to developing and sustaining community, but imagination must be acted upon, set in motion by people who have the potential to fall and to rise up. The poem thus carves out space in the world where imagination can flourish. Even though imagination can be transformative, it alone does not comprise the world in which we live. Stories and songs cannot describe the “full impact” of colonization. Without this void, this undefined space, imagination is a non-starter. There has to be some space that is always undetermined, even by imagination – this is the space in which imagination necessarily operates.

The poem ends with the notion that “the imagination” – notably a collectively held single imagination – “speaks with / us,” “sings with us,” and “loves us.” The community’s
relationship with “imagination” is reciprocal; people give to imagination and receive from it. Two important things they receive are acceptance and compassion. “A Postcolonial Tale” thus sets in motion what Hannah Arendt discusses in her work on political policy formation. She claims that any agent is capable of forming her opinions with regard to others’ interests. A political opinion-generator, moreover, must negotiate the chasm between her “own interests” and “the interests of the group” to which she belongs and the ability to make herself “the representative of everybody else” in the “world of universal interdependence.” She implies that the failure to account for others’ interests is partly due to a “lack of imagination” (Between Past 241-242). Taking this notion at face value and extrapolating from political opinion formation to the formation of opinions in the larger social world forces us to consider the possibility that racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and any difference constituted as conflict (rather than merely as difference) is partly due to a lack of imagination. The violence of the colonial encounter, then, is a failure of a powerful group of people to imagine themselves as another group of people. Imagination bridges cultural and political gaps, in much the same way that Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson says that Harjo’s poetics “creates a rich sense of historical and spatial interconnection across tribal and cultural lines” (107).

If Harjo’s poem can be understood via the implicit context of colonial encounters the world over and especially in North America, Derek Walcott’s “The Season of Phantasmal Peace” (The Fortunate Traveller 1981) is even more expansive. It is probably the most strategically and politically comprehensive of all the poems in this chapter. Although Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, two of the United States’s foremost poetry critics, Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, have been skeptical both of his voice and
his rhetorical strategies. As such, their comments are apt starting points for reading “The Season of Phantasmal Peace” as a premier example of the strategy of equivocal agency. Bloom claims “bafflement” over whether Walcott has “developed a voice altogether his own, the mark of a major poet,” or has adopted a “composite voice of post-Yeatsian poetry in English” (1). Vendler expressed a similar sentiment about the originality of Walcott’s voice shortly after the publication of The Fortunate Traveller. His voice, she wrote, “was for a long time a derivative one;” his “place,” she continued, is not a poem, “but rather an essay in pentameters” (“Poet of Two Worlds” 25-26), presumably about colonialism and the oppression of black Caribbean islanders. “The Season of Phantasmal Peace” renders these criticisms – which are born from a naïve notion of individual genius divorced from the sociocultural and historical contexts in which a poet works – null and void. The poem, after all, does not utilize a recognizable first-person speaking voice, nor does that voice hold forth as an essayist but as an imaginative visionary able to create beauty out of tatters.

In Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics (2000), Paula Burnett explains that Walcott’s poetic “impetus has been to devise an inclusive solution” (8) to contemporary problems stemming from colonialism, racism, and sociopolitical conflicts. Walcott, she claims, is “an idealist” who “believes in the openendedness of possibilities” (9). Part of this idealism and proclivity for inclusion, she points out, “repudiates the tragic view of the human condition that sees it as unable to transcend the patterns evinced by the past.” As such, Walcott “recognizes that the dream can lead the reality into amelioration” (8-9). As Burnett’s claim makes clear, Walcott’s vision is not piecemeal but holistic; his aesthetic is not exclusionary but encompassing. For Walcott as for Harjo, the imagination can do political work; in it inheres the possibility for positive, transformative change. In the words of Paul Breslin, then,
“The Season of Phantasmal Peace” is an “affirmation of the transcendent” (320). It supplies the ultimate in “inclusive” solutions and “open-ended” possibilities.

As it has been in the previous poems of this chapter, the first line of Walcott’s poem is an instructive tone-setter. And like the three previous works, this one opens with a comprehensive vision. However, Walcott begins with a “then” statement that suggests an absent antecedent: “Then all the nations of birds lifted together” (464-465 my emphasis). The simple addition of this one word – especially in conjunction with “all” – immediately puts the poem on an epic scale, as if the events detailed in the poem are the culmination of (or response to) centuries of war and violence. Finally, the lines insinuate, all the nations of the world are united in a moment of peace. The first line also initiates one of the poem’s main symbols – it is reasonable to read “nations of birds” as symbol for “nations of people.” Birds, though, are less heavy-handed and are blessed with the power of flight, and indeed, when many birds fly, they fly in flocks. This extended metaphor is perhaps the primary reason that Vendler calls it the “best” poem in The Fortunate Traveller, because she worries about any poet who is invested in a certain “subject” that may result in his use of language simply as “ornament to his message, the rhetoric for his sermon” (“Poet of Two Worlds” 32, 26). This poem is light not heavy-handed, visionary not directive, beneficent not exculpatory, and its speakerless voice is transparent rather than histrionic.

Walcott’s united birds miraculously lift what normally cannot be lifted but by the rotation of the earth around the sun – “the huge net of shadows of this earth.” These shadows, which appear in different form throughout the poem, are “in multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues.” Again the metaphor is apt – like birds, the human nations of the world speak countless languages. This unified action is a “lifting together” in which speakers of different
languages do not have to compete with each other for space, resources, or power. Because shadows are obscuring agents, once they are removed from the earth, everything is clear – there is no “dusk, or season, decline, or weather.” All that is left from the vantage point of the “wingless” earth dweller for this moment is a passing “phantasmal light” that no shadow “dared to sever.” Burnett points out that this “lifting movement is an extraordinarily physical evocation of flight, and of transformation to weightlessness, figuring a visionary translation from body to spirit” (204). Burnett’s keen reading of the poem focuses on its “roots” in Revelation, its “remaking [of] the apocalyptic story,” and most crucially for her, its connections to and commentaries on the title poem of *The Fortunate Traveller* (204). But, for my purposes, the biblical symbolism of dark and light and the juxtaposition to “The Fortunate Traveller” are of less concern than the poem’s strategy for using visionary imagination to do political work.

Not everything in “The Season of Phantasmal Peace” manifests unmitigated hopefulness, unity, and cooperation. According to Breslin, Burnett paints Walcott’s aesthetic as “open and forgiving towards all” as well as “immune to the callow temptations of racial or political anger” (324). For Breslin, Walcott’s “polystylistic language” must not be understood as acquiescent, but as an ongoing struggle to coalesce anger to inclusion, something we see on display in “The Season.” Breslin seems right, especially when Burnett points out that the poem “models a benign paradisal vision” (204). Her claim does not plumb with either Walcott’s description of the birds as warriors – “battalions…waging peaceful cries” – or with the final vision of the poem in which the “season” of love and light lasts only “one moment.” Burnett does rightly claim that the poem “offers only a glimpse” (204) of a transformed, peaceful world, but there is also a subtle insinuation that the people of the earth just do not
get it. The second stanza begins with “And men could not see” and continues with “they
could not hear.” Perhaps there is something other than flying that humans cannot do that
birds can – seeing and hearing the beauty and peace that is possible on earth by working
together.

Ultimately, the language of Walcott’s poem is lyrical, melodious – phrases such as
“betrayals of falling suns” and “the pause / between dusk and darkness” are beautiful,
stylized, and romantic. Walcott’s rhetorical strategy foregrounds the mystery and beauty
inherent in this miraculous moment of “phantasmal peace,” beauty that is transitory,
ephemeral. There is nothing certain about a moment of absolute peace in a world wracked by
war, famine, greed, genocide, intolerance, and terrorism. This moment is almost necessarily
carried across the earth by those things that inhabit the skies, not by those who live in “dark
holes in windows and in houses,” but by those things that pass in and out of our lines of sight
with ease and speed. Despite the almost totally disembodied visionary moment of the poem
and the lack of palpable human presence, especially that of an identifiable speaker, the poem
ends with an “exquisitely judged note of balance, between the depressing truth of degenerate
human nature and the hopeful, encompassing truth of a greater compassion” (Burnett 205). In
the final line, Walcott explains why the peace lasts only “one moment”: because “for such as
our earth is now, it lasted long.” His strategy, then, at the end, re-dramatizes the
comprehensive, global context. He keeps his vision hovering above the earth, rather than on
the earth in a specific city or country.36

The last two representatives of comprehensive equivocal agency exhibit two very different
elements of contemporary political poetry. The first, Michael Palmer’s “Sun” (Sun 1988),
demonstrates the difficulty of poems that may be unrecognizable as political; the second,
Charles Wright’s “Against the American Grain” (*Harper’s* August 2004), shows that timely editorial placement can help create the political import of a poem. Both suggest the importance of readers in the reception of a poem’s politics.

There is no question that reading Palmer’s poetry is challenging work even for experienced readers. In an interview with Lee Bartlett, Palmer himself said that it is “a lifelong proposition” for him to “understand” his own work. To buttress this remark, he cites Robert Browning’s comment about one of his own poems: “When I wrote it only God and I knew what it meant; now only God knows” (129). Palmer’s poetry threatens what he calls the simple referentiality of the “Anglo-American empirical tradition” in which a poem is “a place in which you tell a little story, the conclusion of which is at the bottom of the page just where it is supposed to be” (126). Like the Language poets, with whom Palmer shares an “attempt to bring into question surfaces of language [and] normative syntax” (129), he wants to work against dominant strains of American poetry, especially poems of experiential agency (those poems with first-person speakers, clear narratives, and embodied experience). Further, he laments poems that “posit” a self and inadvertently create “a poetry of personality;” instead, he says, the “self” must be “transformed through language” in order to hold onto the “mysteries of reference” (130-131, 127). Despite his desire to move away from narrative and representations of experience, Palmer is far from disinterested in politics. As Eric Murphy Selinger points out, Palmer is “interested in the way politics might inhabit poetry as something more than subject matter, particularly when by ‘politics’ we mean something like ‘atrocity’” (7). All of this suggests that if politics are to enter Palmer’s work, it will be in an equivocal, shifting, and nearly unrecognizable manner, redolent with mystery and strange surfaces.
Palmer’s comments about how narrative works in his poetry – it “shimmers at the edge of the page” in “scraps” (Bartlett 132) – can also be applied to his poetry’s political content. It is elusive and appears only in “scraps.” Even so, “Sun” stands out as one of his most obviously political poems, but it is not immediately obvious how it is political. Palmer seemingly wants to frustrate any simple notion of politics in a poem. More so, he wants to avoid romanticizing any artistic or political foray into the realm of human atrocity. As I pointed out in the first chapter, there is an inherent danger in romanticizing one’s experiences of extremity. Palmer has derided “poets’ shuttle down to Nicaragua and so on to get material,” which he says is “a betrayal of what is to be meant by the political.” One of the many problems with these “shuttles,” he says, is that poets “appropriate” what they have witnessed as subject matter to proclaim “in stale poetic language” something that implies “‘Look how much human feeling and fellow feeling I have.’” For Palmer, such poetry is “self-congratulatory” (“Dear” 12, 26). Selinger suggests that Palmer’s Sun can then be understood as a “counterpoint” to Forché’s The Country Between Us, which he says “soothes” readers with its “familiar grammar, forms of reference, and moral compass” (7). Putting aside the specious claim for a moment that Forché’s Salvador poems are comforting (which belies any focused reading of them), it is clear that “Sun” is neither soothing nor familiar; however, it is a polar opposite in form and intent from Forché’s The Country Between Us.

“Sun” begins with four statements that foreground the act of writing about and representing atrocity. Each of the four begins with a command: “Write this.” In the first two lines, statements rife with imperial violence follow the demands to record: “We have burned all their villages” and “We have burned all the villages and the people in them” (233-235). The remainder of the poem frustrates any attempt to summarize its political import. It is
dotted with “scraps” of references to state-sanctioned American violence in Germany during World War II and in Vietnam and Cambodia during the Vietnam War – “Darmstadt,” “Plain of Jars,” “Plain of Reeds,” “Neak Luong,” and “Goebbels.” These allusions, however, are likely obscure to many readers, and Palmer chooses not to footnote them; the poem’s politics are rarely apparent because they are buried in an avalanche of disconnected allusions, syntactical dislocations, non-referential pronouns, non-linear trajectories, and isolated, verbless sentence fragments such as “Pages which accept no ink.” Selinger writes that Palmer is unwilling to “indict, or witness to” American atrocities because “to name them, would be both to ‘mis-appropriate’ them for the poet’s purposes and to collaborate in a mode of representation in which naming and power are uncomfortably allied.” Yet, Selinger suggests that Palmer risks “evasiveness” (15) in doing so, and it is this claim that is most illuminating for present purposes.

Whether or not “Sun” evades some greater engagement with politics is debatable, but it is clear that poems that utilize techniques and strategies like the ones outlined above are difficult to recognize as political. As a public discourse politics must be accessible to citizens, not just those citizens who have the patience, theoretical background, and intellectual capabilities to understand complex commentaries on the nature of language, knowledge, and representation. Further, Palmer’s claims (and those of many Language poets) about the political content of much contemporary poetry suggests that writers should not address directly anything remotely resembling “politics” or “atrocity.” Such a claim is patently absurd and dangerous; it also discloses a longing for a purity of language, of discourse, of politics, and an exclusion of “politics” from literature. This position inadvertently makes politics strictly the province of intellectuals, as any non-theoretical,
linear poem about politics or disaster always borders on appropriation and commodified pomp. Indeed, only certain readers need apply.

Moreover, by opening the poem with obvious political work then obscuring it and refusing to engage it throughout, Palmer too romanticizes his own refusal, saying in effect look at me, my refusal to appropriate atrocity is heroic and honorable. When asked about the Language poets, Philip Levine said as much: “in the long run they will undoubtedly enrich our poetry, but I dislike that heroic, embattled stance” in which they style themselves as fighting a “war in which they represent experiment” and other poets represent institutional staidness (“Staying Power” 28-29). Palmer implies that atrocities should not be discussed – in a mainstream media that Palmer and the Language poets explicitly work against, or in a poetry that directly addresses global events. To be fair, both Palmer and Forché foreground the act of writing about political issues and humanitarian disasters and the difficulties inherent in it, albeit in dramatically different forms. But unlike Palmer, Forché actually experienced first-hand the atrocities she writes about. Even so, Forché’s stylistic transition between The Country Between Us (1981) and The Angel of History (1994) suggests that Forché also understood the shortcomings of the former volume’s first-person, lyric narrative free verse of personal experience.

In the endnotes to The Angel of History, the book that followed The Country Between Us, Forché writes that the poems therein are “not about experiences,” but a “gathering of utterances” that “issue from my own encounter with the events of the century but do not represent ‘it.’” Her earlier style, moreover, has “given way” to a poetry that is “polyphonic, broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration” (81). These endnotes suggest that Forché was likely affected by criticisms such as Palmer’s in the years after the
publication of her El Salvador poems. Further, her explicit concern with the representation of
experience and the use of multiple voices and fragments points to an abiding problem with
her agency as poet. When she writes that her previous style has “given way” to this new one,
it is easy to notice the lack of linguistic agency in the shift. She has effectively given up
control over events as well as her primary voice of experience; in doing so, her aesthetic
begins to dovetail with Palmer’s. In his review of The Angel of History, Jon Thompson asks a
question that plagues “Sun,” Forché’s work, and contemporary political poets and their
critics: “at what point does the witnessing of witnessed – and unwitnessed – human
catastrophe pass from poetic and political necessity to the exploitation of the horror for
dramatic effect?” (7). Indeed, where is the dividing line between necessity and drama? While
this question is important to ask, the level of discomfort matters more. If a work of art makes
us uncomfortable, it may be due to its exploitation of horror, but it also may simply mean
that images of violence and atrocity should make us uncomfortable regardless of how they
are presented. They should make us question our roles – as citizens, as consumers, as voters
– in the policies and power structures that enable poverty, war, and other violence.

If “Sun” is political in its implicit denunciation of American imperialistic violence and
writers’ representations of that violence, it ultimately relies on a patient, informed, and
intellectual reader to access its elusive political content. Similarly, Charles Wright’s “Against
the American Grain” depends on the reader – but this poem’s political import is contingent
on the reader’s ability (or willingness) to connect the dots between the poem’s content, its
title, and current geopolitical contexts. This contingency suggests that readers help make
poems political, that they supply the political context from their current experience of – and
place in – the world.
Wright’s poem was first published in 2003 in *Irish Pages* and republished in the August 2004 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Wright is usually not considered a political poet, and if this poem were published in a Norton Anthology, it would not likely be considered political. However, its placement in the staunchly left-wing *Harper’s* in an issue featuring editor Lewis H. Lapham’s scorching, brusque farewell to Ronald Reagan and Peter Turnley’s disturbing photo essay “The Bereaved: Mourning the Dead, in America and Iraq” hints at a poem transformed by its strategic placement.

Even so, “Against the American Grain” has all the hallmarks of Pulitzer Prize winner Wright’s style – hyphenated compounds, heavy alliteration, a slew of almost hallucinatory metaphors, highly figurative language, verbless sentence fragments (“Then unflecked by evening’s outflow / and its counter current.”), and neologisms used as modifiers (“vowely weather”) that would make Seamus Heaney proud (25). His usual thematic interests are here as well – a deep interest in silence, absence, the haunting strangeness of the natural world, the hovering presence of death and the dead. These features have never made Wright a particularly political poet. But, this poem seems undeniably political in this issue of *Harper’s*, a vehement critic of the George W. Bush Administration, the Patriot Act, the war in Iraq, and America’s foreign policy in general.

The poem is a description – by an unidentifiable, omniscient third-person speaker totally absent from the scene – of a sunny afternoon, but one undeniably eerie. It begins: “Stronger and stronger, the sunlight glues / The afternoon to its objects.” The images of these “objects” that follow are odd, disturbing, fixed in unhealthy repose. Many of them suggest loss, violence, and a sinister hovering presence. There is a “scapular shadow thrown over the pond and meadow grass,” a “silence that grazes” where two horses no longer do, a “cocaine smell
of the wind,” and a “reluctant lilac bush.” Everything in the poem is out of natural balance, teetering between worlds – uncertain, “half-glimpsed, half-recognized,” “unstill,” “never-sleeping,” and “just possible past reason.” The only actions in the poem are bizarre pathetic fallacies by agents who are decidedly inhuman, such as “the slow vocabulary of sleep” that “spits out its consonants” and the sunlight that “glues / The afternoon to its objects” (my emphasis).

Two thirds of the way through the poem there is a marked shift in tone signaled by one word – “however.” This shift comes after the surreal description of the afternoon. The word “however” has the ring of authoritative proclamation, a way to clear up the previous confusion: “Flecked in the underlap, however.” Here, Wright uses the verb “underlap” as a noun, with the meaning, presumably, of something half hidden, “half-glimpsed, half-recognized.” In this underlap “something unordinary persists, / Something unstill, never-sleeping, just possible past reason.” The reader has little clue what this “something unordinary” is, but it seems dangerous, disturbing, and violent. The final line is an alliterative rhetorical question: “What mystery can match its maliciousness, what moan?” Here is where the poem’s pointed title and its inclusion in Harper’s influence the reader’s interpretive framework. The title suggests that there is something “malicious” and haunting in the American grain, in the “unordinary” American character. This aspect of the American character is “just possible past reason” and likely only “half-recognized” by many citizens. Perhaps this poem points to the ubiquitous but indescribable fear many of the world’s poor and oppressed have for American government, its foreign policy, and its abundant powers. Given the debacle in Iraq and the approaching election that would see Bush win 51% of the popular vote and given its inclusion in a magazine that largely goes against the American
grain (51% at least), this poem is hauntingly and politically apropos. It is safe to assume that Harper’s editorial decision assumed the poem would have just such a response among its readers. As Stephen Burt writes, “we can often learn from juxtaposing poems and public issues, even when the poems touch on those issues only glancingly” (550). Wright’s poem may not touch “glancingly” on the public issues of the day, but its title and placement in Harper’s puts the poem in a context that makes just such an invitation tempting to accept.

**Particular Equivocal Agency**

The differences between comprehensive and particular strategies of equivocal agency are subtle and will be teased out slowly in the next several examples. The primary difference is in context. While poems with comprehensive strategies have vast, global contexts, those with particular strategies have specific, focused (but expansive imaginative) contexts. However, their similarities are more instructive than their differences, so the divide here is mostly a cosmetic one used to suggest that the overarching context within a political poem can have dramatic effects on our readings of them. The poems I discuss in the rest of this chapter all connect to explicit contexts, but several of these connections depend upon their writers’ external comments. For instance, Levine’s “They Feed They Lion” does not include a specific reference to the 1967 Detroit riots, but Levine has repeatedly claimed that the poem was written as a response to them. Similarly, Bly’s “Counting Small-Boned Bodies” does not expressly refer to the Vietnam War, but given his public pronouncements about the war, daily Pentagon body counts, and the section title of The Light Around the Body (1967) in which the poem appears, the context is obvious. Poems of equivocal agency, finally, seem to speak to public issues that need no further lucid declaration or clarification within the poem. The issues are either urgent or the poet’s personal history makes the context demonstrable.
The first three poems I consider here all emerged from one of the most tumultuous periods in contemporary American history – the late 1960s. The war in Vietnam, widespread anti-war protests at home, the Civil Rights Movement, high-profile assassinations, and riots in cities across the country marked the late 1960s as a period of outrage and dissension. Poets injected their voices into the center of the maelstrom, so much so that American culture was “lyricized” during the Vietnam era as citizens began to view poetry “as an inherently anti-establishment vehicle for their political expressions” (Bibby 7). In his study of Vietnam resistance poetry, Michael Bibby lucidly argues that American poetry from 1965-1975 should be periodized as “Vietnam-era Poetry” and that any categorization of 1950, 60s, and 70s poetry as “Postwar Poetry” obscures the true nature of our national and literary history (23-24). Robert von Hallberg also argues that 1965 heralded a critical shift in the nation’s poetic sensibilities. After 1965, he laments, poets stopped using concessions, qualifications, adversatives, and “reasonable language” such as “even,” “is needful,” “nevertheless,” “not that,” “none as yet,” “let us only” that was appropriate in the 1950s (American Poetry 129-130), a decade that historians argue was a time of cultural consensus, at least among white middle and upper classes.

Bly, W.S. Merwin, and Levine all entered this fray in different ways, but all three wrote remarkable political poems of equivocal agency, one each of which I discuss here. Bly was one of the most politically active writers of his generation. In 1966, he and David Ray founded American Writers Against the Vietnam War – the more visible forerunner to Sam Hamill’s Writers Against the War, which so angered Laura Bush – that organized protest readings and public demonstrations. Then in 1968, Bly won a National Book Award for The Light Around the Body, a volume replete with unabashed political poems condemning
America’s actions in Vietnam; he used his acceptance speech to criticize the war and to encourage draft resistance. Bly’s polemics led critic James F. Mersmann to call him “one of the most annoying and most exciting poets of his time” (113). Von Hallberg falls firmly on the “annoying” side of the critical fence, reserving his utmost scorn for Bly’s “The Teeth Mother Naked at Last” (1970), which he calls the most “ambitious” of Vietnam-era “period poems” that are marked by an absence of the qualifications and the “reasonable language” he admires in poetry (American Poetry 142). Mersmann also opines that Bly’s Vietnam magnum opus has “prose opinions and not poetic insights,” a fact that has led critics to “misread” his work (124).

In “Counting Small-Boned Bodies,” Bly’s unique political voice is on full display. While not long, self-aggrandizing, and bombastic like “The Teeth Mother” and not directly confrontational like “Somebody Blew up America,” the poem’s staged, perverse, and disembodied speaker indirectly challenges the official bureaucratic propaganda of the United States government. Walter Kalaidjian calls the poem a “burlesque performance” and suggests that the poem employs Bly’s surrealism in a “subversive tone” that “flouts the half truths and windy abstractions of bureaucratic propaganda.” There is a lot to talk about in regard to this poem, but the best place to begin is with Kalaidjian’s note about its tone. While the poem obviously has a subversive tone and “black humor” (“From Silence” 198-201), stopping there is insufficient. How exactly is that tone crafted? First, Bly’s much discussed use of the “deep image,” which William V. Davis points out “has never been clearly or fully defined” (7), is nonetheless helpful for understanding this poem. Deep image poems generally employ images that work “below the level” of “rational thought;” further, these poems generally have a “fluid, dreamlike construction” and an “intense subjectivity” (Mills 211-12, 217). In
“Counting Small-Boned Bodies,” the images are nothing if not horridly dreamlike and irrational – the speaker imagines in a strange progression all of the dead Vietnamese bodies first as the “size of skulls,” then as small enough to fit “a whole year’s kill” on a desk, and finally, as small enough to fit into a “finger ring” (Selected Poems 73). The reader must obviously forgo “rational thought” in order to jibe with Bly’s parody. The increasing smallness of the bodies is a fluid distillation of the perversity of daily body counts in the hundreds or thousands into the size of a “finger ring.”

Victoria Frenkel Harris claims that the tone of this poem can “never be confused.” Despite its “sarcastic presentation,” she writes that Bly “exudes naked emotion, rage” (22). However, the tone can easily be confused; Harris herself is guilty of badly misreading it. The poem does not have a trace of emotion or rage. It is calm, cool, calculated, and slow. The first line is matter-of-fact, distant: “Let’s count the bodies over again.” Of the poem’s 74 words, 56 are monosyllables. These monosyllables greatly slow down the lines. As in Ezra Pound’s famous “In a Station of the Metro,” the second and final line of which ends with three consecutive stressed monosyllabic words – “petals on a wet, black bough” – that stand in stark contrast to the first (iambic) line, Bly’s poem relies on monosyllables both for sound and sense, with the former echoing the latter. When the speaker says “we could fit / a whole year’s kill in front of us on a desk,” the tone is slow, measured, and, most of all, deadpan. There is no melody or rhythm or rage.

Further, Bly’s poem, and the above line especially, proliferates prepositions. In Bly’s assessment of his own political poetry, he explains that he used a “Smart-Blake-Whitman” line, which is “additive” and “monotonous” with an abundance of prepositions, often becoming “swollen by them” (Selected Poems 196). Not only do these prepositions extend
lines while slowing them, they add to the absurdity of the speaker’s vision. With each additional prepositional phrase, the image grows more preposterous. The final line would be sufficient with the image of fitting “a body into a finger ring,” but the addition of “for a keepsake forever” makes it doubly absurd and stinging. Similarly, the image of making a “whole plain white with skulls” becomes more depraved with the consciously poetic phrase “in the moonlight” added gratuitously after it.

In much the same way, Bly’s heavy use of repetition and conditional statements – which grammatically signal the hypothetical – make the tone calmer, more measured. “If we could only make the bodies smaller” is repeated three times in the brief poem; this perverse desire is nonetheless expressed in a hypothetical, betraying the speaker’s rationality in the face of such absurdity. He knows that it is impossible to fit a year of dead Vietnamese on one desk. As such, it is not the vision itself that is grotesque, but the speaker’s wish that such a world were possible. This slight twist is Bly’s brilliant move in the poem. It is relatively simple to create a grotesque vision of a brutal war; it is another thing altogether to get into the psyche and hopes of a military machine.

Such a move is only possible with a calm, detached tone, one that does not “exude rage” but an irrational rationality that is depraved in its demeanor as well as in its desire. Bly’s use of the “Smart-Blake-Whitman” line, even for all its monotony, is perfect for such a venture. As Bly says, this line is given to “declaration rather than inquiry” and to “rhetoric rather than exchange of feelings” (Selected Poems 197). In “Counting Small-Boned Bodies” the speaker declares his desire, but evinces no feelings that buttress it. This empty rhetoric echoes the horrifying, detached rhetoric of daily kill counts during the late 1960s. Bly has said that it is folly to write political poems “impelled by hatred” because it is a “heavy” emotion (“Leaping
up into Political Poetry” 133), and it seems that this poem was impelled not by hatred but by bewilderment at the depravity of giving daily body counts to the public as a way of bolstering its confidence in government.

While “Counting Small-Boned Bodies” is perhaps the finest of Bly’s many Vietnam-era political poems – not least because it is short, concise, restrained, and clever and because its voice is a parodic absurdity, unlike some of his longer meditations on the effects of the Vietnam War on the American psyche – “The Asians Dying” is the most direct, intentionally political poem in Merwin’s brilliant The Lice (1967). There are other stunning political poems in The Lice, such as “Unfinished Book of Kings,” “Caesar,” “When the War is Over,” “The Last One,” and “For a Coming Extinction,” all of which employ various elements of Merwin’s style, one that overlaps in many regards with the characteristics of equivocal agency. The latter poem, in which the speaker converses with an endangered gray whale, is especially interesting in its differences from an activist, political-environmental poem such as Snyder’s “Front Lines.” In poems completely devoid of punctuation and marked by disconnected, surreal images, ambiguous syntax, elusive meditative phrasing, and an abiding sense of absence and death, Merwin meditates on the spaces of experience and consciousness that defy simple narrative. The political poems in the volume move more by haunting strangeness than by specific ideological platform. Each poem then can be seen paradoxically as both a self-contained unit since there are no smaller syntactical units within the poem – no sentences and few unequivocal phrases – and as an expression that can never be contained by marks on a page. The lines scar not so much the page but the reader’s consciousness and her archetypal, primeval sense of what it means to live in a world better understood as a mysterious place than as a rational, logical one governed by scientific and human laws.
“The Asians Dying” is a paradigmatic example of a political poem of particular equivocal agency. There is no readily identifiable, realistic speaker. There is no punctuation to help the reader sort out the haunting, surreal images or to sequence them logically. The only quasi-human agents in the poem are odd abstractions from decay and absence, without breath, color, or immanence. The four primary movers in the poem, the ones that act or are acted upon, are symbolic images: “The ash the great walker,” “the possessors,” “the ghosts of the villages,” and “the open eyes of the dead” (118-119). And yet the reader knows that the poem refers to the atrocities of the war in Vietnam because the title directs her to interpret what follows using just such a lens. However, Merwin’s aesthetics are not given to overt political statements or blunt representations of the “real” world. Instead of talking about empire, soldiers, or the Pentagon, he creates visionary personifications that make U.S. actions in Vietnam both more pervasive and more disturbing. The battle then takes place not in “the poisoned farmlands” and “watercourses” of Vietnam but in an imaginary, mythological space where the stakes are cosmic as well as human. “Possessors” sounds much more forbidding than soldiers and “ash the great walker” is a more disturbing image than burning corpses and villages.

In contrast to Marjorie Perloff’s claim that “The Asians Dying” is so “memorable” because of its “blend of strangeness and a clear-sighted literalness” (“Apocalypse Then” 136) and William H. Rueckert’s contention that the poem is “one of the most straightforward” in The Lice and that it is “obviously political” and demands neither “analysis” nor “critical mediation” (63), the poem is more intense when understood as neither “literal” or “straightforward” because both of these opinions simplify the poem and disempower Merwin’s eerie rhetorical strategy. The poem’s images are not literal or straightforward as
nearly every image in the poem occupies a liminal space fraught with decay and death; the poet’s eschatological vision shows a halted natural life-cycle put into reverse by “possessors” who have “no past / And fire their only future.” Merwin’s approach to the horrors of Vietnam is to describe them as a strange retreat into non-existence. He does not directly harangue U.S. policy or leadership; instead, he follows the advice of the speaker of Emily Dickinson’s “1129,” which begins: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant— / Success in Circuit lies.”

Merwin’s poem reveals truth through slant, indirection, and the images of “possessors” leaving nothing but “ash” in their wake. Unlike the speaker of “Counting Small-Boned Bodies,” who mimics official government propaganda, the language of Merwin’s poem is utterly different from any public discourse and from almost all other political poetry from this era. Even so, he pulls no punches in his descriptions; despite the “enigma” at the core of Merwin’s rhetorical strategy, the language he uses to illuminate the devastation is absolute, unyielding. There is no space for negotiation or compromise when “The ash the great walker follows the possessors / Forever / Nothing they will come to is real” (my emphasis here and below). Thus, the possessors reign through time immemorial and absolutely nothing they touch will be spared. Further, natural processes such as the cycles of day and night and the body’s healing mechanisms are no longer restorative: “The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed” and “the seasons rock” but they are “calling to nothing living.” The possessors’ power, moreover, is absolute, but derivative: they “move everywhere under Death their star.” Here, the possessors are most clearly styled in military terms as they “advance” in “columns of smoke.” Thus, the possessors themselves are possessed by Death. They are Death’s agents on earth, doing its bidding without
discrimination, without remorse. They are Death’s army, commanded by its brutal calmness, its ultimate rule over everything living.

But as Edward J. Brunner has noted, death for the possessors is different than death for the Vietnamese. Brunner writes, “The two versions of death radically distinguish Asians from Americans, a distinction underscored with irony: the death the Asians experience leaves them with their eyes open; the death star under which the possessors march leaves them as blind as ever” (148). While Brunner’s point is well-taken, the poem leaves wholly unclear the identities of “the open eyes of the dead;” while Brunner declares unequivocally that these dead are Vietnamese, the poem suggests otherwise because “when the moon finds them they are the color of everything.” “The color of everything” may suggest brown soil and thus brown Vietnamese skin, but such an interpretation is essentialist and would necessarily leave out the tens of thousands of African American, Native American, and other non-white U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam. It is more prudent not to think of “The Asians Dying” in Brunner’s binary terms in which Vietnamese die enlightened and Americans die “blind”; the movement of the possessors “everywhere” implies instead that Merwin is really getting at an American imperial policy that ignores the past and must necessarily rely on “fire (power)” as the “only future” that will increase its power.43

The Vietnam poems of Bly, Merwin, Denise Levertov, David Ignatow, and Robert Duncan are categorically different from the poems of Yusef Komunyakaa’s Dien Cai Dau (1988), Bruce Weigl’s volume of Vietnam War poetry Song of Napalm (1988), and the G.I. resistance poems Michael Bibby discusses in Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era (1996). Komunyakaa’s, Weigl’s, and G.I. resistance poetry are based on first-person experiences of war. Bibby points out that the Vietnam era was “a period
in which ‘being there’ [was] paramount” (ix). Bly’s and Merwin’s poems are counterpoints to this notion and to poems of experiential agency in which “being there” is of great importance. However, Bly’s and Merwin’s poems do something different than write about combat experience; they document instead the effects of an imperialistic foreign war on the American home front.

Like the two previous poems, Levine’s “They Feed They Lion” (They Feed They Lion 1972) does not rely on first-person experience of oppression and brutality. Levine did not participate in or directly observe the 1967 Detroit riots, nor is he an African American who experienced racism and injustice. Even so, Levine has pointed out that the poem “comes out of the riots” (“Staying Power” 23) in the city in which he was born, raised, educated, and in which he lived and worked for many decades. Levine thus has both an outsider’s and an insider’s perspective on the 1967 riots. This dichotomy could be a primary reason that he chose to use a different style for “They Feed They Lion” than he used for most of his other poems of the period. The political poem of equivocal agency is an anomaly for Levine as most of his poems – political and non-political – are in the experiential, first-person narrative vein. His poems often prominently feature readily identifiable first-person speakers meditating on their experiences of nature, love, poverty, work, and foreign cultures or a third-person speaker meditating on the experience, for example, of a Republican in the Spanish Civil War or an auto worker in Detroit.

Poems such as “Saturday Sweeping” (They Feed They Lion) and “On the Birth of Good & Evil During the Long Winter of ’28” and “For the Poets of Chile” (The Names of the Lost 1976) are more indicative of Levine’s narrative style and his use of experience as a poetic tool than “They Feed They Lion.” David St. John rightly claims that Levine’s “primary
“They Feed They Lion” is narrative, especially one of the “struggle of individuals ignored and unheard by their societies.” St. John points out that Levine’s work “gives voice to these ‘voiceless’ men and women whom he feels have been recognized and honored rarely in our literature” (277). Thus, “They Feed They Lion” has a theme similar to Levine’s best poems, but its techniques – lack of narrative, unidentifiable first-person speaker, and the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) – diverge from his usual strategies.

“They Feed They Lion” has much to distinguish it from the majority of Levine’s work, but also from the majority of political poems over the last few decades. This differentiation begins noticeably with the title. It immediately brings up several important issues that haunt both the poem and its reader. First, the repetition of “They” foreshadows the poem’s incantatory use of syntactical parallelism and repetition. Next, the second “They” shows Levine’s heavy usage of AAVE – the substitution of the personal pronoun for the possessive pronoun, the dropping of the initial article as in “Earth is eating trees,” and the departure from the standard subject-verb agreement such as in “They Lion grow.” Third, the prominence and repetition of the third-person plural “They” indicates that the poem will be about community and collective agency, what Edward Hirsch has called a “hymn to communal rage, to acting in unison” (“Naming” 348).

Finally, the title alerts the reader to the fact that Levine is boldly putting on a rhetorical guise foreign to him. In doing so, the poet risks appropriating the voice of an oppressed other in order to alleviate his own guilt. Levine’s comments about the poem nearly twenty-five years later bear out in part such a notion. He says that he saw himself “as a witness to a great American crime” of racism; however, he suggests that the poem really seeks to deal with his own place in the struggles against racism. On his visit to Detroit sometime after the riots, he
was struck in “realizing that in Eldridge Cleaver’s term” he was “part of the problem, not part of the solution” because he is white, middle class, and middle-aged. He continues that “he had identified at a great distance with the black rage that was exploding” but then saw who he really was: “a guy who’d made his peace with America” He has said, moreover, that “They Feed They Lion” is “an effort to come to terms with being that guy” and its “firestorm of emotion” (“Staying Power” 23).

This impulsive guilt and confused identity make the use of AAVE powerful and self-incriminating rather than exploitative. The compromised first-person speaker does not appear explicitly until the fifth and final stanza as a collective representative of white guilt and sadness, but also of privilege. The Lion, which is fed on the injustices perpetrated against African Americans, literally grows from the white speaker: “From my five arms and all my hands, / From all my white sins forgiven” and “From my car passing under the stars” and “from my children” the lion grows (34 my emphasis). What Fred Marchant has called the “disconcerting, ambiguous nature of the persona” (306) is less unambiguous given the prominence of “my white sins” and Levine’s comments about his status as “that guy.” The poem shows that he himself is the cause of African American rage. Levine’s speaker would likely not gripe with the speaker of Rich’s “For the Record” for he has certainly answered its question: “ask yourself where you were.”

Levine’s inclusive vision of American inner city poverty – via the specifics of Detroit – is a gumbo of industrial materials, foods, waste products, deceased people, body parts, and rage being cooked “on the oil-stained earth.” Detroit is in effect a huge skillet greased with “bearing butter,” “tar,” “creosote,” “gasoline,” “rain,” and the “sweet glues of the trotters”; “out of” this volatile, highly flammable surface “They Lion” is continually fed. The raw
materials of the city go into the skillet; they are the materials of urban squalor that contribute to and are symptomatic of poverty, oppression, and despair. The first stanza even reads like a recipe for riot; with its repetition, syntactical parallelism, and de facto ingredients, “They Lion grow(s)” like yeast rising in a hot oven:

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor or tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow.

The materials are earthy, rugged, elemental, and mostly physically tangible objects. In the second stanza, though, they become more emotionally resonant and familial but also more abstract. So while the lion grows “out of buried aunties” and “Mothers hardening like pounded stumps,” it also grows “out of the bones’ need to sharpen and the muscles’ to stretch.” The use of “aunties” is particularly resonant as it suggest centuries of African American domestic servitude and oppression. The latter two lines are images of being taxed to physical extremity and the corresponding need to respond to that extremity with focused physical strength.

At the same time though, the symbols of poverty are still present. “Industrial barns,” “bus ride,” and “gutted cars” mix with disconcerting, abstract images such as “the sweet kinks of the fist” and “the thorax of caves.” The result is a ghostly lion, rising both out of mysterious, visionary images resonant with emotional turmoil and the very real materials of the inner-city. In a review of They Feed They Lion, Alan Helms claims that the title poem “ignores the ‘edges’ of syntax, logical relation, propositional sense.” For Helms, moreover, much of the poem’s imagery does not “make ‘sense,’” but “that’s one of the points of the poem” (153). While much of the poem may not make sense from a purely realistic, representational
viewpoint, the collection of images make “sense” on a gut emotional, adrenaline-fueled level. Furthermore, from a mainstream media standpoint, riots do not make “sense” either – for them, riots are self-destructive, primal, and pathological. Levine’s poem powerfully suggests that riots come “out of” the everyday, mundane realities of bus rides, burlap sacks, and black beans and “out of” some abstract, dynamic repository of rage – “From they sack and they belly opened.” Therein lies the brilliance of “They Feed They Lion.” There is no way to get at the raw emotion Levine is interested in without mixing the inexplicable genesis of pure anger with the raw materials that both embody and create that anger. In this way, the rage is similar to the anger in some hip hop music with its emphasis on metaphor, hyperbole, and the raw materials of urban poverty and oppression.

Along with its sense of communal rage, the most instrumental aspect of “They Feed They Lion” is the poem’s sense of collective agency. The lion is the communal agent – in it is embodied all the power and anger of Detroit’s African American community. All of the community’s energies coalesce in the single figure of the lion. “They Lion” is the agent that enables this community to move “from ‘Bow Down’” to “‘Rise Up.’” Even though the speaker – outsider and symbolic oppressor – “has imaginatively embraced ‘They,’ and done it in defiant black English grammatical constructions” (Marchant 305) – he is still an outsider. He is the symbolic character that the lion acts against. This outside speaker is consumed as “they feed” on him. As Marchant points out, the lion has a connection to Africa as well as to Yeats’s “rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem” in “The Second Coming” (305). And, lest we forget, the lion is popularly known as the king of the jungle, and since Bob Marley’s “Concrete Jungle” (1970) urban ghettos have often been popularly referred to
as jungles. Levine’s “Lion,” then, is a remarkable imaginary construct embodying the rage of Detroit’s African American community and the guilt of a middle-class white man.

Like “They Feed They Lion,” a collective experience of oppression is the central tenet of Sherman Alexie’s “Evolution” (*The Business of Fancydancing* 1991). However, unlike Levine, Alexie – a Spokane / Coeur d’Alene Indian – uses a comic narrative infused with parody and satire in order to cast the contemporary Indian reservation as a space controlled by the malicious forces of white colonialism and its consequent ills. In “Evolution,” Alexie’s rhetorical strategy departs from Native American oral traditions even as it uses certain elements of magical realism popular amongst Native American, African American, and particularly Latin American writers. He has even said that his work “has nothing to do with the [Native American] oral tradition” because he “typed it” (“Sherman Alexie” 14), a claim that strikes me as protesting too much and as a betrayal of the historical and cultural forces that shape all writers. In contrast, John Newton writes that Alexie “stresses instead his own easy affiliation” with American popular culture and the culture of the contemporary reservation (414), spaces that are hybrid, dynamic, and multicultural; but, is the contemporary reservation really completely separate from the legacy of oral tradition? I think what Alexie ultimately stresses is his willingness to borrow from a variety of traditions, one of which is the nebulous “oral tradition.”

Alexie imagines the contemporary reservation in “Evolution” as a surreal combination of popular culture, supernatural occurrences, and what Jennifer Gillan has called “the structural elements of the representation of Indianness – the Indian as savage or child” (103) or, in the case of “Evolution,” as desperate alcoholic. These representations of what it means to be an Indian from a stereotypically conservative white perspective, moreover, “are central to the
narrative of the United States as a nation” (103-104) in that the purity, godliness, thriftiness, and the Protestant work ethic of white America had a foil in the laziness, savagery, and chemical dependence of the Indian. For Alexie, the union of a supernatural world and a rational one in the techniques of magical realism offers a reality beyond the rational world and an alternative vision to the sterile, stagnant, and oppressive white, western ethos. Its hybridity puts into strange repose the hybrid problems of contemporary Indian life. “Evolution” includes just such an alternative representation of the oppression of contemporary Indian reservations; it also makes the history of Buffalo Bill as an “American” hero magically present, showing that as William Faulkner once wrote, “the past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past.” The history of oppression, then, is not past, but present, in the dynamics of Alexie’s reservation.

Alexie’s narrative of the American Indian’s mock “evolution” satirically begins with a popular culture icon; Buffalo Bill is physically present on the contemporary reservation in present tense verbs and in the actions they portray. First, he “opens a pawn shop on the reservation / right across the border from the liquor store” (The Business 48 my emphasis here and below). His shop is inside the borders of the reservation while the liquor store is noticeably on United States land. Like a 7-Eleven, Buffalo Bill’s pawn shop “stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week,” but unlike a 7-Eleven, this shop buys rather than sells, takes rather than provides. At Buffalo Bill’s shop, “the Indians come running in” to sell first the material possessions prized by white, mainstream America (“jewelry / television sets, a VCR”), next their cultural heritage (“a full-length beaded buckskin outfit / it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish”), and finally their very bodies. This process is the mock, reverse evolution of North American Indians.
Before Buffalo Bill begins to take the Indians’ bodies, he acts like a bureaucratic governmental agency – perhaps the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the Department of the Interior – that keeps meticulous but incredibly skewed records of contact between whites and Indians. Everything he takes he “keeps it / all catalogued and filed in a storage room;” in this storage room resides the historical records of these contacts – controlled, stored, and organized by an Indian oppressor. When the Indians begin pawning their bodies, the first thing to go is “their hands,” “saving” the final vestiges of humanity – their thumbs – “for last.” After they have pawned “their skeletons” – typical museum pieces in natural history museums – Buffalo Bill “takes” the “last” Indian’s “heart.” At this juncture at the end of the poem, Indians reach the apex of their evolution – as museum items to be gawked at, laughed at, and catalogued as stereotypes for perpetuity.

When Buffalo Bill has nothing left to take from the Indians, he “closes up the pawn shop” and “paints a new sign over the old” one. The new sign reads “THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES.” This shift in purpose – from killing Indians as part of the United States’s “evolution” to mock-celebrating them and exploiting their cultures for entertainment – continues with further economic exploitation. In the final line of this “Evolution,” Buffalo Bill “charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter” their own museum. Not only are they exploited in all of these ways, they are also consumers of their own history of oppression, their own stereotypes, and their own deaths. While Stephen F. Evans rightly claims that the implied border crossing from pawn shop to liquor store is a “powerful metaphor of recurring Indian defeat by white civilization and the white-conditioned habit of Indian self-defeat” (56), the more ubiquitous metaphor is the one that sees white American popular culture’s (in the guise of Buffalo Bill’s) vision of evolution as the death of the Indian, the savage, and the
advent of his only proper place – in the museum where other extinct, wild creatures have
their homes. Alexie’s parody of this vision of evolution ends in that beacon of high culture –
the museum, where cultures are supposed to be preserved; but this museum actually means
the deaths and exploitations of native cultures.

In Alexie’s usage of elements of magical realism, Buffalo Bill does not miraculously enter
the reservation in the late twentieth century; instead, he never really left. He has always been
there to keep Indians in their proper place in American popular culture. Buffalo Bill has been
the celebrated hero, Indians the primitive savages unable to overcome alcoholism and self-
destruction; both are popular images that mask the realities of colonization. Therefore, in
“Evolution,” the Indians strangely give back to whites the trappings of popular culture (TVs,
VCRs, etc.) even as they still struggle with the alcohol introduced to them by white colonists.
Alexie’s Indians are thus trapped in a colonized space wherein they have compromised
identities and little self-determination.

In the final analysis, “Evolution” works not only at the level of satirical narrative, but also
in its parodic tone. Unlike the two Simic poems I discussed earlier that employ strange
narratives and ironic tones, “Evolution” is more readable, more accessible, and oddly
enough, more entertaining, and therefore somewhat deceptive. Newton points out that
“poetry-shy undergraduates respond to Alexie’s work” with “instant recognition” due to its
“reader-friendly textures and ambivalent good humor” (414). But, as Newton suggests,
something more sophisticated is at work; the import of “Evolution” is subtle and indirect.
Newton calls Alexie’s collection of parodic strategies vis-à-vis white American culture
“autoethnographic parody;” in this strategy Alexie works to reclaim the Indian’s stereotyped,
white-constructed image. Newton points out that Alexie “cannot set the terms of this
narrative exchange” because it necessarily takes place in the images, terms, and significations of the dominant white culture (427). Indeed, “Evolution” works as a type of gallows humor, but not an empty one. It takes on the “most vicious and demeaning” (Newton 416) stereotypes held by the dominant culture and attempts to re-imagine them as part of genocide styled as “evolution.”

If Alexie re-imagines the contemporary Indian reservation as subject to a historically disastrous barter not in smallpox-infested blankets and corn but in liquor and human bodies, in “A Reconsideration of the Blackbird” (Pyramid of Bone 1989) Thylias Moss re-imagines racism against African Americans by “reconsidering” the object of one of the most famous twentieth century American poems – Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (Harmonium 1923). Like Simic’s, Moss’s modus operandi falls squarely within the rhetorical strategy of equivocal agency. And unlike Stevens (mostly), Moss is interested in disturbing sociopolitical issues – racism, violence, and misogyny. In the author head note for Moss in the third edition of The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Jahan Ramazani writes that Moss’s “approach to this weighty material is oblique, riddling, and gnomic.” As Ramazani points out, Moss’s poems are “digressive, elliptical, allusive” pieces that “ramble associatively,” but “tend to return to their central themes” (999). In “A Reconsideration of the Blackbird,” all of the elements Ramazani describes are in play; Moss’s poem is so fragmented and elliptical that the political import is mostly felt rather than rationalized.

Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is well-known for its multiple perspectives, cubist influences, and its celebration of movement and motion. In Stevens’s poem the blackbird “whirled in the autumn winds, / It was a small part of the pantomime.”
Whereas Moss’s reconsiderations are often prosaic and flat, Stevens’s are often haiku-like and cubist-influenced: “I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds” (The Collected Poems 92-94). In Moss’s poem, though, there is very little motion or faith in language to remake the world in a positive manner. Stevens’s poem enacts in part the modernist desire to create a world out of the individual’s imagination and consciousness. He was primarily concerned with a world that is in constant motion. However, for Stevens and for many of his readers, the negative counterbalance to this continual movement is instability and uncertainty, two notions that Moss explores in her “reconsideration.”

Stevens’s propensity for linguistic play is the primary element that Moss takes on in her poem. But unlike Stevens’s poem, which is methodical and ordered, Moss’s is explosive, snarled, and difficult to sort out. It is immediately obvious from the visual texture of “A Reconsideration of the Blackbird” that it is even more fragmented than Stevens’s thirteen well-marked sections; Moss’s poem proliferates with italicized terms and phrases, questions answered elliptically if at all, and three pairs of “Problem” and “Solution” lines. On this surface, the poem’s main linguistic play and conceit emerge – that a crow is a blackbird and a blackbird is a symbol for a black person.

Accordingly, the first line is a declarative statement with just such an implication: “Let’s call him Jim Crow” (10-11 original emphasis here and below). The following couplet takes the next step from thinly disguised racism directed at the blackbird – Reconstruction-era Jim Crow laws – to a declaration of blatant racism: “Let’s call him Nigger and see if he rises / faster than when we say abracadabra.” These first three lines appear to make obvious Moss’s Stevensesque imaginative consideration of the blackbird from multiple perspectives; indeed, the first three lines look at racism from two perspectives. However, the next three
fragments/stanzas turn surreal and elusive as if to disrupt any systematic attempt to understand racism and how it affects the identity of the blackbird. Each imaginative fragment begins with a perplexing, ungrounded question. They are, in order: “Guess who’s coming to dinner?,” “What do you find from here to eternity?,” and “Who never sang for my father?”

The first response is comical in the speaker’s address to the reader as if she is at a gaming table: “Score ten points if you said blackbird. / Score twenty points if you were more specific, as in the first line.” The second “answer” is simple: “Blackbirds.”

The third response is lengthy, complex, and violent. The syntax is confusing, but its import is not. Here the blackbirds are not the oppressed but the oppressors. They “landed on the roof / and pressed it down, burying us alive.” Are the definitions of blackness imposed on African Americans oppressive? Do they bury black people under an array of negative images? The poem’s speaker implies these questions and that African Americans did not have the power nor the time to escape these negative definitions: “Why didn’t we jump out the windows? Didn’t we have enough / time?” Here the crushing weight of historical racism is destructive, but a few lines later some of its consequences are styled as positive and unifying. Presumably in the house being “pressed” upon by the blackbirds, the inhabitants unite in common cause for survival: “We were holding hands and hugging like never before. / You could say the blackbirds did us a favor.” But – and this is a major rebuttal – the speaker immediately denounces this statement with a declarative “Let’s not say that however.” The reader gets the sense that the speaker is thinking and speaking on the fly, rapidly reconsidering each and every thought she has on the blackbird and its blackness.

This refashioning has the effect of leaving space for negotiation, for self-definition, and for evading imposed, negative definitions. Immediately after the speaker’s rebuttal, she offers an
alternative followed by an ultimatum. The alternative is to “let the crows speak.” The ultimatum is simple in its formulation – “Let them use their tongues or forfeit them” – but difficult in its import, especially since it is not at all clear how it would be best for crows to use their tongues. More critically, what is the significance of crows speaking? Why crows here and not blackbirds? It is nearly impossible to uncover differences between crows and blackbirds in the poem; they appear to be one and the same object, perhaps just “different ways of looking” at or referring to a blackbird.

The final third of the poem takes the image of tongues and submits it to a surreal series of “Problem” / “Solution” statements. The “solutions” are even more terse, piercing, and stripped-down than the poem’s previous “answers.” The speaker’s short, clipped sentences are disturbing and dismissive. These mock dialogues are structured in the manner of logical, philosophical proofs, but the solution statements are never logical. Here is the first systematic interchange:

Problem: What would we do with 13 little black tongues?
Solution: Give them away. Hold them for ransom. Make belts. Little nooses for little necks.

In this first “problem,” Moss makes a specific allusion to Stevens, but now the blackbirds are tongues. The “solution,” moreover, includes four options, all of which suggest that the black tongues have no autonomy; the four solutions portend slavery, subjugation, physical exploitation, and lynching. I trust that no further explanation is needed to elucidate the role of these “solutions” in the historical abuse of African Americans.

The final “Problem” / “Solution” lines appropriately end the poem with the most forthright perspective on the blackbird. The “Problem” is disheartening in that it summarizes the lack of human capacity for compassion that characterizes racism: “Problem: No one’s in love with
the blackbirds.” Despite the riddling nature of Moss’s poem, the sentiment here is understandable. Moreover, it has a crushing pathos absent in the rest of the poem, except perhaps in the line about “holding hands and hugging.” The enormity and emotion of this problem is made even more so by the speaker’s jarring “Solution.” The commas that separate the parts of the solution suggest a logical, step-by-step connection between the parts, unlike in the previous, disconnected, four-part solution: “Paint them white, call them visions, everyone will want / one.” This “solution” is ugly, but it seems the culmination of a “reconsideration” that starts with Jim Crow, moves on to Nigger, then to self-destructive tendencies, then to murder and oppression, and finally to a self-effacing erasure of blackness altogether.

Moss’s elliptical and convoluted approach aptly ends with this solution. Since the “blackbird” and black identity in general have been historically defined by white, western, political-religious, imperial powers as evil, primitive, inferior, and subhuman, the “rational” culmination is a mandate or “solution” to make all black people white, and therefore desirable. Moreover, in Moss’s final “solution,” the imperative to “call them visions” subtly denounces poetic tradition, especially its romantic, visionary strains, of which Stevens could be considered a descendant. It further suggests that “vision” has wrongly been considered the province of whites, not blacks. The message could be construed as: if you are a black artist, make sure your vision is a white one. If so, “everyone will want” to read it. Otherwise, your tongue will become a “little noose.”

In his review of Moss’s Small Congregations: New and Selected Poems (1995), Rafael Campo indirectly hints at a series of questions that affects politically engaged contemporary poetry. For Campo, sometimes Moss’s poems “fail to sound beautiful,” which “transmits her
distrust of poetry to her reader.” He continues with the claim that “at times, her methods are not equal to her message.” He conjectures that her poems are sometimes not beautiful “because it hurts the eye so much to read them, to see the awful truths they reveal.” However, before he succumbs to such an analysis, he claims that his is not a “convincing excuse” because, he implies, contemporary poets such as Marilyn Hacker, June Jordan, Thom Gunn, and Adrienne Rich have written beautiful poems about difficult sociopolitical subjects (“Sturdy Boxcars” 348). While comparing, for example, Rich’s rhetorical strategies with Moss’s is an indirect result of this study, the more pressing questions are not ones of comparison. Why do poems, especially political ones, have to be beautiful? Certainly many hip hop songs are not “beautiful” but are moving and politically powerful. Are pain and oppression unacceptable subjects for poetry? Or do these subjects have to be made beautiful as well? What problems result from making beautiful the horrific? Campo’s comments get at the heart of the complications and problems with much political poetry. For a poem of equivocal agency, traditional concepts of beauty ought not apply. “A Reconsideration of the Blackbird,” moreover, is beautiful primarily in its haunting qualities, ones that make the reader quail and think, rather than appreciate gracefulness and charm.

Summary and Conclusions

The political poems of equivocal agency I discussed in this chapter are not so much about certain messages, firm political positions, or the experiences that help create and are created by these positions or worldviews. Instead, these poems’ strategies evince greater concern for imaginative visions that do not fit neatly into succinct messages or political positions. They do not order us to act; they move by insinuation, intuition, and the recreation of the world rather than in its representation. The Writing of the Disaster (1980), Maurice Blanchot’s
fragmented meditations on disaster, language, and an ethics of responsibility, continually suggests that literature arrests and impedes the containability of its message, in the process defusing and complicating whatever messages inhere in it. So it is in many of the poems in this chapter written by poets as diverse as Simic and Alexie, Palmer and Harjo. Many of these poems are complex and multifaceted, which are potential consequences of departing from first-person experience as a primary tool of poem-making. As such, these poems often display more sweeping, challenging, and surreal visions of the world we live in, the ones we might live in, and the ones that are likely only dreams. A few lines from A.R. Ammons’s book-length poem *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) sum up the strategy well. He writes, “in art, we do not run / to keep up with random / moments, we select / & create / the moment occurring forever” (37). So, while the moment – events and experiences in the world – have a place in art, in poems of equivocal agency the poet creates and recreates a type of magical, transformative world that is “occurring forever” and is not bound to a limited time and space, even for those poems with particular contexts.

There are many other poems I could have chosen for this chapter, including those in the oeuvre of Yusef Komunyakaa, many of which combine the rhetorical strategies of experiential and equivocal agency. Poems such as “1984,” “Landscape for the Disappeared,” “The Music that Hurts,” “Fever,” “Camouflaging the Chimera,” and “‘You and I Are Disappearing,’” all of which appear in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1993), are some of his most haunting, surreal best. Jorie Graham’s “Fission” (1991) is another prominent example that combines elements of both experiential and equivocal agency. Amiri Baraka’s frequently anthologized “An Agony. As Now” (1964) is also a political poem of equivocal agency, one which stands in stark contrast to his poems of
authoritative agency. But a most excellent example I did not choose is Robert Hass’s “Politics of a Pornographer” (*Field Guide* 1973), which is hauntingly suggestive and sophisticated. However, the poems I chose are in my opinion the best and broadest range of examples for exploring the strategy of equivocal agency. Finally, when reading any political poem of equivocal agency, it is necessary for the reader to be willing to make broad imaginative leaps. As Bruce Weigl writes of Simic’s poetry, the reader “must be willing to enter a wildly imaginative world, willing to jump into the fray surrounded by strangely human and magnificently cosmic forces that radiate within the expansive vistas of his imagination” (2-3). The poems of *migratory agency* in the next chapter include touches of the strategies I outlined in the first and second chapters, but they have an innovative and unique set of characteristics and techniques.
CHAPTER THREE  
Migratory Agency

Not only was the brain split into two functions but so was reality. Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes. Such is the case with the *india* and the *mestiza*.

- Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* 49

Introduction

As in the previous chapters, my goal in this chapter is to elucidate one of the primary rhetorical strategies for making political poetry in the United States. However, unlike the previous chapters on embodied and equivocal agencies, this one on migratory agency makes more significant departures from current criticism and theory regarding American poetry. The most basic of these departures is the byproduct of my desire for inclusion, an acknowledgement of some basic demographic realities, and an embrace of multilingualism. Despite two decades of discussing multiculturalism and canon formation in regard to pedagogy and American literature, most critical work in contemporary American poetry studies is either dedicated to a specific ethnicity, gender, topic, or to what I consider an elite survey of American poetry and culture. Book-length studies of contemporary American poetry generally focus on, for example, African American, Asian American, Native American, Latina/o, Chicana/o, or female writers; or on a topic such as environmental, war, feminist, postmodern, prophetic, language, or resistance poetry. Nearly all of these latter thematic works exclude Latina/o writers, writers from alternative traditions, spoken word poets, and hip hop artists. The “comprehensive” surveys of American poetry usually consider
only canonical (primarily white male) writers with a white woman or an African American included to give the appearance of breadth or for comparative purposes. More encompassing volumes, such as books of essays edited by Charles Bernstein and Marjorie Perloff, are better, but they do little with Latina/o poets or hip hop artists.

Latina/o poets are generally left out of the more encompassing critical studies of American poetry. Yet they are not simply marginalized because even marginalization implies an existence at the edges of a critic’s scope. To give just one instance, in the seminal *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* (1985), Robert von Hallberg focuses on the work of Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, James Merrill, Robert Lowell, Edward Dorn, Mona Van Duyn, and Robert Pinsky, all of whom have “shown marked curiosity about the dominant American culture” (8).50 To his credit, Von Hallberg is interested in poets who “have looked more searchingly and fairly at the national culture;” he claims that the enduring popular perception “that American poets have made themselves cultural outlaws” (244) is inaccurate. While I mostly agree with his claim, it is easily pointed out that middle- to upper-class white males are much more likely to look at the dominant culture more fairly than women, the poor, and minorities; they are, in fact, *part* of the dominant culture rather than *apart* from it. While von Hallberg would argue that some white poets – Levertov and Bly for instance – have not looked fairly at the dominant culture, he does not consider that what might be “fair” for African Americans or Latinas/os is much different than what is fair for middle-class white males.

The major problem, then, with even an insightful book such as von Hallberg’s is the title. It is misleading. For him, as seemingly for many others, “American poetry and culture” represents a narrow range of poets. While I understand that his book was published in 1985,
before hip hop gained in visibility and power, before spoken word poetry became popular, and before much of the emphasis on multiculturalism in the academy, the same fundamental dynamics of his study persist today. Any relatively comprehensive study of contemporary American poetry and culture that does not take African American and Latina/o poets into account is extremely limited, just as any contemporary study that does not take on hip hop music is missing out on the most vibrant poetry scene in the United States. Writing about American poetry with limited breadth is perfectly acceptable and important for understanding specific poets, but a readjustment of scope is necessary if a critic chooses not to write about poets concerned with race, ethnicity, and civil rights. The problem, then, centers on the meaning of “America,” an issue I (and the poets I discuss) take on throughout this chapter.

In many cases, however, critics include one or two poets other than canonical white ones in their books. Kevin Stein’s *Private Poets, Worldly Acts: Public and Private History in Contemporary American Poetry* (1996) is a typical example. Stein features chapters on Lowell, Rich, Frank O’Hara, James Wright, Levine, Komunyakaa, Rita Dove, David Wojahn, and Forché. As has become relatively standard in books on American poetry, Stein includes a selection of the frequently discussed (Lowell, Rich, O’Hara, and Wright) alongside several African Americans, here choosing a canonical African American (Dove), and one that fits into his specific framework (Komunyakaa). Problematically in a country of nearly forty million Latinas/os, Stein’s book, more impressive in its breadth than most, is emblematic of the white / black dichotomy inherent in contemporary studies of American poetry. It seems that – to an extent – many African Americans have gained entry into the canon while other groups remain outside, even though Native American Joy Harjo is sometimes included in more sweeping studies. But rarely is a Latina/o poet – especially one
who writes in Spanish as well as English – included as one of these additions, despite the potential fruitfulness of this juxtaposition.

The inverse of these dynamics is apparent in the weight borne by scholars of Latina/o and Chicana/o poetry. In their authors’ efforts to be comprehensive and illuminating, book-length works often get bogged down in description, background, and context. Accordingly, for example, four of the seminal, self-described comprehensive texts – Bruce-Novoa’s *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos* (1982), Cordelia Candelaria’s *Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (1986), José E. Limón’s *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems: History and Influence in Mexican-American Social Poetry* (1992), and Teresa McKenna’s *Migrant Song: Politics and Process in Contemporary Chicano Literature* (1997) – have significantly overlapping summaries and descriptive information. When Candelaria briefly outlines a historical context for Chicana/o poetry vis-à-vis the dominant American (i.e. Anglo American) literary tradition, it is a necessarily expeditious and indistinct backdrop to her “exhaustive analysis” (xii). Even Candelaria acknowledges that her self-proclaimed comprehensive study will necessarily “fall short” of her goals and reader expectations (xi-xii).

Although books on Latina/o poetry and on other minority poetries are indispensable to scholarly work and essential for illuminating and understanding the poetry, they also tend to marginalize further the poetry from the mainstream of American letters. Candelaria’s claim in 1986 about Chicana/o literature in relation to the larger American literary tradition is still dangerously unheeded in the academy: “That Chicano literature is fundamentally ‘American’ is clearly established, for its origins and influences are all part of the very basis of the macro context that constitutes the U.S. American literary tradition. In this sense, therefore, it, like
other ethnic minority literatures of the United States, lies within the *mainstream* of American literature.” This mainstream, she points out, is “basically pluralistic, iconoclastic, democratic, and multi-ethnic and should be thus perceived, instead of as a solely Anglo-American” tradition (15 original emphasis). I mostly agree with Candelaria, but her claim verges upon wishful thinking, which she hints toward with the qualification “should be thus perceived.” The poems I discuss in this chapter state an undeniable claim to being “American,” but they often see the term differently than many critics. The rhetorical strategies of migratory agency are part of the larger framework of political poetry in the United States. They embody the dynamism, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature of America and its literature; these poems are thus the most charismatic repositories of the shifting space that meets at the junction of two terms – “America” and “poetry” – both of which are currently undergoing great change in meaning and emphasis. Inclusion in the overall body of American letters also need not mean the loss of ethnic, cultural, political, and social identities.

With one exception, all of the poems I write about in this chapter are written by Latina/o poets. However, my intention is not to write a chapter analyzing the rhetorical strategies of Latina/o poetry in general. Nor is it my primary goal to argue that the poets discussed here deserve inclusion in the canon of American letters whatever that may be. But the primary strategies of migratory agency are employed almost exclusively by bilingual Latina/o poets. And because most Latina/o poetry is usually studied from within the framework of a specific tradition or type of poetry and rarely as part of a larger framework, I hope that one of the byproducts of this chapter is a movement of these poems and their languages into the multi-ethnic family of contemporary American poetry. Here I hope various traditions can be studied more fruitfully in juxtaposition.
I want to revisit briefly the term “America” before detailing the elements of migratory agency, as the different connotations of the term are important to how I define the strategies. As I discussed in this project’s introduction, the “United States” and “America” can (and should) be thought of as different realms. With over forty million Latinas/os living in the United States, we are now the second largest hispanohablante, or Spanish-speaking, country in the world. These two realms are meeting on a scale they never have previously. The prevailing English understanding of “America” is fundamentally different from its denotation and connotation in Spanish. As Debra A. Castillo notes, in English the word “typically refers to a country” and in Spanish to a continent (5). I find it necessary to retain both connotations. First, the poems I discuss in this chapter were produced in the place that North American English speakers understand as America, but they exhibit the values and influences of the broad range of peoples, cultures, and languages of the Spanish speaker’s continental understanding of America. This bifurcated understanding of America symbolizes the bilingual character of poems of migratory agency, in which the various registers of the two languages vector into and out of each other and into and out of the multi-ethnic social worlds from which they originate. Poems of migratory agency are remarkably flexible and comfortable in many worlds and in many voices. Further, as Castillo points out in Redreaming America: Toward a Bilingual American Culture, the “discourse of plurality” in the American academy is discordant – and perhaps disturbing – “in the context of monolingualism” (190) in which English predominates and other languages barely register. This situation is one reason bilingual political poetry and the strategy of migratory agency are important correctives in contemporary American letters as a redress to the language imbalance in the academy.
The strategy of using multiple languages is not exclusive to contemporary Latina/o poets. Two iconic Anglo American high modernists, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, used several languages in their most famous long poems, Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922), Pound in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)” (1920) and in the sprawling *Cantos* (published intermittently from 1917 to 1969). The multilingual textures of these poems, however, are different in kind and intention from poems of migratory agency. Eliot used German, French, Italian, and Sanskrit in *The Waste Land* in order to create a polyglot texture of voices, perspectives, and speakers as if mimicking the turning of a global radio dial. He was interested in the fragmentation and uncertainty of the modern world; the use of multiple languages was part of his attempt to find some objective way of seeing this world through a cacophony of voices.

Pound’s engagement with languages, on the other hand, was longer and more sustained. Imagism, founded and practiced by Pound, H.D., and Amy Lowell, was influenced greatly by Chinese and Japanese poetry. He translated regularly from Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and Greek, and his translation of T’ang dynasty poet Li Po’s “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” (1915) is one of the best twentieth-century translations of a poem originally written in another language. In his own poetry, Pound habitually made allusions in five to six languages. Herein lies a key difference between the strategies of migratory agency, which I fully delineate shortly, and those of these modernists. Pound and Eliot wrote English poems textured with lines and allusions in other languages in large part to display the difficulty, authority, and unique individualism inherent in their rigid, authoritarian, and patriarchal high modernism.
Eliot’s and Pound’s obscure, arcane allusions in multiple languages were implicitly political in their didactic intentions and in their juxtaposition of languages. In Pound’s case, for example, *The Cantos* were his attempt at a modern epic encompassing world history, literatures, languages, arts, myths, and economics. He wanted to write a poem with allusions that classically-educated readers (i.e. white upper-class males) would know; these readers would then work to create an uber-civilization “ruled by right-thinking men of action” (Ramazani Head Notes 367). Eliot’s and Pound’s use of multiple languages, therefore, was a political strategy for demonstrating authority, learnedness, and superior education. Moreover, they were not directly challenging the primacy or authority of English or its place in the dominant culture. Additionally, their multilingual poems are the product of elite, classical educations, not the life experiences of immigrants moving between languages, which suggests that experience is key to poems of migratory agency as well as in poems of embodied agency, the latter a point supported by Rafael Pérez-Torres when he claims that many Latina/o poems “attempt to represent accurately the culture and economics of specific communities” (*Movements* 17).

In contrast to poems by poets such as Eliot and Pound – later in this chapter I discuss John Balaban’s “Agua Fria y Las Chicharras” (*Words for My Daughter* 1991) as a contemporary example of a multilingual poem – poems of migratory agency usually code-switch between English and Spanish. There are numerous literary, sociological, and linguistic studies on code switching in both Latina/o poetry and in the United States’s bilingual communities. I want to outline some of their conclusions in relationship to migratory agency before I discuss particular poems. Anthropologist Keith H. Basso argues that code switching – in his study between Western Apache and English – “may be strategically employed as an instrument of
metacommunication” and as an “indirect form of social commentary” (8-9). Jeraldine R. Kraver writes that code switching in Latina poetry is a “means of resisting the forces of monoculturalism and monolingualism that threaten bicultural and bilingual writers;” she shows that it also “upset(s)” “the binary oppositions – especially English / Spanish – upon which Anglo society depends” (193, 196). Further, she rightly claims that the “simple act of introducing the minority language (Spanish) into the text disrupts authoritarian discourse” if “we consider English the majority language…spoken by the group with power and prestige” (196-197). Poems of migratory agency, which have various amounts of English and Spanish, do all of the above things – they strategically challenge the dominant discourse, reflect the multicultural experiences of the poets and their communities, and upset the order of English literary language and tradition.

In poems of migratory agency, the speaker-poet – to use the words of sociolinguists Eva Mendieta-Lombardo and Zaida A. Cintron – is “the creative actor who uses CS [code switching] as a linguistic/literary device to accomplish an end, for instance, to engage the reader/audience in a culturally significant or culturally intimate way” (567). As such, code switching not only reflects the speaker’s experiences and serves as a means to establishing and recognizing group ethnic identity, it can also be a strategic, creative device for making political poetry. The primary and most powerful agency these poets have in the wider culture is their ability to move fluidly between languages and their variant systems of signification. But we must keep in mind that the use of multilingual textures is but one tool at the disposal of bilingual poets. They employ numerous rhetorical strategies that often dovetail with the experiential and authoritative strategies I discussed previously. Furthermore, many poems by Latina/o writers may be written almost exclusively in English but still informed by the
rhythms, nuances, and cultural currents of Spanish. Four critically acclaimed Latina/o poets – Alberto Ríos, Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto, and Martín Espada – write almost exclusively in English, but their poems embody many of the concerns and issues taken on by bilingual poets. Also, some bilingual poets – notably Lorna Dee Cervantes and Victor Hernández Cruz – no longer write bilingual poems; Cervantes now writes in English exclusively and Hernández Cruz writes poems in Spanish and English but not in combination. Cervantes, for example, “decided early in her career that she could not write bilingually, that it was a ‘false’ and ‘clumsy’ voice” (Kraver 197). While I disagree with Cervantes and believe some of her strongest poems are bilingual, readers must decide this question themselves. Ultimately, though, it is not necessary for a poem to be bilingual in order for it to display the sensibilities and strategies of a bilingual speaker, as I explain more fully later.

Bilingual poems are an important intervention within American literature given the power dynamic between Spanish and English in the United States. The following illustration may be anecdotal, but it symbolizes the resistance to Spanish among many poets, readers, and critics. In a recent essay, Marcos McPeek Villatoro retells the story of Joseph Brodsky’s confrontation with Latino writer Benjamin Sáenz. Brodsky, according to the story, “admonished” Sáenz for turning in a bilingual poem in Brodsky’s workshop (176). For Villatoro this incident suggests the difficulties and pressures bilingual poets face from an English-dominant literary culture that often determines a poem’s acceptability on the basis of its relationship to an illusory English-only tradition. In his account, Sáenz writes that Brodsky told him to “keep foreign languages out of [his] poems, since [he] was working in an ‘English tradition.’” According to Sáenz, shortly thereafter Brodsky “recite[d] a poem with a Latin phrase in it.” Sáenz concludes that Latin, Greek, and French have “an esteemed
place in American letters” – and we see evidence of this in Eliot’s and Pound’s work – and that Brodsky’s real problem was with Spanish. “Clearly,” Sáenz writes, “some languages are more foreign than others” (524).

Brodsky’s apparent disdain for Spanish as well as his upholding of an “English tradition” mask some fundamental realities. There is no unbroken “English tradition” handed down from poet to poet in the United States. There are many English traditions in the United States. A critic could ostensibly trace various strands of poetic tradition: Whitman – Williams – Olson – Ginsberg – Creeley – Baraka; Dickinson – Pound – Snyder – Charles Wright; Stevens – Ashbery – Merwin – Strand – Graham; Longfellow – Frost – Roethke – Kumin; McKay – Hughes – Brooks – Clifton – Dove; Bishop – Lowell – Plath – Berryman – Olds; and Tillie Olsen – Edwin Rolfe – Rukeyser – Levertov – Rich – Forché. Even these are incomplete, contentious, and tenuous. Do you trace “tradition” on the basis of aesthetics, styles, themes, commitments, or some combination thereof? How do you account for influences on U.S. poets from abroad, from England and Ireland as well as from France, Spain, Russia, Cuba, Chile, and Mexico?

There are also many Spanish traditions in America and, more specifically, in the land we now call the United States. José E. Limón thoroughly addresses one of the them in his aforementioned book. The corrido is an oral folk poetry that has been prominent both in Mexico and in the United States. He suggests that it is a key influence on the poetry of the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which I discuss here. Bilingual poetry, moreover, can no longer be ignored by the dominant literary culture as millions of Americans are now bilingual. Nor can Spanish be ignored as a crucial aspect of one of the primary rhetorical strategies for making political poetry in the United States. Finally, authenticity and
purity, as many cultural and postcolonial theorists have shown, are dangerous illusions usually put forth in the service of “traditions” that seek to maintain prejudicial power structures and linguistic inequalities.

The conscious mixing of traditions and languages can create exciting and discordant juxtapositions. The presence of Spanish in an “English” poem disrupts “tradition” and makes strange not only its sensual textures, but also the import of its messages. A canonical example in Latin American poetry illustrates these tensions, but from the opposite perspective. In Pablo Neruda’s “La United Fruit Co.” (Canto General 1950), the presence of English is menacing, disjunctive, and harsh. The title immediately suggests an uneasy tension between cultures and languages – the conjunction of the Spanish “La” with the untranslated name of an American company is discordant, especially since United Fruit Company is generally considered in Latin America as the actual and symbolic representative of the United States’s corrupt political and economic imperialism. In the fourth and fifth lines, “Coca-Cola Inc.” and “Ford Motors” stand out as harsh linguistic intrusions, aural metonyms for intrusive economic imperialism by U.S. companies. The names sound especially sinister when the poem is read aloud. Strange even in an entirely English poem, they literally create a break in the mellifluous Spanish:

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Cuando sonó la trompeta, estuvo
todo preparado en la tierra,
y Jehová repartió el mundo
a Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,
Ford Motors, y otras entidades
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The company names are clunky; the monosyllabics “Ford” and “Inc.” especially stand out amid the polysyllabics of the romance language. However, the two North American
corporations in the previous line – Coca Cola and Anaconda – sound like Spanish names, but they are made stranger, more foreign by the English abbreviation “Inc.”

The bicultural, bilingual texture at the outset of “La United Fruit Co.” provides an apt transition into the rhetorical elements of migratory agency. At the heart of these poems is a migration between languages and between cultures. These poems live and work in the contact zone between North American and Latin American cultures and between English and Spanish. They are agents of change that work to make multiculturalism and multilingualism vibrant parts of American literary culture. As Ada Savin notes in her essay on Lorna Dee Cervantes, the multilingualism of Latina/o poetry “acts out the living contact between the cultures in contact and their respective languages” (217). This continual migration paradoxically centers these political poems in a constantly moving space, one that does not rest in one culture or language.

The figure of the cultural and linguistic migrant, then, is key to the agency in these political poems. Teresa McKenna begins the first chapter of *Migrant Song* by citing a passage from Jimmy Santiago Baca’s “In My Land” (1979) to show that the image of the migrant symbolizes Chicano literature. She writes, “the primary metaphor for the experience is the migrant, who is at once the paradigmatic figure of displacement and oppression and the leading force of persistence in the vicissitudes of change. As both, the migrant finally underscores life-generating rebellion against cultural erasure” (9). Arturo Islas makes clear that the Mexican experience in the United States is one of the migrant, not the immigrant. He writes, “Mexicans did not cross an ocean with the intention of starting a brand new life in a ‘new’ world. They were already very much a part of the landscape even before it changed its name from ‘Mexico’ to the ‘United States’” (5). A similar notion informs the title of Jimmy
Santiago Baca’s first book – *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979). The poet/speaker in poems of migratory agency, then, is both the force of dynamic resistance to and the site of cultural and linguistic displacement. This speaker often uses displacement as a weapon and as a tool to refuse erasure by a melting pot that encourages amnesia and acquiescence.

In contrast to the previously discussed types of political poetry in which the strategies are the means to political intervention, the rhetorical strategy in poems of migratory agency is itself political. These poets have figured out how to make the form of their poetry political over and above its content. The multilingual form of these poems is political in its challenge to the dominant English discourse. As such, there is a form / content distinction in many of these poems similar to the one I outline later in my discussion of live hip hop. If a poem’s form is political, its overt content need not be political for it to be a political poem. However, the poems I discuss in this chapter are political in form and in content. The techniques used in poems of migratory agency are therefore both political ends themselves as well as tools for doing further political work.

Before looking at some specific examples of poems of migratory agency, I want to make a couple of further clarifications about code switching. While the previously discussed functions of code switching have been well-documented and apply to many works of migratory agency, both Cordelia Candelaria and Rafael Pérez-Torres suggest that other types of code switching in addition to the one between English and Spanish may be in play as well. Candelaria writes that Chicano poetry only appears bilingual “if one is not looking or listening very hard.” Instead, she rightly claims that much Chicano poetry has a remarkable “multilingualism” that uses “at least six different language systems” – Standard American English, Standard Spanish, English slang/vernacular, Spanish dialects (regional vernaculars),
English/Spanish bilingualism, and “an amalgam of pre-American indigenous languages” (Chicano Poetry 73 original emphasis). Pérez-Torres also points out that Chicano poetry moves not only between languages, but between vernaculars, registers, and colloquialisms. He writes, “Code-switching among Spanish, English, and the vernacular is a common means of expression used by multilingual speakers, a verbal strategy for conveying such information as sociopolitical identity and economic position” (Movements 17). The use of the vernacular in Chicano poetry, he continues, has “been an attempt to make present a silenced voice;” it “does not merely serve to ‘represent’ a community. It [also] serves to scrutinize the processes of discrimination and dispossession the community suffers” (233). Candelaria’s and Pérez-Torres’s comments indicate that all poets, indeed most of society’s agents, even monolingual speakers, have a variety of ways of speaking. In the movement between registers and languages there is a powerful agency both of representation and re-creation.

Poems of migratory agency, therefore, engage in a special kind of code switching because they involve not only registers of a single language, but variations on two languages. These political poems bound between languages; they reside in neither, but imply the “possibility of a third” language, “neither Spanish nor English but other” (Pérez-Torres Movements 17, 6). This latent language is actively shaped and developed in response to political, social, literary, and linguistic factors, working “between a potentially liberating language not yet born” (Movements 218) and those that are spoken by colonizers.

In the discussions that follow I try to expand upon the rhetorical techniques of this latent, growing language of migratory agency. How does this collection of strategies create political poems? How does the movement between languages create a unique political space wherein a dynamic agency helps to create powerful agents of multicultural change? Finally, the
poems I discuss occupy varying gradients on the English-Spanish language see-saw, but most of the poems I write about have more English than Spanish. This truth does not privilege English over Spanish; it merely suggests that the dominant mode for writing political poems in the United States still occurs on the cultural ground of English, although that ground is rapidly changing. Because Spanish often occurs on the ground of English in these poems, it has even greater significance and power. Some poems, moreover, may have few Spanish words, but those few have powerful rhetorical effects and a marked impact on the poem’s political strategy.

**Poems of Migratory Agency**

In a review of Derek Walcott’s *The Fortunate Traveller*, Helen Vendler suggests that the use of more than one language in a poem is a fool’s game for serious poets. After questioning Walcott’s use of patois and his alternations between “high” and “low” diction, she says that multilingual poetry embodies “a macaronic aesthetic” that “has never yet been sustained.” She goes on to acknowledge that even though Latina/o poets write in “a mixture” of English and Spanish, “neither language gains mastery.” For Vendler, multilingualism “may accurately reflect their linguistic predicament, but the mixed diction has yet to validate itself as a literary resource with aesthetic power” (“Poet of Two Worlds” 31). While Vendler’s stance on multilingual poetry may yet be indicative of many critics, her desire for a “mastery” of one language in poetry is disturbing, undesirable, and impossible. The implicit exclusion or erasure of one language via the “mastery” or primacy of one language in a poem is an illusion. Language is often haunted by the other languages it seeks to exclude as are cultures and countries haunted by those groups of people they seek to master.55 Such is the source of rebellion, uprising, and the eventual erosion of structures of “mastery.” Further, I
hope to show that the use of two languages is a “literary resource” with dynamic “aesthetic power” and political agency.

It is clear that neither language “gains mastery” in Chicano poet and painter Tino Villanueva’s “Nuestros Abuelos” due to the skewed power relations it depicts. The poem suggests that when one language gains mastery, suffering and oppression come shortly thereafter. Villanueva’s first book, *Hay otra voz Poems* (in English *There is Another Voice*), appeared in 1972, and his book *Scene from the Movie “Giant,”* which is comprised of a long poem rethinking the malicious perspective on Chicana/o identity in the 1956 film *Giant* starring James Dean, Rock Hudson, and Elizabeth Taylor, won the 1994 American Book Award. In “Nuestros abuelos” (*Shaking Off the Dark* 1994), Villanueva’s systematic language choices create a sophisticated sociopolitical framework. His linguistic choices produce a means for understanding the reality of Chicana/o laborers; they also comment on the history of struggle borne by contemporary Chicanas/os’ *abuelos* (grandparents or grandfathers).

Villanueva’s poem shows Chicana/o subjects not only split between languages, but also split between their bodies and the actions their bodies perform. Consequently, they are agents fundamentally separated from the objects and results of their actions. They do not, in Marxist terms, have any control over the capital they create for others. Even so, Villanueva’s seamless use of both languages symbolically redeems the “private suffering” (55) they endure in this state of physical, economic, and linguistic limbo. He immediately frames the poem in a state between languages – images of community are in Spanish while cold courtroom legalisms are in English. The first instance of this dualism is an English epigraph from the unjust, predatory courtroom of mid-nineteenth century California. It appears, as is
customary, between the title and the first line of the poem, which is also “Nuestros abuelos,”
and is attributed to “The Honorable Don Pedro de la Guerra,” a California senator, lawyer,
and judge of Spanish descent.

The epigraph and its footnote are key to understanding the poem’s suggestive
framework. According to the footnote below the poem, de la Guerra’s speech was
originally delivered in court on April 26, 1856 “in opposition to the ‘law to settle land titles
in California’” that was “approved by the legislature” that year. The epigraph and footnote
suggest to readers that the poem will be directly oppositional as well, but they soon learn
otherwise. The italicized epigraph begins with the seemingly rhetorical question, “Who are
the plaintiffs?” De la Guerra answers instantly and unambiguously. The aggrieved plaintiffs
in the case, which gave the traditional lands of Chicanas/os to white settlers, were the
“conquered who are humbled before the conqueror asking for his protection, while enjoying
what little their misfortune has left them.” The plaintiffs, moreover, were unable to
comprehend the “prevalent language” (English) of “their native soil,” which makes them
“strangers in their own land.” Here Villanueva (via de la Guerra) portrays the same
migrant’s (not immigrant’s) lament earlier depicted by Islas, Baca, and McKenna. In
choosing this epigraph, Villanueva uses the terms of colonial conquest, terms that highlight
the dislocation of Chicanas/os and their inability to resist it due to a lack of speaking skills in
the conqueror’s language. As such, they have been rendered childlike, obsequious, humbled,
and most disastrously, silent. They have not been driven off of their own land to other lands,
but made inferior on their own lands to “their conquerors,” which is colonization at its worst.

The epigraph appears between the repeated “Nuestros abuelos” and is huge and forbidding
in relation to them. Chicanos’ ancestors are figuratively small in English-speaking U.S.
courts. The epigraph and footnote combine for parts of eleven lines, while the poem itself only has sixteen. However, “nuestros abuelos” is important in that its Spanish rendering suggests that identity, family, and heritage are the province of Spanish-speaking roots, not Anglo North America. These two words imply that the poem’s speaker considers himself a product of a collective heritage of Chicanas/os, not of our heritage, but of nuestra herencia, in a line of descent from Spanish speakers rather than English speakers, as if to say the voices of the ancestors remain even in their absence.

While the poem is initially framed via unequal power and linguistic relations, its three stanzas insinuate that silence and anonymity result from such a structure. Bruce-Novoa claims that Villanueva’s poetry envisions “oppressive forces” that “threaten to relegate people to a silent, invisible, anonymous state of nonexistence.” Villanueva’s voice, Bruce-Novoa continues, “is faithful to the silent essences of life’s victims with whom the poet identifies.” Finally, as Bruce-Novoa is want to do in his strict structuralism, he suggests that Villanueva’s poetry displays a deep structure or essence: “Silence essentially characterizes life’s victims, while sound pertains to the oppressors” (131). In “Nuestros abuelos” that silence is pervasive but not total, but that sound is all “conqueror.” In the first stanza, in English except for the first two words, the ancestors’ “suffering” is “private” and therefore silent and anonymous. Moreover, their suffering occurs in an abstract space bounded by “the four winds of heaven / & the fifth sun.” This elemental abstraction is interminable precisely because it is bounded only by elements; their suffering, then, appears natural, elemental, and unchangeable.

On the third line of the first stanza, which consists of the single word “toiled,” Villanueva begins an axiomatic functional use of English and Spanish. All action verbs are in English:
“Nuestros abuelos” “toiled,” “carried,” and “genuflected.” In each of these simple past-tense, preterit verbs, the ancestors act on behalf of their North American “conquerors.” None of their actions work toward their own ends, only to serve humbly the manifest destiny of a growing white North American empire. When the grandparents “carried,” they “carried ties / for iron-horse companies.” When they “genuflected,” they “genuflected / for other similar go-West-young-man / enterprises.” Their actions are in English because the beneficiaries of those actions are white North Americans; their work enabled the prosperity and westward expansion of the United States. More hauntingly, their servitude and strength propped up the American Dream and those white Americans who sought it (“go-West-young man / enterprises”) on railroads built by Chicanos.

Yet, if their actions are symbolically silent because rendered in English and thus lost to them when they enter Anglo culture as completed actions, their worn bodies at least remain their own. In the second stanza, “sus espaldas” carry the railroad cross-ties and “sus coyunturas” bend in obeisance to manifest destiny so that the “go-West-young-man” can achieve the American Dream. The disturbing division goes something like this: the grandparents’ Chicano-Spanish backs and joints perform North American-English actions. Such a separation implies you can have our labor, but you cannot have our voices or our bodies. This division is crude, especially considering that for many indigenous peoples throughout Latin America Spanish is the language of the conqueror and oppressor. However, in Villanueva’s poem the bifurcation is subtle and clear, as are its implications for the two languages, but nevertheless disturbing.

The final stanza is entirely in Spanish, which might indicate that the English-language actions are completed, silenced, and that there is some hope for a self-determined Spanish-
speaking future. Whereas in the first two stanzas the silence and anonymity belonged to “nuestros abuelos,” in the final stanza silence and isolation symbolically apply to Anglo Americans who, unable to communicate in Spanish, are now symbolically strangers in their own land. While I do not want to overemphasize technical linguistic terms, the notion of “marked” and “unmarked” choices in code switching are helpful here.58 Eva Mendieta-Lombardo and Zaida A. Cintron write that code switching “among non-bilingual members of a community has a marked value,” while “among those who live with two cultures and languages it becomes an unmarked choice” (566). As such, the final stanza has a high markedness value for monolingual English speakers, but for bilingual speakers it is unmarked because moving between languages is common for Latinas/os. The final stanza thus silences monolingual-English readers in much the same way the “conquerors” did to Chicanas/os in mid-nineteenth century California.

Even as this isolation is enacted in the opposite direction, there is still an abiding silence in “nuestros abuelos.” The poem is devoid of interiority; because the ancestors’ suffering was “private,” it is now somewhat inaccessible to the reader. Everything is action, surface, body. In the final stanza there is no longer any separation between Chicana/o bodies and North American-English actions because all that is left is the corporeal. The only actions that occur in Spanish do so in the last stanza, but neither of them are positive. First, “Sus manos se hincharon de años / y de callos.” Their hands – here the Spanish is flexible – either swelled or were swollen since “se hincharon” can be either a simple past tense, reflexive third-person plural verb form or, as is the norm in much Spanish usage, the passive verb form. Accordingly, this action may be imposed upon the Chicana/o ancestors as the passive implies a lack of agency. It forebodes the possibility that even their bodies will be lost to them.
In this final line, the speaker describes his ancestors’ deaths in Spanish. Even though Spanish is now the controlling language, they remain silent, wordless, absent. “Sus cuerpos” (their bodies), in Villanueva’s final stanza, are “cansadas cicatrices” (tired scars) that have arrived (“han llegado”) at a “humilde tumba.” Their bodies, then, most curiously arrive at a single humble tomb – this communal grave ends the poem on a note of collective experience, community, and heritage. But here humility comes not in the language of the conqueror as it does in the epigraph but in the Spanish “humilde,” which is a more eloquent, mellifluous word than the English “humble.” Small consolation that they die in the beauty of poetry, in “la humilde tumba.” Unfortunately, for the speaker, this end seems inevitable due to the presence of a momentous “por eso” (literally *for this*, but usually considered as *therefore*) in the final stanza: “y por eso / sus cuerpos, / cansadas cicatrices, / han llegado / hasta la humilde tumba.” While not as dramatic, this *therefore* hangs on the end of the line and strongly suggests an inevitable outcome much as it does in James Wright’s “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio” (1963). In Wright’s poem, the destitution, frustration, and latent violence of poor fathers in the steel belt of the Ohio Valley is made manifest in their sons’ high school football games:

> Therefore  
> Their sons grow suicidally beautiful  
> At the beginning of October,  
> And gallop terribly against each other’s bodies.  

But, and here’s where the Spanish really packs an emotional punch: “therefore” sounds cold, distant, and legalistic, while “por eso” sounds like a plea, a slow drip into sadness whose three syllables can be painfully drawn out.

Villanueva’s poem sets some basic groundwork for my understanding of migratory agency. The poem moves strategically between languages like a migrant worker does
between locations. Without this migration, these poems would not be able to exert external influence back on the forces of culture and language that attempt to erase and determine Latina/o communities in the United States. The next poem I look at moves between languages as well, but it suggests that silence will not pervade the suffering of Chicanos. Like Tino Villanueva, José Montoya rose to prominence among Chicana/o poets in the late 1960s and early 1970s during the height of the Chicano Movement. Also like Villanueva, Montoya is both a poet and a painter. But, unlike Villanueva, Montoya’s Chicano nationalist politics are more direct and explicit. In the introduction to his selected poems, *In Formation: 20 Years of Joda* (1992), Olivia Castellano rightly claims that Montoya’s “La Jefita” and “El Louie” are, “without a doubt, the two most celebrated poems in Chicano literature to date” (xv), an assertion that rings true over a decade later if Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s *Yo Soy Joaquín / I am Joaquín* (1967) and Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* are considered as well. Both “La Jefita” and “El Louie” are discussed competently and at length elsewhere; here I focus on “Pacheco Pass” (1973), a poem that further elucidates the competing forces and cultural and linguistic (non)exchanges at work in “Nuestros Abuelos.”

In “Pacheco Pass,” Montoya uses a historical event as a microcosm of two primary conditions: the vapid, hedonistic pursuit of wealth and pleasure in the dominant North American culture and the abuse of Chicana/o culture in that selfsame pursuit. For the poem’s speaker, the “huge, blue lake / At the base of Pacheco Pass” (81), which was built during Ronald Reagan’s tenure as California governor (1967-1975), symbolizes the warped values of an entire culture. Like “Nuestros Abuelos,” Montoya’s poem focuses on the communal rather than the individual’s experience of suffering from the results of economic imperialism. And as in Luis J. Rodríguez’s “Then Comes A Day,” which I discussed in the first chapter,
“Pacheco Pass” is concerned with the notion of progress as it is usually understood in the United States. California, Montoya shows, now belongs to greedy Anglos, a fact that the speaker of “Nuestros Abuelos” would also attest to. As such, his poem is replete with the proper place names and concrete images of this California. Much like in Ernesto Cardenal’s exteriorismo, Montoya populates his poem with a world of concrete, proper places, people, and things, “Pacheco Pass” being but the first. “Reagan,” “Evinrudes,” “Hollister,” “Lamont,” “Coachella,” “Fresno,” and “Lodi” all make appearances in the poem.

Because the narrative voice of “Pacheco Pass” is English, it is tempting for monolingual English readers to ignore its numerous Spanish lines or to consider them merely verbal flourishes or aesthetic garnishes. However, linguist Guadalupe Valdés Fallis shows that “the consistent use of one language for narration makes it evident that code-switching is being employed for a definite effect” (880). This point suggests that John J. Gumperz and Edward Hernández’s claim that the U.S.’s bilingual speakers use English for narration or information and Spanish for “stylistic embroidery” (cited in Fallis 880) is strikingly inadequate. The Spanish of “Pacheco Pass” has an impact far greater than winning style points even though it undeniably lives and breathes from within the English-speaking, Anglo-controlled world of California in the early 1970s, a world in which César Chavez fought so hard for farm workers’ rights. The Spanish serves as a repository of community and a rallying cry for solidarity while the English is awkward and its narrative disturbing.

The story of “Pacheco Pass,” as it were, is populated by the quintessential American cowboy capitalist Reagan, a variety of California cities, and the American-made boat engines (Evinrudes) that power numerous pleasure crafts around countless artificial lakes. However, the poem’s English is marked by polysyllabic hyphenated compounds that make the Anglo-
American pursuit of wealth sound distorted. The initial description of the lake is clunky; it is a “man-made-for-growers-by / Agribusiness-unnatural lake.” This description implicitly condemns the construction of the lake as a solely for-profit venture, and the unwieldy hyphenated compounds suggest that this style of progress is merely additive – the more development the better, the more wealth the better, the-more-compounds-the-better. In the second stanza the purposes for the lake become even clearer; the “blue-green gem” was built “to boost Reagan / And a multi-million dollar / Industry to better and bigger / Things and hot summer fun.” Again unwieldy polysyllabic phrases proliferate. The English is chunky, artificial, and unpleasant: Montoya puts a transparent veneer of language over the lake, one that mimics its builders’ intentions and perversities, and therefore reveals its true character.

In the third stanza the poem changes from implicitly critical to directly biting and from mono- to bilingual. At the same time, transformation becomes both main theme and primary metaphor. The lake changes from a “blue-green gem” to a “Lake of blue blood” and to “el sudór / De campesinos.” Montoya gives us the other side of the picture: the “hot summer fun” of pleasure-seeking Anglo-Americans is also “the same hot summers” in which Latina/o campesinos (here farm laborers) are “beaten / By hired goons in the / Fertile valleys of despair.” The violent contrast between wealthy whites and poor Latinas/os, both of whom populate this valley – depending on the view, as it were – is one of a “a scenic drive” to “hot summer fun” versus one of “despair.”

The transformation is not only from one language to another and from one class status and power to another, it is also from past to present. The pass was once the celebrated “Ancient bridge-gap de mi / Gente – awesome gateway / To yet another valle salado.” It is “Now a scenic drive – with / A four-lane, super highway” with “a view” of the lake and its
“superficial mantle.” At this point, Montoya verges upon an old/new dichotomy in which all that is ancestral is glorious and all that is new is evil and superficial; such dichotomies are necessarily simplistic and generally elide histories of oppression that permeate all cultures, including Spanish-American ones. The danger is in the simultaneous, arbitrary glorification of one history of colonialism and the denigration of another. As in the Black Arts Movement and in anti-war poems of the 1960s, many Chicano Movement poems, because they are interventions in social injustice, often do not allow for complexities and qualifications. However, Montoya attempts to move in a different direction. He shows that progress is unable to “cover up” the suffering wrought by the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. Traces of better days and lives remain, but barely, because the land has been carved into a superhighway with a compromised view.

For Montoya’s speaker, the collective experience of Chicana/o suffering can never be fully obscured. Not even economic “progress” can cover it up, although it is clear that the view goes a long way to doing so for tourists and the rich. Valdés Fallis explains that in Montoya’s poetry Spanish is used as “a plea for unity” and a way to express “common experience” (882). In a landscape that is being swallowed up by progress and pleasure-seeking English speakers, Spanish eulogizes both past labors and present reverberations. In “Pacheco Pass,” this collective experience of suffering is bloody and goes largely unnoticed by the dominant white culture. However, the lake is “unable / To cover up” or silence totally this ubiquitous pain:

la sangre de
La Raza que todavía mancha
El camino viejo – vereda peligrosa
De los pobres – hoy retumban los
Gritos del pasado, barely audible
Above the roar of high-powered
There is great sadness and empathy in these lines. When the speaker emphasizes the collective cultural heritage of Chicanas/os – “La Raza” – as well as their hardships in the lands of California where their blood still stains (“todavía mancha”) the road that goes through the pass, he does so in dramatic Spanish. The experience is collective: on this dangerous path of the poor (“vereda peligrosa”), the “Gritos del pasado” (“screams of the past”) echo through the valley. Unfortunately, they are “barely audible” because of boat noise. There is a battle, then, between the rich and poor, and the pleasures of the rich, the speaker suggests, trump the suffering of the poor.

The next stanza is comprised entirely of six exclamatory Spanish sentences, beginning with the inverted exclamation marks of written Spanish and ending with exclamation marks customary in Spanish and English. In this stanza the tone, of course, is exclamatory; more importantly, the exclamations are a series of rallying cries and warnings for La Raza. For instance, the first one, “¡Se acabó el jale, Raza!” (The haul is finished, Raza!), potentially rallies Chicanas/os around the notion that the worst is over. Others are warnings – “¡Cuidense por ahí en el Pacheco Pass!” – to be careful. The final one assures Chicana/o audiences of a collective blessing before their journeys. Chicano poet and critic Alurista suggests that exclamatory lines are an important aspect of Chicano poetry – oral, public performance. Chicano poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s was “not a closet poetry;” instead, it occurred “in the thick and thin of the mass mobilization and dedicated organizing efforts” of the Chicano Movement (29). This stanza of “Pacheco Pass” is in part an oral, public performance of group organizing chants, which is clear in the plural verb forms (especially in the repetition of “nos” [we]) and in the forceful spoken rhythm of “¡Nos
guardan una carpa!” It is easy to imagine this line bellowed into a megaphone to a crowd. Here Spanish serves as a rallying cry for a community so it also excludes the ideas and people they are rallying against, most of whom speak English.

Sadly, this encouragement is deflated as the speaker openly wonders how many “familias enteras” – here again the collective experience of heritage is in Spanish – “left / Their dreams at the bottom” of the lake. This sobering question restores the order of inequality. The lake exists so that “the insensitive, white man” can have a “paradise / Retreat” “far removed” from the “violent / Carnage” and the “beating of women and children” that happens in “Lamont and Coachella,” in “Fresno and Lodi.” This notion dovetails with Simic’s “Paradise Motel,” and for Montoya, there are disturbing inconsistencies in North American culture that find their repository in this “paradise retreat.” The last two stanzas also partially restore the dominance of English, a dominance maintained via violence. They are both entirely in English as if suggesting that violence and insensitivity are province of Anglo Americans while suffering, dignity, and unity are the province of Spanish-speaking Chicanos.

Lorna Dee Cervantes’s “Poema para los Californios Muertos” (Emplumada 1981) shares many strategic and rhetorical similarities with “Nuestros Abuelos” and “Pacheco Pass.” However, unlike those two, Cervantes’s poem prominently features a first-person speaker who is dramatically present in the poem’s actions. This first-person speaker is instrumental in vivifying both the identity of the Chicana agent and a collective cultural memory. The first-person speaker brings greater emotional outrage to the poem than do the third-person narrators of the previous two poems. While the previous two poems are bilingual, and thus enact a type of split subject and cultural/linguistic migrant, “Poema para los Californios Muertos” also enacts an embodied first-person subject who is bilingual, bicultural, and
fissured between languages as well as between an inaccessible past and a future haunted by a ghostly absence of her cultural heritage.

English is the language of narration in “Poema para los Californios Muertos” as it is in “Pacheco Pass.” And, as in “Nuestros Abuelos,” Cervantes’s poem begins with an epigraph. This one, however, is brief: “Once a refuge for Mexican Californios…” It appears on a “plaque outside a restaurant in Los Altos, California, 1974” (42-43). This historical marker, Candelaria suggests, “operates as a mnemonic stimulus” for the speaker’s sense of heritage (“Rethinking” 125). The poem thus deals with a local history of small, dying California towns once home to Mexican Californios, and as the first lines make clear, the notion of progress as a false promise. An image of violent transformation marks the first lines: “These older towns die / into stretches of freeway. / The high scaffolding cuts a clean cesarean / across belly valleys and fertile dust.” The image of death exists simultaneously with one of life. As Chicano towns die, they morph into that prototypical beacon of prosperity – the freeway – and into the image of an unnatural, invasive parturition. Cervantes suggests that what is progressive is also regressive. The inevitable result of this death and birth is “a bastard child” of a city full of ghosts.

The speaker’s sense of dispossession becomes clear in the second stanza when she is physically present in Los Altos. Cervantes writes, “I run my fingers / across this brass plaque. / Its cold stirs in me a memory / of silver buckles and spent bullets.” Here the speaker gives us simple information about what she touches, how its surface feels, and what memories it arouses. She narrates in English her actions and the images the cold plaque “stirs” in her memory. These lines betray neither emotion nor overt opinion. Her actions are measured and composed, and her response is cold, distant. Even “silver buckles and spent bullets” have
little affective power despite the reader’s suspicion that these objects are symbols of white Euroamerican oppression, violence, and colonization.

Spanish, on the other hand, plays a role contradictory to the measured English. As Jeraldine R. Kraver explains, Spanish “is the language of anxiety, frustration, and rage” in “Poema para los Californios Muertos” (202). When the speaker switches languages in the second stanza, she moves from a narrative voice to one of rage, but also one that expresses collective identity, solidarity, and cultural heritage. About the dead Californios (“californios muertos”) she proclaims: “Yo recuerdo los antepasados muertos. / Los recuerdo en la sangre, / la sangre fértil,” an image that recalls Montoya’s “la sangre de / La Raza” that stains the earth. Cervantes’s speaker laments and identifies with her “antepasados muertos” (dead ancestors). Her memories of them are literally mediated through “sangre” (blood), both through the blood that courses through her veins and the blood that the dead Californios lost with their violent deaths.

In the third stanza, the speaker’s witness to absent presence extends into a pair of questions posed directly to the “ancient Californios.” She discovers absence inhabiting the restaurant and its surroundings even though “nothing remains” of their presence but an “old oak and an ill-placed plaque” so that the speaker sees “nothing but strangers.” “Nothing,” it seems, is sadly a key part of the speaker’s heritage. The second of these rhetorical questions is part existential and part practical. She addresses the absent Californios through apostrophe, which quickens them but makes them present in a landscape that allows their presence only in memorial: “Is it true that you still live here / in the shadows of these white, high-class houses?” The speaker, then, ponders whether or not there are ghosts of the dead Californios in the city as well as whether or not Chicanas/os actually still live there, not in a refugio
tranquilo, but in the “shadows” of poverty. In either case they are invisible but for the plaque, which the speaker suggests is a fabrication because they likely found no “refuge” there. They are absent both in historical terms and in the “shadows” that hide poverty from the larger white society.

This absent presence (“nothing” that is more than “nothing”) is itself a source of identity for the speaker. Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson writes that in Cervantes’s work “loss itself becomes a presence that enables” the speaker-poet “to imagine a community” (107). In the third stanza the speaker asserts her identity as a member of this imagined, but lost, community: “Soy la hija pobrecita / pero puedo maldecir estas fantasmas blancas.” These lines imply that her cultural inheritance from the Californios is meager, not invested with the agency necessary for social change. She says that she is their poor little daughter; here the Spanish diminutive form (the suffix –cita) suggests smallness, pity, and relative powerlessness. Despite her status as a “pobrecita” (literally, *poor little thing*), language can be a source of power and release. She is able to curse (“puedo maldecir”) the white ghosts (“fantasmas blancas”) that inhabit this haunted place. Language, then, especially Spanish, is a source of agency for the speaker, a powerful but perhaps unsustainable one. After all, how sustainable is cursing something that is absent?

Lynette Seator claims that “when Cervantes looks to language to connect her to her past, she finds a rupture, a rupture that her words attempt to bridge” (32). In “Poema para los Californios Muertos,” the speaker’s Spanish declarations of identity and solidarity insinuate that there is a rupture between history (the world of absence) and the contemporary North American cityscape (the world of presence). At the end of the third stanza, she says that only the ghosts of the dead Californios should remain (“deben aquí quedarse”) in this city, which
points to a desire to honor her dead ancestors and a fantasy of absolute separation between a white Euroamerican present and a Chicana/o past. Later, it is clear that there has been an erasure of history and that the plaque is but a superficial, dishonest attempt to make that history present. All that remains at the restaurant are “bitter antiques, / yanqui remnants,” “the pungent odor of crushed / eucalyptus,” and “the pure scent / of rage”; none of these presences, it seems, are “de los Californios.” Their history is conveniently bracketed in a small plaque – in effect a shrunken museum writ small, an image recalled earlier by Sherman Alexie’s “Evolution” and strangely, in scale, by the finger ring in Bly’s “Counting Small-Boned Bodies.”

Cervantes’s strategies highlight the fissure between history and the living present – even as that history has a palpable presence in each unfolding moment – and between the language of collective ancestral memory (Spanish) and that of her present life (English). There is political agency in both and in the space between. The poem’s Spanish effectively refuses to forgo a heritage of absence and loss and to submit fully to the world of appearances, to the notion of progress. Moreover, Cervantes’s poem denies American cultural progress spoken of in terms of the “melting pot.” Some things, she suggests, do not melt easily. They may be largely absent, but they ferment uneasily in “la sangre fértil” and they will eventually manifest themselves in everything planted in the fertile soil. The poem thus seems to say that in making “progress” you will reap what you sow; if you sow blood (“sangre”) you will reap it as well.

The three poems I have discussed thus far use code switching to foreground the sociopolitical and cultural experiences of Latinas/os and to deterritorialize the dominant language. But these poems’ primary political interests are not the interchanges and relations
between the languages themselves. Many bilingual poems (and a striking number of primarily English poems by bilingual Latina/o poets) take as their de facto subject the cross-pollination of languages and the cultures they inhabit. Many of these poems include explicit commentaries on the socioeconomic and power disparities between Spanish- and English-speaking communities in the United States. Poems such as Victor Hernández Cruz’s “Lunequisticos” (*Maraca* 2001) and Martín Espada’s “Mariano Explains Yanqui Colonialism to Judge Collings” and “Revolutionary Spanish Lesson” (*New and Selected Poems* 2003) suggest that language itself is a contestatory sphere and an appropriate vehicle for exploring power in a hybrid, constantly mutating culture, much as it is in postmodern literature and theory, especially in the work of Michel Foucault.

Gina Valdez’s “English Con Salsa” (1993) explores these inequalities and the somewhat superficial language reciprocation within an imaginary “ESL 100” classroom. The poem’s narrator, ostensibly an ESL (English as a Second Language) instructor, sarcastically and enthusiastically welcomes Mexican migrants/immigrants to the class. The poem has three main implications. First, the speaker cynically implies that Mexican immigrants learn English only to cook for and to serve food to U.S. English speakers. Second, Spanish-speaking immigrants will change, enrich, and enliven English. Third, students will put English on like a mask while retaining the spirit of their native cultures, lands, and languages, as if to say, *we will not be assimilated into your melting pot.*

Unlike in the previous three poems, Valdez’s poem has biting humor and a sardonic tone. As if spouting off a bizarre confessional first day introduction to the class, the speaker welcomes her students – “muchachos from Zochicalco,” “muchachas from Teocaltiche,” and “amigos del sur” (cited in *Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets* 203). The first words of each of the
poem’s three dense stanzas are “Welcome.” The first line, though, begins a general, subversive introduction to the class: “Welcome ESL 100, English Surely Latinized.” The syllabus, as it were, starts by dropping the article before ESL, a common problem for non-native speakers (which suggests that this course is taught by an ESL speaker), and by converting the ESL anagram into the funny, subversive “English Surely Latinized.” Immediately, then, the speaker undermines the primary purpose of many ESL classes – to get students to sound like North American English speakers. Instead, English will become “Latinized.” As Victor Hernández Cruz claims, Latina/o writers (and by extension speakers) are changing English syntax, making it more fluid; he says that Latinas/os “should change the English and give it spice, Hispanic mobility” (“Mountains” 673-674). After decades of the linguistic interchange prominent in a country-wide “ESL 100” classroom, English will “surely” be “Latinized.”

While Mexican immigrants have a certain potential power and agency in their abilities to transform English, there is something more invidious at work as well in the poem. In the second line, Valdez’s speaker begins to suggest that what immigrants will actually learn is service industry English. So, although English is “Latinized,” it is also “ingles con chile y cilantro” and “English as American / as Benito Juarez,” that seedy tourist trap of a town just over the Texas border. In a parodic tone the speaker urges her students to learn English so that they can be subservient to white customers. The lines lampoon actual fly-by-night ESL classes that promise future fame and fortune if the potential student learns English. I recently noticed numerous advertisements on New York City subway trains for ESL classes. The Spanish headlines promised: “Aprenda Inglés. Conoce Amigos” (Learn English. Make Friends.). In the poem, Valdez’s speaker makes unrealistic promises too: “Learn the language
of dolares and dolores, of kings / and queens, of Donald Duck and Batman. Holy Toluca! / In four months you’ll be speaking like George Washington.” Valdez’s teacher/advertiser initially mentions that English is the language of money and sorrows (“dolares and dolores”) in a remarkably fortuitous combination of Spanish words that sound almost exactly the same – in linguistic terms a “minimal pair.” After equating dollars with pain and sadness, the speaker regresses further into the realm of fantasy. No one, except for children, would want to speak like George Washington, cartoon characters, or superheroes. The speaker here sells American culture and fantasies about it, not language skills, just as the subway advertisements prey on immigrants’ loneliness, insecurities, and desires for acceptance.

Worse than the comic overtones of learning to speak like Donald Duck, Batman, and George Washington is the likelihood for many Mexican immigrants that they will spend their lives waiting on the wealthy white descendants of Washington. For this potentiality, after “four weeks you can ask, More coffee?” and “in two months / you can say, may I take your order?” If the student is persistent or merely seeks to survive north of the border, “in one year you / can ask for a raise, cool as the Tuxpan River.” These lines are the most sarcastic of the poem; they condemn the use-value of English when thought of solely as a way for immigrants to earn money. They also implicitly denounce the low glass ceiling for Mexican immigrants. But, at least for me, they embody a type of morbid humor, a laughing-at-the-gallows sensibility, and a knowing subversiveness.

Throughout the poem, the speaker connects English with the places, sensibilities, and languages of Mexico. The first metaphor comparing the immigrant’s future use of English to parts of the Mexican world appears in the last line of the first stanza: “you / can ask for a raise, cool as the Tuxpan River.” While this line clearly has a negative connotation, many
that follow do not. The speaker claims that “in this class,” they “speak English refrito.” This refried English is invigorated and transformed by Mexican places and experiences. They learn to speak English “tuned like a requinto from Uruapan,” “lighted by Oaxacan dawns,” and “spiked / with mezcal from Juchitan.” These juxtapositions exclaim a dissident sensibility: Students, English is yours, take it, make it your own, and do not lose your language or culture. Speak English like Pancho Villa or Emiliano Zapata might have, not like George Washington might have. She suggests that immigrants must reimagine the language of Washington in order to speak it themselves.

The abundance of Mexican proper place names (Benito Juarez, Zochicalco, Toluca, Tuxpan River, Teocaltiche, Uruapan, Oaxacan, Juchitan, Zapotec, Nahuatl, Lake Patzcuaro, and Jalisco) Mexicanize English and render it accessible to immigrants. More critically, the speaker eventually shifts from what the students will be able to do practically with English to what the students will bring to English and how they will change it – how they will attack it, have fun with it, and stamp new vibrancies on its syntax, its surfaces. These impulses emerge primarily from the notion that these immigrants/students have political agency, as the English they will learn to speak will be “poured from / a clay jug.” As such, it will originate with their histories, experiences, poverty, and their sense of the earth; it will not be poured into them by the dominant North American culture. The students will do the pouring of their cultures into the dominant one, which suggests both a type of power and the potential danger of their culture being swallowed by the dominant one.

While Valdez might overestimate the agency immigrants have in their transition between cultures and languages, her images of the power of these Spanish speakers to transform English are inspiring and inclusive. When the speaker “welcome(s)” the “amigos del sur,”
she encourages them to “bring” a variety of things with them, including their “Zapotec tongues” and “Nahuatl tones.” In doing so, she opens wide the linguistic and cultural doors of welcome, especially because even in Mexico indigenous speakers of Zapotec and Nahuatl (even if bilingual) are often marginalized from the larger Spanish-speaking culture. She also encourages them to “bring” their cultural icons with them. If North American “patron saints” are Batman and Washington, their “patron saints” are “Santa Tristeza, Santa Alegria, Santo Todolopuede.” Here earlier dualisms prevail – if there is a saint of sadness, there is also one of happiness. All is possible it seems. And, for the speaker, abundant optimism is not only within the purview of North Americans; the saint of you-can-do-anything (“Todolopuede”) comes with immigrants rather than it being discovered or bestowed upon them in the United States.

While such hopefulness is perhaps sardonic, muttered as a tongue-in-cheek nod to the unflappable “American Dream” that spits out many more dreamers than those who actually live theirs, there is real hopefulness in the speaker’s proclamations about immigrants’ abilities to change English, and by extension, the United States. The proclamations are playful and witty, but they also suggest a sense of agency able to enact a transformative process: the students “will sprinkle / holy water on pronouns, / make the sign of the cross / on past participles, jump like fish from Lake Patzcuaro / on gerunds, pour tequila from Jalisco on future perfects.” Sprinkling holy water, making the sign of the cross, jumping from water to air, and pouring tequila are all emblematic of transformative processes, the passing from one state into another. Each action moves from the quotidian to the transcendent. The students will transform the boredom of grammar to the transcendence of religion, the splendor of flying fish, and the festiveness of drunken revelry. Finally, the students are in
power positions. They will act upon English pronouns, past participles, gerunds, and future
perfects.

Like the previous three poems, English is the language of narration in Valdez’s “English
Con Salsa.” In her poem, however, the speaker implies that English will be spoken
differently by Mexican immigrants, that it will be spoken through a mask. Near the beginning
of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, the narrator speaks of his grandfather’s advice to treat
white people with the utmost deference and respect when face-to-face with them while
silently subverting their authority and power. In other words, his advice is to speak their
language but not to believe in it (16). Such is the implication in “English Con Salsa.” In this
ESL “course,” the immigrant students will have fun with English. They will put it on happily,
rejoicing in their new language. They will “say shoes and shit”; they will “grab a cool verb
and a pollo loco / and dance on the walls like chapulines.” In other words, they will happily
do the song-and-dance minstrel show that some North Americans ask of and want to see
from immigrants: be happy that you are here, and if you don’t like it and don’t want to speak
English, go back where you came from. Until then, make sure you show gratitude. As such,
the students will act like stereotypical buffoons or children, inanely repeating “shoes and
shit,” dancing the crazy chicken (“pollo loco”), and bouncing around in ecstasy like
grasshoppers (“chapulines”), all the while silently working to change English and North
American culture.

There is great facetiousness in the penultimate line in the speaker’s declaration that her
students will respond to questions of “Do you speak English?” with “of course. I love
English!” Both the tone and the exclamation mark suggest that love is not only too strong of
a word, but that the students’ “love” of English is an act. The poem’s final line is slow and
measured after a poem of quick, enjambed rhythms and fast lines. The speaker concludes that speaking English will be undergirded by other more ancient rhythms. She says, “And you’ll hum / a Mextec chant that touches la tierra and the heavens.” Because the speaker says this line immediately following “I love English!” it is a reminder that the immigrant students will make sense of the world with their native expressive traditions. English will be the language of the shallow everyday business transaction, Spanish and other indigenous languages the media of song, poetry, of “la tierra and the heavens.” In this poem, then, the alternating use of English and Spanish enacts the sociopolitical agency of immigrants even as it foregrounds the glass ceiling that traps immigrants and channels them into careers bouncing between restaurants.

**Bilingual Poems/Poets and the *Italics* Question**

The four poems of migratory agency I have looked at so far require readers to be competent in both English and Spanish. They would likely frustrate monolingual readers, sending them to the dictionary/diccionario too many times to have a fluid reading experience. This disruption is a critical aspect of these poets’ strategies; each disruption highlights the rift between languages and cultures enacted for bilingual and non-English-speaking Latinas/os on a daily basis. Code switching also interrupts the dominance of English and puts a stress on its supposed mastery of lesser “foreign” languages. As such, it is apparent that these poems are intended for a bilingual readership comfortable with both languages. If a poet must imagine her audience, it is safe to assume that the imagined audience for the previous poems of migratory agency is bilingual.

There are, however, poems of migratory agency that should not be considered fully bilingual poems. Even so, these primarily English poems highlight or foreground Spanish
words, phrases, and titles without excluding monolingual English speakers from them. In
2003, Chicana writer Pat Mora was asked about her use of Spanish in primarily English
works. Mora responded, “I’m writing to a great extent for an English-speaking audience. I
am bilingual, though English-dominant. I’m interested in including Spanish because it’s part
of my world, it’s part of my mind…There is subversion in the use of Spanish, very
consciously.” She goes on to say that she “want(s)” monolingual readers to be able to “stay
with” her, but that she also includes “double pleasures” – particularly resonant words and
phrases – specifically for bilingual readers (143). I do not want to suggest that Mora’s modus
operandi regarding English and Spanish is representative of other Latina/o poets, merely that
her calculated use of two languages points to both a dual-headed strategy and a bifurcated
audience for this poetry. Her claim also suggests Spanish lines in primarily English poems
can challenge the dominance of English in the sociopolitical discourses of the United States,
but it may do so subtly, subversively.

The majority of primarily English poems that strategically include Spanish words and
phrases literally highlight their Spanish textures by italicizing any Spanish words, phrases,
and sentences. The examples are numerous. Pedro Pietri’s “Puerto Rican Obituary” (1973),
Jimmy Santiago Baca’s “Mi Tío Baca el Poeta de Socorro” (1989), Pat Mora’s “Artista
Cubano” (1994), Sandra M. Castillo’s “En el Sol de Mi Barrio” and “Monday Night at
Pedro’s” (1997), Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “The Changeling” (1993), Virgil Suárez’s “Poem for
My Father” (2001) and “After Forty Years of Exile, The Poet Arrives” (2002), and Martín
Espada’s “Searching for La Revolución in the Streets of Tijuana” (2002) are just a few
political poems in English that use a proportionately small number of Spanish words and
phrases. The italicized Spanish words foreground these poems’ bifurcated worlds – switching
between cultures is analogous to switching between languages. Poems of migratory agency

do not need to have an equal number of Spanish and English words because poems migrate

between cultures as well as strictly between languages. Even a few Spanish words in a poem
serve as a metonym for a larger world excluded from the mainstream of U.S. English-
speaking culture. The ability to straddle and move between cultures is itself a form of
sociopolitical agency.

Castillo’s “Rincón” and Baca’s “Mi Tío Baca el Poeta de Socorro” are two political poems
of migratory agency with minimal Spanish but with great departures between English-
speaking and Spanish-speaking cultures. The use of Spanish is a signal or a slightly opened
doorway to this other world that impinges on the English-speaking one. Even so, in both
cases the Spanish – minimal though it may be – gives these poems their most critical
meanings, but in divergent ways. In Cuban-American Castillo’s poem, the speaker returns
home to visit the person she calls “my cousin, my brother, my love” after twenty-five years
in the U.S. (cited in Touching the Fire: Fifteen Poets of Today’s Latino Renaissance 16). In
Chicano-Apache Baca’s poem, two cultures with varying degrees of power clash – Chicano
campesinos and the U.S. Rangers who repress them. This relationship exposes rifts between
generations, methods of activism, and uses of art.

The setting of “Rincón” (Corner) is not in Havana or in Miami, but in an abstract
borderland. The first line is: “We curve along the edge of civilization.” The main actors in
the poem – the speaker, her relative and his son – travel in a liminal space in which a step to
either side will bring great change. On one side of this “edge” there are “overgrown
canefields,” “sombreroed men / with saffron skin and machetes,” “farm equipment, / tractors,
ox carts,” and people “who dare / to bicycle the island with children / strapped to homemade
wooden seats.” From the road the speaker and her companions “share” with these men, children, and equipment, the Cuban countryside is decidedly low-tech with its makeshift modes of transportation, “overgrown” crops, and “machetes,” that hand-held tool seen on rural roadsides throughout Latin America.

Over the course of the three-stanza poem, the speaker narrates this world with little commentary or emotional language. There is enough pathos in Cuba’s landscape of poverty to make up for direct editorialization or lamentation so there are few lines in English with direct feeling and judgment. When there is impassioned language, it holds great reservoirs of emotion, but it is subtle, reserved, and a bit ambiguous. The first such direct commentary occurs near the beginning of the second stanza when the speaker addresses her relative: “And you, a product of the revolution, / my cousin, my brother, my love, / have learned to live with horror.” She seems to equate the results of the revolution with “horror,” but leaves the reader to guess of what the horror consists. In contrast, Castillo first uses Spanish in the final lines of the first stanza as an emotional and editorial bookend to the description of the Cuban side of the “edge.” For the speaker, Cuba is a world of images and things rendered in English, while her feelings about that world are in Spanish: “un día cenizo y triste que se sienta / en mi garganta como un licor extraño” (original emphasis here and below). Here there is a shift between languages, typographies, cultural spheres, and intentions. The day in which they walk is ashen (“cenizo”) and sad (“triste”) and gives the speaker a strange taste in her throat (“garganta”). The worlds figuratively join there in a strange liquor (“un licor extraño”), in that place in the body that is a transitory border area between mouth and stomach. The two worlds literally collide in her body; she is in the middle of digesting the concoction that results from living in two worlds but not feeling at home in either.61
In this confusion, the speaker searches for answers in language and in symbols. The single Spanish line of the second stanza simply communicates elemental states of being and a contrived image. The speaker’s “cousin…brother…love” lives with “dolor y escasez,” sadness and poverty. Further, the speaker begins to address him directly – as she does for the rest of the poem – when she says that he has lived with “tus ojos tristes,” plainly translated as your sad eyes. The speaker seems to reach for something in the poem’s three Spanish lines, perhaps for elemental emotions and solidity, but most of all for closure, summary, and meaning to a history and a landscape devoid of those very things for her. The first line of the third stanza suggests that after more than two decades in the United States, the speaker still does not know which language or culture to turn to for meaning. She says, “It has taken me twenty-five years / to get here, to feel these sunburned vinyl seats / stick to my tourist skin with the adhesive that is sweat.” Here, the speaker’s interface with her environment – her sweaty skin – betrays unease in the cultural borderland between Cuba and North America. As earlier in the poem when the “choleric air” comes in “through the open windows / to touch our shoulders and lick our lips,” the environment of Cuba has power over the returning speaker. If the poem’s political power resides in the interface between cultures, languages, and the speaker and her environment, this political power is also difficult for the speaker to harness. Straddling two cultures can be both empowering and compromising.

The poem thus ends with this confusion, appropriately inside a car traveling in the countryside along an “edge,” not in one place or the other. The speaker, her “cousin…brother…love,” and his son travel with “the confused impurity” of the speaker’s “thoughts,” a confusion likely compounded by the young boy’s discrete action when he “reaches for his toy alligator, / a Florida souvenir.” This souvenir is the symbolic (and only)
representative of the other side of the “edge.” Both sides are equally strange and image-driven, and his reach for the toy gets the final say. Sadly, souvenirs travel most easily between cultures, but they have no practical longevity, only symbolic value of a place visited but not stayed in. This ending suggests one prominent point – that such “confusion” will be borne by children who will struggle to walk between worlds in some cases with only souvenirs to join them.

Poems such as Castillo’s can be politically problematic in that they often exclude one of the primary audiences their authors are interested in reaching or motivating – bilingual and primarily Spanish-speaking Latinas/os (in addition to the audience of mostly English-speaking poetry readers – students, scholars, and writers). Similarly, Baca’s “Mi Tío Baca el Poeta de Socorro” is primarily in English, but it is about the speaker’s uncle, a deceased poet who almost certainly wrote in Spanish. As such, Baca’s poem highlights the chasm between the uncle’s politically efficacious poems and the self-declared ineptitude of the speaker-poet to make a difference.

The migratory agency of Baca’s poem is cross-cultural, interlinguistic, and intergenerational. While the speaker is self-accusingly cynical and faithless, the power he summons is politically powerful, even if the spirit of that power is eulogized in his murdered uncle, a poet and labor organizer. According to the speaker, his uncle’s poems were tools used to organize his community’s resistance to oppression. As “Poet de Socorro,” a title that suggests Uncle Baca was both a poet of “socorro” (translated as help, assistance, or aid) and the poet of Socorro, the county in which Albuquerque is located (near Baca’s childhood home). As such, the title is both honorary and practical. In Tío Antonio Baca’s world, poetry was politically effective; his “poems roused la gente / to demand their land rights back”
(cited in *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern Poetry* 591-593). These are some of the most inspirational lines in contemporary poetry because they assert the political efficacy of poetry. Even though this is one of the few Spanish phrases in the poem, it is a repository of hope, power, and solidarity.

As testament to his influence in the Chicana/o community in New Mexico and to the force of his poetry, “men wearing remnants of Rinche uniforms” invade his house and assassinate him. “Los Rinches,” which is border Spanish for the Texas Rangers, are legendary for their history of treachery and violence against Chicanas/os in New Mexico and Texas. Rafael Pérez-Torres claims that Baca evokes the historical oppressiveness of the Rinches/Rangers as a “disembodied presence” that suggests that “their power lies beyond individuals,” a technique that “underscores the impersonality of repressive power” (*Movements* 81). Even though this anonymous – their faces are “masked in dusty hankies” – but specific repressive power drags Uncle Baca from his “one-room adobe” and murders him, there are several key agents that oppose this violence. First, the power of poetry. Uncle Baca’s Spanish-language poetry actually organized and energized *la gente* (the people). For the impoverished people of Socorro, then, their power too “lies beyond individuals.” The power of the uncle’s poetry also in part rests outside poems themselves and with the people who likely sung or chanted them in opposition to the theft of their lands. His poetry lives even after his death.

Second, Baca’s poem is an elegy not only to his uncle, but to community-based action motivated and organized partly by poetry. While Uncle Baca’s “house still stands” and the speaker-poet “drink(s)” in the “spirit” of Antonio, the speaker betrays a waning lack of hope in poetry and in the future as a whole. He says that he “descend(s) / into dangerous abysses of the future” and sounds unconvincing and desperate when he says, “I want to believe /
whatever problems we have, time will take / its course, they’ll be endured and consumed.” Unlike his uncle, the speaker lacks faith. The poem concludes with the speaker imagining following his dead uncle into a church, watching him “kneel before La Virgen De Guadalupe, / bloody lips moving slightly.” While the uncle’s “great gray head [is] poised in listening,” the speaker concludes “considering the words faith, prayer and forgiveness, / wishing, like you, I could believe them.” The speaker thus expresses his lack of faith in poetry, in community-based action, and in human goodness. While Pérez-Torres claims that the poem has an ambiguous ending (Movements 83), there is in fact a clear conclusion from the speaker. What is ambiguous is what the speaker will be like in the future. I see a glimmer of hope left due to his belief in the power of language. In the poem, language is capable of joining generations even as they simultaneously highlight the rift between generations; at the conclusion the speaker-poet affirms the power of the word: “a prayer on my lips bridges years of disaster between us.” Prayer, it is worth noting, can be either communal or private – that too is ambiguous.

If the model for community activism and the roles of poetry have changed from Uncle Baca to J.S. Baca, it may be due partly to a change in what Pérez-Torres calls the “process of affirmation.” This process, he writes, occurs on a personal level in Baca’s poetry whereas much Chicano Movement poetry was written explicitly for political organizing. Like much Black Arts Movement poetry, poetry of the Chicano Movement was driven by a “desire to organize a community for political action.” In contrast, Baca’s is not simply protest poetry or an organizing tool; as Pérez-Torres points out, it is more complex and nuanced and “represents a retreat from mass political movement, a reflection of the political situation during the Age of Reagan” (Movements 11-12, 47). Perhaps Baca’s tumultuous youth, well
documented elsewhere, turned him from the idealism of community-based activism. His poem is in part elegy to the tactics of the Chicano Movement and testimony to a more fragmented political reality. It is deeply personal and leans heavily on the strategies of experiential as well as migratory agency.

The gap between Baca’s and his uncle’s poetics represents a dilemma for poems of migratory agency as well as a rift between general notions of the poet’s role in Latin and North America. I want to return to the Latin American testimonio tradition to help elucidate this space. John Beverley defines the testimonio as a story “told in the first person by a narrator who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration” is “a significant life experience” (24). A testimonio, then, is a “narrative of real historical actors” that “communicate(s) a subject’s or subjects’ lived experiences” (Rosman 129-130). A testimonio, though, is not memoir or autobiography; it chronicles una lucha, a fight on behalf of la gente against injustice. As Beverley writes, “The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on” (26). In Latin America, it has traditionally been expected that poets enter these battles on behalf of la gente if they can avoid appropriating and romanticizing their struggles. Testimonio, though, has if not obviated then called into question the poet’s role as representative of the people because the repressed and illiterate now have a voice that both speaks for and founds a community.

“Mi Tío Baca el Poeta de Socorro,” while not a testimonio, is a variation on it and an implicit commentary on its cultural function. The poem’s speaker does not actively seek to speak for the la gente, but in holding up his uncle as an effective poet of the people, he upholds the tradition of representation he denies for himself. Baca’s speaker implies that his
role is not to speak for the oppressed or voiceless nor to found their community. Is this a
more orthodox North American view of poetry as private, emotional, even ineffective? Or is
the speaker-poet simply suggesting that when you fight for la gente and the final poem you
write is “scrawled across the page, / ‘¡Aquí vienen! ¡Aquí vienen! / Here they come!’” as an
angry mob comes to “‘Shoot the Mexican!,” that in some sense poetry will always ultimately
fail as a tool of revolution? Or is the uncle’s murder ultimately a vindication of poetry’s
power to move people?

If Baca is concerned about the poet’s role in the community, it relates intimately to what
George Yúdice points out about testimonio, that it “has contributed to the demise of the
traditional role of the intellectual/artist as spokesperson for the ‘voiceless’” because the
“oppressed feel more enabled to speak for themselves in the wake of the new social
movements, Liberation Theology, and other consciousness-raising grassroots movements.”
Consequently, “there is less of a social and cultural imperative for concerned writers to
heroically assume the grievances and demands of the oppressed” (42). The issue that I closed
the first chapter with – poets heroically assuming an embattled first-person “I” in their
willingness to witness atrocity – is thus even more tricky now that outlets such as the ones
Yúdice mentions have empowered the oppressed. But, this assumes that poets only speak for
the oppressed, not themselves as well. Baca suggests that point in his poem – he speaks for
himself and no other because, it seems, he believes he is not worthy of his uncle. In Baca’s
speaker, unlike in Baca’s uncle, whose poems “roused la gente” to fight for their rights, there
is an implicit movement away from the role of representative. However, for Baca’s speaker,
the imperative to fight for the oppressed is not gone, but simply inaccessible in an age of
cynicism. Yúdice longs for the authenticity of “non-mediated communication that testimonio
makes possible” (Rosman 128), but the speaker-poet in Baca’s poem in fact suggests that the word – prayers, poems, testimonios, stories – always mediates between generations and cultures, and that without those words, any hope for “faith, prayer, and forgiveness” may be lost.

Finding “America” in Poetry

The final two poems I discuss in this chapter are by U.S. Puerto Rican poets; the first, by Martín Espada, is just four lines, and the second, by Victor Hernández Cruz, is long. They are apt bookends to this chapter on migratory agency. They demonstrate in strikingly different ways the linguistic and political agency bilingual poets have (and do not have) in reshaping and reporting on life in the United States. Both poems have at their cores a search for justice for those who do not speak like Massachusetts Brahmin, Georgia aristocratic gentry, or Midwest protestants – the immigrants and migrants who live in and arrive in the United States looking for their American dream, often to see it torn to tatters as in the case of Espada’s poem, or to shape it into song and dance with the disparate materials at hand in the case of Cruz’s poem.

Espada’s “Mariano Explains Yanqui Colonialism to Judge Collings” (Trumpets from the Islands of Their Eviction 1987) looks and sounds more like a fragment of a play than a poem. It is a brief courtroom dialogue with three speakers/characters:

Judge: Does the prisoner understand his rights?
Interpreter: ¿Entiende usted sus derechos?
Prisoner: ¡Pa’l carajo!
Interpreter: Yes.                   (Alabanza 45 original emphasis)

Here I focus on two of the poem’s many fascinating elements – notions of justice and (mis)communication⁶³ and how they contribute to my ideas about migratory agency. Even if the reader is unfamiliar with Espada’s careers as a journalist who has worked civil wars in
Central America and as a lawyer who has represented Latinas/os, it is clear that the poem is concerned with justice. Given the conspicuous title, however, the possibilities for justice are extremely limited. One Spanish-speaking immigrant versus a system of United States colonialism? An individual charged with a crime versus a judge charged with enforcing colonialism, law, and order? Yet, if anyone can “explain” Yankee colonialism, it is an immigrant charged with a crime against a colonial power. The title suggests further that Mariano is in the act of speaking truth to that power.

Where, then, is the agency in this political poem? Is it entirely with the Judge and the system he or she represents? Or is the situation more complex than it first appears? Espada has said that he has long been interested in what he calls a “poetry of advocacy” that speaks “on behalf of those without an opportunity to be heard.” Moreover, he says that “the struggle for justice” and working through “justice in philosophical terms, in aesthetic terms, in practical terms” is the “single most important idea” in his poetry (Dick 29), a claim that dovetails with Robert Hass’s ideas about poetry and politics I cited in the conclusion to the first chapter. His emphasis on justice in this poem seems to reside – as it does in many other poems of migratory agency – in the space between cultures and languages. In this case that liminal border space is embodied by the “Interpreter,” who is the agent of both parties, the go-between who mediates the communication between Latino and North American, prisoner and captor, powerless and powerful.

If Mariano is charged and Judge Collings is in charge, then the Interpreter is charged with the greatest responsibility. He must facilitate communication and ensure that justice is possible. Without the Interpreter’s presence, there can be no interchange, especially since Judge and Prisoner never talk to each other directly. In effect, there is no dialogue between
cultures or languages or across power differences in the poem. Even though Judge Collings has much more power than Mariano, the Interpreter presumably works to level that playing field. The main power Mariano has in this situation is his ability to speak a language (and curse in a language) that Judge Collings does not understand. Even if upon first reading Mariano does not appear to “understand his rights,” after some consideration it is obvious that he does quite well.

When the Interpreter translates the Judge’s question for the Prisoner – “¿Entiende usted sus derechos?” – the Prisoner replies with an exclamatory expletive: “¡Pa’l carajo!” This phrase is an elusive one for non-Spanish speakers scrambling for their dictionaries. A colloquialism, it can be translated in a variety of ways including variations on “prick,” “shit,” and “damn it!,” but the most appropriate one is a resolute, angry “Go to Hell!” The Prisoner, it appears, understands his rights quite well. He seems to know that he has none, so his response is given in kind. As such, the Interpreter has no choice – “Go to hell!” equals “Yes,” or more appropriately, hell yes. It is prudent not to stop here though. Given the title’s implications, Mariano’s explanation of “Yanqui Colonialism to Judge Collings” is just that: “¡Pa’l carajo!” Mariano appears to say that U.S. imperialism says to the rest of the world, and especially to Latin America: go to hell; the only rights you have are the ones we allow you. Mariano explains this colonialism succinctly and venomously, but unfortunately seems to remain under its boot heel.

It is appropriate that we know nothing of his alleged crimes. From what the reader knows, there may not be one other than the prisoner’s inability to speak English. Espada opens the door just slightly and leaves much to readers as interpreters, which further suggests that bilingual readers and speakers have a great responsibility now in all of America (the
continent) to mediate between cultures and to facilitate communication between different groups of people and to make sure that the powerless can speak in more than just expletives. Santa Arias sums up this imperative in the suggestion that Espada’s work “has to be viewed as a bridge between First and Third World culture and politics.” She continues that Latina/o poets “write in order to present a testimonial of survival, but [also] to intervene at various levels in a definition of these borderlands, of what it is like to live in between geographical, linguistic, and cultural worlds” (237). Similarly, Gareth Williams “speaks of the need [for scholars] to mediate rather than dominate discourses of cultural exchange between Third World cultural production and First World institutional sites” (cited in Gugelberger 16). Espada’s poem is just such a mediating intervention, but it is an intervention of failure that highlights problems and cleverly creates (or represents) a microcosm of North-South relations in the Americas.

If Espada’s poem is terse, economic in language, and clever in its use of an iceberg effect, leaving unsaid the most important elements of the poem, then Victor Hernández Cruz’s “Areyto” (*Red Beans* 1991) is an extensive sprawl of enjambed polysyllabics, hybrid language, and constant motion. Its voiced feel and spoken word sensibilities create a movement that Cruz has described as “Spanish and English constantly breaking into each other like ocean waves” (“Mountains” 674). In the poem, he recreates the areyto circular dance performed for centuries by indigenous Taino in the Caribbean. Cruz has said that the areyto was a “singsong ceremony done in a round circle” that served as the “epics” of the Taino (Dick 57). He reworks this tradition in order to remake “America” as a multilingual, musical, and constantly dancing signifier, with the intention of letting all “Americans” into the circle if they are willing to dance.
Cruz has said that “language is motion” and that poetry is “action” because it is “a dance” and a “force of great physical urging.” If poetry is action and dance, Cruz’s in particular is concerned with fusion and with creating a “cultural brew” (Dick 56-57). To that end, “Areyto” actively fuses cultural elements into a unified, but always open, circle. However, “Areyto” should not be mistaken as assimilationist. It does not seek to enter the melting pot mainstream of U.S. society and thereby lose large parts of other American cultures. It is, instead, a jumbled mess that seeks to remain messy, dynamic.

English may be the primary language of Cruz’s “Areyto,” but as its speaker says, “The river on the other side / of English is carrying the message” (Maraca 150-153). This praise song of the Americas looks south for its inspirations, beyond the Rio Grande that porously (and poorly) separates English-speaking North America from Spanish-speaking Latin America. To listen to the contemporary white vigilantes, calling themselves the “Minutemen,” who now roam the Arizona border with rifles, something contaminated from that way comes, but in this poem it is beautiful and life-giving. The speaker repeatedly summons legendary mythical and historical leaders from the Caribbean and Central and South America, most of whom believed in the concept of a united America. In his invocations, he calls on Cuban poet/revolutionary José Martí, Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, and liberator Simón Bolívar, all of whom believed and fought for their ideas of a single América, unified and strong. He also invokes the legendary ruler of pre-Colombian Mexico, the Aztec-Toltec god Quetzalcóatl, in a moment of temporal hybridity: “Quetzalcóatl is on the phone.” Cruz calls on the muses, so to speak, of a vibrant Latin American history, not of conquest, colonization, dictatorships, civil wars, and poverty, but of revolution, liberation, poetry, philosophy, and unity.
The musical and dance traditions of the Americas also play a prominent role in Cruz’s “Areyto.” They mix with colors in Vasconcelos’s vision of a “RAZA CÓSMICA” that sees “red mixed with black / And black with white / Rhythms united married in history.” The combination of “Marimba tango samba / Danza Mambo bolero” and “Maraca güiro and drum / Quicharo maraca y tambor” serves as a pulsing repository of positive energy that functions as a séance or divination ceremony. For the speaker, “America is our belly / Our abdomen of spirit” from which emerges an active ceremony that chants a nation of diverse people into unified being through song. As such, Cruz’s areyto founds this new America as well as represents it. It is foundational and representational, English and Spanish, indigenous, African, and European.

There is a steadfast idealism in Cruz’s vision of America. In the final third of the poem, the speaker repeats the word “possible” seven times, as if hoping that the repetitions will call into being a unified America. In “Americas areyto,” it is not only “Possible to be / A whole unto one” and possible to have “A nation with lots of fish to / eat,” it is also “possible to be / pure fresh river water.” In passages such as these Cruz creates a utopia where poverty and greed no longer exist and where purity is a property of hybridity. In this idyllic world, positive social change is possible because agency is held within song, dance, and rhythm instead of by armies, corporations, and politicians.

This areyto, then, is an act of defiance “against conquistadors’ wishes” and against “racket and industrial tension” and “textbooks that are lying / tongues of pretensions.” Like many poems by Latinas/os, including Luis J. Rodríguez’s in the first chapter and others in this chapter, this one defies the “horizons / of progress” in the white, European-North American dominated west. As in other poems of this chapter, this defiance finds form in a hybrid
language, English and Spanish and neither all at once. This new language finds its first expression in the title; while an areyto is a Taino ritual dance, it should also be considered subtle linguistic experimentation. When broken into its constituent parts (as well as its syllables), “areyto” is “are” “y” and “to,” which is a combination of two English and one Spanish function words. “Are” signifies a state of being and suggests what the Americas “are”; “to” signifies a state of becoming and movement; and “y” is the Spanish conjunction and that joins the state of being to the one of becoming. As such, Spanish is the language that joins the cultures and peoples of América in this areyto, what they are and what they can be in the future.

The conjunction of English and Spanish in the title suggests the linguistic juxtapositions that abound in the poem, but it also undermines the notion of colonialism that equates cultural purity with linguistic sovereignty. For Hannah Arendt, sovereignty is the opposite of freedom. It is the position of the control freak and a fantasy of self-sufficiency; freedom, she thought, can only exist in a state of dependency and relation to others, while sovereignty is a fear of what others can and might do. Sovereignty, then, negates freedom. In Cruz’s America, linguistic purity and sovereignty are non-starters. As Frances R. Aparicio claims in an essay on Puerto Rican writing in the U.S., “prevailing linguistic policies and attitudes equate linguistic mixing with degeneration;” further, existing powers erect boundaries to keep languages from supposedly ‘contaminating’ each other” (164-165). Cruz “contaminates” both languages in response to the forces suggested by Arendt and Aparicio; he puts them “through phonetic, morphological and syntactical deformations that eventually produce a new language composed of the ruined remains of the two standard languages” (Esterrich 44). However, these “remains” are not “ruined.” They are regenerative because
they found a new America via the tools of music and dance – and all politics are a type of
dance – while they show the fluidity of a unified America. This dance is so fluid and unified
that it moves “with such precision / That ten thousand appear to be one.”

Part of this contamination/mixing is expressed in fast-paced spoken word phrasings and
inflections devoid of punctuation and full of internal rhyme and linguistic play. Yet, the best
instances of this (bi)linguistic play are paradoxically most capable of maximum effect when
read on the page rather than spoken aloud. In the lines “Linda America just rise and take / off
your clothes” the speaker implores “America” to strip away superficialities, materialisms,
and histories in order to reach a more natural state. 69 Here, as he does subtly throughout the
poem, Cruz slips slightly into ahistorical nostalgia for pre-conquest America. Even so, his
intentions are resolute and positive. “Linda,” which is a Spanish word meaning pretty or
lovely, suggests that America is beautiful but would be more so if it took off its “clothes.”
Moreover, “America” has agency activated by the dance; it is capable of acting for itself.
“Linda” can also be read as an English proper name; in the U.S. “Linda” is an name often
associated with the all-American white beauty queen. 70 It is difficult to get this doubling
when the poem is performed because the performer must choose how she wants to pronounce
“Linda,” with the Spanish ‘i’ (pronounced “ee”) or with the English phoneme [I]. When read
on the page, bilingual speakers familiar with U.S. culture will recognize Cruz’s nod to both
north and south.

This doubling is faster and more clever later in the poem. Again Cruz plays on the sonic
interfaces between Spanish and English, but in these latter instances the proper name is
Spanish and the adjective is English:

America sur south
America norte
Cruz places Spanish and English next to each other (“sur south”) not only for sound effects but also to connect linguistic traditions and seemingly disparate worlds (the south and the north, the undeveloped and the developed, the poor and the rich). “Juan America” is not only an America in which the names of America are Latina/o, it is also a place where “Juan” becomes “one” and “one” collapses into “Juan.” In the fluid circle of Cruz’s areyto, “it is possible” for America “to be one único Unidos” – one, only, united. The agency for this possibility is in the dance itself, in the language, music, and song that creates it and in the people joining hands in the circle. All of which suggests that code switching in poems of migratory agency is often used for purposes of sound and rhythm, but with added sociopolitical import. This is, after all, poetry.

Frances R. Aparicio points out that Cruz distinguishes between two types of bilingual literature, “making a clear differentiation between elite choices and colonial impositions” (164). On one hand there is bilingualism “that is a writer’s interest in other languages,” and on the other there is “imposed” bilingualism that impacts “an entire group of people, a whole culture” (*Panoramas* 128). This distinction is important, but I believe that in poems of migratory agency choice is equally as important as imposition. The two are not mutually exclusive, and excluding choice takes agency away from its source – the bilingual speaker’s skillful and strategic use of two languages. The writers of this chapter could choose to write in either Spanish or English because they are skilled in both; however difficult it would be to live without both languages, they could choose to write exclusively in just one. Chilean
novelist Isabel Allende, for example, has lived in California for many years, but still writes exclusively and successfully in Spanish.

It is also equally important to understand that many writers who use more than one language do so for “elite” reasons, as did Eliot and Pound, while others do so for less pretentious reasons. These poems are quite different from poems of migratory agency. Their code switching is likely not political, but used instead for sound and rhetorical effect or to represent some aspect of experience. For example, John Balaban’s “Agua Fria y Las Chicharras” (from *Words for My Daughter* 22-25, which was selected by W.S. Merwin as one of five books in the 1990 National Poetry Series) has a Spanish title and a few lines in Spanish. However, Balaban, who has produced outstanding translations of poems by Bulgarian poets Blaga Dimitrova and Georgi Borisov and Vietnamese poet Ho Xuan Huong, does not speak or read Spanish. Balaban appears to use the Spanish for two reasons – to authenticate an experience and for sound effects. Because the poem takes place in three places – the Alhambra in Spain, Arroyo Hondo in New Mexico, and outside Taos in New Mexico – the Spanish words authenticate and localize the poem and the experience therein.

The first section of the poem mainly focuses on sound, specifically on how “the voice of the Prophet,” the singing of “water-carriers,” the “spill of water,” and “locusts calling at the edge of wilderness” combine to create a type of simple beauty in language. As such, Balaban renders the title – which translates simply as “Cold Water and the Locusts” – and the water-carriers’ song in Spanish. Balaban likely uses Spanish in order to authenticate experience and to make poetry aurally pleasing. There are, however, countless problems with “authenticity,” as Balaban’s poem and my analysis of hip hop authenticity in the next chapter make clear. Further, Balaban’s poem and the hip hop discussion indicate that authenticity is staged, a
rhetorical device that trumps lived experience. One does not need to know a language in order to use it in a poem, but something is lost in this process, including any migratory agency. We should keep in mind that an interest in other cultures and languages does not necessarily imply “elite” intentions nor “colonial imposition” as any full reading of Balaban’s poem makes clear. But, it may imply a lesser status for the second language, although not the “mastery” that I referred to earlier in regard to Helen Vendler.

Balaban’s poem shows that code switching happens in monolingual poems as well, not between languages but between registers of the same language. Switching between high poetic language to colloquialism in the matter of a line occurs frequently in English language poems. Balaban’s speaker moves between lines such as “In the spill of water, the signature of god” to “the few friends he counted / were gone and God knows where.” Poets as different as John Ashbery, who is masterful at switching between jargons and registers, and Yusef Komunyakaa, whose “Changes; or, Reveries at a Window Overlooking a Country Road, with Two Women Talking Blues in the Kitchen” (Neon Vernacular 8-10) is a verbal and visual tour-de-force of code switching between registers, utilize different languages in their poems, even if they are not different standard languages. Chicano Ricardo Sánchez’s poems are some of the best examples not only of code switching between Spanish and English, but of switching between multiple registers – beat sensibilities, Caló, regional dialects, and barrio cultural expressions. He was central in El Movimiento in the 1960s and early 1970s, and his poems show that switching between registers is crucial to multicultural, multilingual poetry. Adapting one’s voice within a poem – between languages, registers, and cultures – makes migratory agency a strategy with real flexibility.
Summary and Conclusions

Poems of migratory agency are a significant part of the landscape of contemporary American political poetry. Their strategies and concerns strike to the heart of the ugly battles building in classes, courtrooms, and communities all across the United States. With debates about “illegal” immigrants and the rights they should be afforded, including bilingual education and public services, increasing in venom, and with vigilantes patrolling the Arizona border, Los Angeles welcoming their first Latino mayor since the 1870s (spring 2005), and Latinas/os becoming the largest minority in the United States, the definition of what it means to be “American” is continually changing. One of the most important sociopolitical frontiers in the United States is linguistic. Soon national and local politicians may not get away with simple Spanish soundbites such as “¡Viva Bush!” or “¡Vamos a ganar esta elección!” in lieu of real dialogues with Latinas/os.

Latina/o poetry – both bilingual and monolingual – will continue to flow into and out of these communities. Some of it will be angry and activist, while yet other of it will be integrationist. But, one thing is certain: there will be much more of it and it will become much more difficult for the academy to ignore. In his essay on Philip Levine’s poem about Hart Crane and Federico García Lorca’s 1929 encounter in Brooklyn, “On the Meeting of García Lorca and Hart Crane” (The Simple Truth 1994), Carl Good argues that these Modernist poets’ failed meeting is one of many telling “non-encounters” in the Americas, one in a long history of miscommunications between north and south, English- and Spanish-speaking, and one that in part symbolizes the “scholarly and literary neglect of the Hispanic dimension in the North American historical and literary imaginary” (234). These non-encounters will become more detrimental in years to come in the United States if the voices
represented in Latina/o poems are not heard and heeded. As teachers we should teach these poems, as readers read them, and as *Americans* understand what is *shared* in a hemisphere of both immigrants and indigenous. After all, what these poems *do* is share – languages, cultures, and spaces.

This poetry, moreover, will continue to have a dynamic migratory agency. Rafael Pérez-Torres writes that Latina/o poetry confronts “ideological positions in order to enable political criticism and action.” He continues by explaining that “the motivation” in much of it “is to work toward spiritual and political agency” (*Movements* 10). While poems of migratory agency have at their core an endeavor to create and harness a lasting sociopolitical agency, most of the poets whose poems appear in this chapter already have a type of agency borne of their positions in the larger culture. While I have claimed that much poetry is inherently countercultural and counterinstitutional, especially bilingual political poetry, we should consider that all but two of the poets discussed in this chapter – Baca and Cruz – teach at U.S. universities. They garner state salaries or ones funded heavily by major U.S. corporations and foundations. Does this fact point to my bias, my failure to choose more performance poets or local poets? Or, does it suggest that Latina/o poetry is becoming a critical part of the literary landscape in the U.S.? The main question, though, is itself political. Georg M. Gugelberger’s concerns for the testimonio apply to bilingual poetry: “What happens when modes of transgression become sanctioned and canonized?” While he suggests that “if you are housed in academia, you will have lost the power” of independence and subversion (2), a claim that is certainly meritable, I believe it is more appropriate to focus here on the positives of institutionalization.
Such a situation – bilingual poets teaching in increasing numbers at universities – should begin to ensure that Latina/o poetry will reach students who may otherwise be exposed only to Anglo American and a limited range of African American poetry. Their resistance to a completely English-speaking world is being mirrored in the larger Latina/o community. As increasing numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants continue to speak their native language and refuse to “assimilate” into “America” by giving up their own cultures, the greater the likelihood the United States will turn into a Spanish-speaking country (or a largely bilingual one). This is wide-scale, community-based political activism at its most subtle, but perhaps most efficacious. The poets of this chapter, then, may be in the forefront of a latent, quietly powerful political movement that could create widespread change. In the meantime, it is unclear how political poems of migratory agency will change. This chapter makes clear that suffering, violence, and sadness are prevailing aspects of the Latina/o experience, but that creativity, hope, and community are as well. Poets in this community must continue to ask themselves how they will move forward as citizens, speakers, and writers in a confusing but vibrant America.

In the next chapter I explore some issues related to one of the most popular, powerful, and self-reflexive languages spoken in the world – hip hop language. Although it is rarely acknowledged, Latinas/os were instrumental in the origins of hip hop music and culture in the Bronx and Queens in the mid-1970s. Some of the community-based values and the skepticism about and resistance to the dominant Anglo culture I discussed in the third chapter also inform much of the hip hop I write about in the fourth.
CHAPTER FOUR
Hip Hop Music and Culture

What is making us smarter is precisely what we thought was making us dumber: popular culture.
-From Malcolm Gladwell, “Brain Candy: Is pop culture dumbing us down or smartening us up?” (88).

Introduction

I begin with this epigraph from Malcolm Gladwell’s review of Steven Johnson’s Everything Bad Is Good for You – a book about how popular culture is making us smarter and more cognitively sophisticated citizens – not because I agree with the claim and want to prove that hip hop is somehow “smarter” than printed poetry. I begin with this claim because of what it made me realize about my own relationship with hip hop music. As I mentioned in the preface and introduction to this project, I am a long-time fan of the art form. I have remained dedicated to it from fifth grade to the present, through high school, college, several jobs, and years of graduate school, all the while seeing other interests slowly disappear. Hip hop has been a constant and consistent teacher for me. In addition to the ways it led me beyond the limitations of history classrooms to other historical traditions, my sense of justice, compassion for the impoverished, belief in community and multiculturalism, and my faith in the power of language and art to move people have all been continually reinforced by listening to and engaging with hip hop.

That brings me to an issue that both informs and troubles the work of this chapter. During the oral portion of my Ph.D. comprehensive exams, one of my committee members, a
prominent African American scholar, asked me – hypothetically of course – to respond to the claim that white critics will always be outsiders to black art. As a consequence, the claim goes, they should abstain from criticism because they will never be able to understand black art fully. While it is not my intention to dwell on that justification here, the question is especially pertinent for white critics of hip hop. Although, as Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace claimed in 1990, hip hop music is no longer a “closed show” for white people (23), the ground for all critics is unstable and deceptive. Patrick Neate points out that supporters of hip hop are generally leery of criticism. He notes that “criticizing hip-hop is somewhat frowned upon” by people in the culture, “especially if you purport to be a hip-hop lover yourself.” He continues, “Say a bad word about the culture and you’ll be derided for missing the point or not being ‘real’” (13). Despite problems with most notions of “keeping it real,” an overused phrase in hip hop that I discuss later, the prevalent suspicion of criticism is historically well-founded. In Reflecting Black, Michael Eric Dyson discusses widespread African American skepticism of cultural criticism because of criticism’s historical parallels with racist assumptions about black people. These fundamental conditions are especially precarious ground for white critics, whose counterparts do not face the same scrutiny in working with African American fiction. We – all critics of hip hop – must not be “tourists” who visit the culture for a year or so to write an article or book. Hip hop, unlike printed poetry, is lived culture and lived language and must be experienced first-hand.

The crucial danger for critics, then, is “authenticity.” Do you really know hip hop music and culture? Have you lived with it and in it? Outside observers and critics are usually scorned, largely because of their history of denigrating the culture. Yet, can’t outside voices be important? Isn’t that what most academic critics of poetry are? As I hope becomes clear in
this chapter, “authenticity” is a complex concept in hip hop culture. It is staged, performed, and constantly contested, and it is often bankrupt with dangerous inaccuracies. There is no simple equation for calculating it. For a critic, then, it is not only important to know what one’s talking about, but it is absolutely imperative to avoid a condescending, hierarchical position of privilege, something I am cognizant of throughout this chapter. Participation – which I explore in conjunction with live hip hop in the first section of the chapter – is a cornerstone of hip hop culture. So while I do not agree that white critics should not discuss or cannot understand black art, I do believe that non-participants in hip hop culture will never understand it well.

Because of the complexities of writing about hip hop, in this chapter I depart substantially from the trajectory of previous chapters. In earlier chapters, I outlined the rhetorical strategies of certain types of political poetry by examining representative poems. The results, I hope, were the elucidation of various approaches to making political poetry in the United States. In this chapter, I investigate a broader range of issues in hip hop culture and its varying political interventions. To begin, I discuss the diverse multiplicities of hip hop in order to establish some useful parameters for talking about types of hip hop music as well as to show how these parameters are fluid. Following that interlude, I discuss live hip hop shows at small clubs and how live hip hop has a stage (and a consumer market), as it were, for political impact that printed poetry does not. Next, I discuss “authenticity” and hip hop’s self-criticism, its dialogues with itself. In the final section, I focus on hip hop’s sense of agency and how hip hop artists are beginning to have a more palpable agency as political activists. In the conclusion to the chapter, I think briefly about hip hop as the world’s urban
poetry, both now and in a potentially dark future. But, first, I discuss some terms of contentious debate in hip hop.

All of the critical work of this chapter is informed by the notion that hip hop is not monolithic. Consequently, it is inaccurate to make any claim that hip hop is $x$ or that hip hop is not $x$. There will, however, be exceptions to every rule. In 1995, Russell A. Potter wrote that it is not possible to “take the diverse agglomeration of music that falls under ‘hip hop’ and make sweeping statements, whether of praise or condemnation” (130). I could not agree more. When critics essentialize, their conclusions are invariably naïve. In 1991, in *The New Republic*, David Samuels wrote that hip hop music is neither black nor music. In 2003, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Sanford Pinsker wrote that all hip hop is minstrel music, a claim I will discuss later. At the other end of the spectrum, any claim in 2005 that hip hop is hedonistic and hypermaterialistic misses the bigger picture. As Potter points out, many critics have falsely taken raps that are gay-bashing or misogynistic or that glorify violence and materialism as hip hop’s essence (102-103). How then should a writer make claims? With specificity, clear but malleable terms of debate, and qualification. In the following paragraphs I carefully outline some useful, but contentious, terms for understanding the various types of hip hop. Of course, it is prudent to note, many hip hop artists (as well as critics) are given to essentialisms (at least staged), about which I say more later in regard to “authenticity.”

It is no longer sufficiently explanatory to say that you listen to hip hop; you must qualify your declaration by stating which kind of hip hop you enjoy. Sometime last year I was shuffling through music magazines at a Barnes and Noble when a guy I recognized from hip hop shows in the area approached me and asked me what kind of hip hop I listened to. He
was, I knew, testing me. His question really meant something like this: *do you listen to “commercial” artists such as 50 Cent, Snoop, Lil Jon, and Eminem or do you listen to “underground” artists such as MF Doom, Cannibal Ox, and Dilated Peoples?* In other words, on which side of the fence do you stand that divides hip hop into commercial and underground? A few months after that in an organic food co-op another guy approached me and asked me about my t-shirt from an independent hip hop record label. He was excited because, and I paraphrase, *sometimes it’s hard to find true hip hop heads around here.* I had, by wearing that t-shirt, passed his “authenticity” test, just as I had at the bookstore when I dropped some names to establish my “underground” credibility. Both, incidentally, were African American, circumstantial evidence that undermines somewhat my later claims about fan demographics. The point of these stories is not to establish my credibility – among other hip hop fans I may have little because of my tastes – but to lay out the beginning terms of the debate. How can we make sense out of the dichotomies *commercial versus underground* and *mainstream versus independent?*

Many of the hip hop artists I discuss in this chapter record on independent record labels rather than on mainstream major record labels. Although they have less visible marketing campaigns and narrower distribution channels, and their videos appear only occasionally on MTV2 (but never on MTV), they are subject to little corporate oversight or creative control. As such, independent hip hop plays a valuable, if somewhat marginal, role in the ways that hip hop music is marketed, produced, created, and sustained. Artists recording on independent record labels have been transforming the industry through their innovative marketing and by being highly responsive to their audiences. Such approaches have begun making inroads on Ernest Allen, Jr.’s criticism of hip hop music’s political capabilities. He
writes that hip hop is “dependent on the market for dissemination,” which he rightly believes is a “significant political weakness” (160). His claim is especially pertinent to artists who record on independent record labels. Many of the artists who have the most challenging political content often record on independent labels; as a result they tend to sell fewer records, have less visibility in traditional media markets, more limited distribution, and smaller marketing budgets, all of which limit their political potential. As a counterpoint, though, moderately successful independent records sell in much greater quantities than do contemporary books of poetry.

One media that has helped independent artists is the internet. A specific example illuminates a variety of the ways that lesser-known artists connect with, get feedback from, and expand their audiences. On OkayPlayer, an artist-run website dedicated to promoting and discussing a collective of like-minded artists, message boards combine with pages of artist information, featured artist profiles, and daily updates on live shows, album releases, and other events involving OkayPlayer and other hip hop artists. It is not unusual for rappers to chat with fans on the message boards, where they often consider feedback, promote their work, and discuss upcoming events or other artists.74

Such a platform reveals a paradoxical truth – the artist who has the most control over her material is most open to the influence of her audience. Although many artists in the OkayPlayer collective record on major labels, they promote dozens of independent artists on a regular basis. Moreover, message boards and fan feedback allow artists to monitor their work by more than just album sales figures, which are often difficult to determine because Soundscan, the primary collector of national sales data, does not include sales numbers from independent, locally-owned record stores or from independent websites. In contrast, an artist
who works for a major label corporate conglomerate has much less control over his or her content and a much greater pressure to recoup huge marketing and production budgets with large sales figures. Much of the marketing for independent acts occurs on the internet, via word of mouth, in independent record stores, and at live shows, where lesser known and newer independent acts often open for better known independent artists. Such approaches are grassroots-generated compared to the mass market penetrations of the major record labels.

The ways that many independent and lesser-known artists approach their craft exhibits an acute understanding of what Tricia Rose calls the “cultural logic of hip hop” in her catalog of independent label successes (7). Hip hop began as a grassroots movement in public parks and on street corners, where “mixtapes” of music were sold and distributed locally and by word of mouth and where rappers, DJs, breakdancers, and graffiti artists mingled with and worked amid their fans, as many independent artists do now on the internet, at in-store performances, and in live shows at small clubs. Currently, independent labels such as Rhymesayers, Stones Throw, Heiro Imperium, ABB Records, Coup d’Etat Entertainment, Baby Grande, Definitive Jux, Fat Beats, Loud Records, 75 Ark, Female Fun Records, and Chocolate Industries include many of the socially and politically conscious artists that major labels usually ignore. In many instances hip hop artists are signed to independent labels but marketed and distributed by larger distribution companies, a practice which allows artists to have greater control over their content, production, and political engagements while having better distribution and marketing. Independents, then, play important roles not only in diversifying the expressive spectrum in hip hop, especially in support of politically and socially engaged artists, but in the ways that rappers and DJs receive and employ audience feedback, utilize democratic marketing channels, and work to remain free from corporate controlled major record labels.
The refusal of major labels, radio stations, and cable television networks to promote hip hop with challenging creative, social, and political content has made it increasingly difficult for listeners to access innovative, nuanced political and social messages through popular radio and television.\textsuperscript{75} For instance, Clear Channel owns over 1,200 radio stations and controls 70\% of major live music events in the United States. Clear Channel is also run by arch conservatives, which implies that they have a vested interest in making sure that the music they promote does not challenge their values.\textsuperscript{76} One critic writes that major labels shy away from more political rappers to sign artists that “have all the moves but little of the message” (Potter 147), which points to a potentially damaging divide between style and substance in much mainstream hip hop, most of which will make your head nod but your mind rot.

Michael Eric Dyson pointed out a trend in 1993 – record and radio executives opting for “pop rap as more acceptable than its realistic, politically conscious counterpart,” a tactic which he claimed results in “sterile hip hop that, devoid of its original fire, will offend no one” (8). If it was a trend in the early 1990s, when MTV and BET played videos by politically-engaged artists such as Brand Nubian, Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, and Poor Righteous Teachers, it is now the norm. Currently, the values of much mainstream hip hop are themselves causes for resistance for politically-engaged rappers in addition to the larger sociopolitical structures and figures against which hip hop has traditionally rebelled.

While in the late 1980s and early 1990s MTV prominently featured videos such as Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” and “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” the most politically forceful videos now on MTV are variations on Black Eyed Peas’s watered-down unity message featuring Justin Timberlake “Where is the Love?” While not discounting the politics
of pleasure, the Epicureanism of 50 Cent, Ludacris, J-Kwon, and others dominates MTV, BET, and Billboard sales charts seemingly without contesting or protesting anything. They are vacuous, but entertaining; but most distressingly for many hip hop fans, hip hop’s political conscience and its aesthetic of resistance have largely disappeared from mainstream media markets. This situation makes independent record labels crucial for maintaining hip hop’s founding ethics of countercultural resistance, creative renaissance, and community-based strength.

So if major record labels, radio and television stations do not support challenging hip hop music, who will? College radio stations have long been a major source of airplay for independent hip hop. As a middle school and high school student growing up in a college town, I listened to hip hop on the college radio station for hours many afternoons. I had my first introduction to much hip hop through this outlet. It is therefore difficult not to conclude that if you want to listen to politically and socially adept hip hop – with a few exceptions, who I mention later briefly – you have to be “in the know.” In other words, you must have internet access, access to a progressive college radio station, or extensive word-of-mouth connections. Just who is in the know poses a big problem for the future of hip hop, and is an issue I discuss in the next section of this chapter.

But, and here it gets complicated, it is often extremely difficult to differentiate between the musical content and style of much independent and mainstream hip hop. What defines them is largely not the music, but the market. The two “types” or “markets” are permeable and fluid and some artists move in and out of the underground or commercial scenes over time. I do not claim that all independent hip hop is “good” and that commercial, major label hip hop is “bad” even though most of the hip hop I listen to is either recorded on an independent label
or was recorded in the late 1980s or early 1990s. It is important to avoid a purist position that laments popular appeal and much of the vibrant and entertaining hip hop recorded on major labels. Such a position dovetails to many essentialist positions I try to undermine in this chapter.

Yet, it is also important to make clear the dramatic general divergences between these two wide streams of hip hop. As one critic claims, hip hop songs that appeal to a large audience are often “deliberately diluted in order to appeal to the pop market, i.e. the white music mainstream” (Allen 178). Further, in a recent interview, Slug of Atmosphere explains the difference between an MC such as the multi-million selling 50 Cent and one of hip hop’s foremost intellectuals, the didactic and politically-engaged KRS-One: “With someone like 50 Cent, he’s rapping for the whole world to listen to and to learn the words and sing along. But when KRS-One raps, it sounds like he’s talking to you – not to you and 50 million people, but just to you” (Turenne 66). The distinction Slug draws between these two iconic MCs puts into stark repose the ways that different rappers engage their audiences, and perhaps gives insight into their purposes as artists. His words are also an astute approach to understanding the sharp distinctions between hip hop songs that speak to issues, aesthetics, and political engagements and those that seek primarily to entertain. The most difficult aspect of this contrast is that those MCs who seem to speak most directly to their audiences as individuals are often the most political, which gives pause to any notion of hip hop as a political tool. However, successful politicians generally have the skill to make their audience members feel as if they are being spoken to directly, as individuals. So, this technique can be effective in engaging hip hop audiences as well.
To sum up, the consumer market for hip hop music is remarkably segmented and cliquish. One of the consequences of hip hop’s widespread acceptance as a consumer product is that artists currently making socially and politically conscious music often are considered “underground” or “independent” artists who usually record on smaller, independent record labels, while those artists – Jay-Z, Missy Eliot, Ludacris, 50 Cent, and Eminem amongst others – who sell millions of records and have countless videos on MTV are often considered “pop” artists. Further, many independent hip hop artists call attention to the values of mainstream hip hop as complicit with the segment of American values that oppress African Americans and disadvantaged urban Americans, an issue I explore at length in the second section of this chapter.

The “underground,” finally, poses substantial problems of both definition and classification. What exactly is “underground” hip hop? How is it different from hip hop you hear on the radio or see on MTV? Does it have different aesthetics? As I just mentioned the differences are often market-related rather than aesthetic. As such, it is never quite clear what the underground is even though some general ideas hold. KRS-One has said that hip hop has both “commercial” and “underground” sounds, but that “underground” music is fundamentally “raw” “ghetto music” as opposed to more “cooked” commercial rap (Potter 53). Cheryl L. Keyes briefly writes about the underground, and she mentions that Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Rah Digga, and Eminem started their careers “there,” without recognizing that the first three grew up in greater New York City, Eminem in Detroit (120). She has the same problem as Shusterman does when he discusses underground rap without attempting to explain his use of the term (625) and when Potter discusses the underground’s influence on hip hop as a whole without solidifying an understanding of underground hip hop (114).
Defining the “underground” is so challenging because it cannot be located in any strict sense in a geographical location, aesthetic sensibility, style, or subject matter, and any attempt to define narrowly a single “underground” is necessarily reductive and simplistic. Further, many artists, like the ones cited above by Keyes, are able to move out of the underground and into, in the case of Talib Kweli, the margins of the mainstream, or in the case of Eminem, fully into the public spotlight, or in the case of Mos Def, into the mainstream as a Broadway star, film actor, and rapper. The boundaries, then, between underground and commercial hip hop are permeable and bisect a variety of paradigms.

Finally, the “underground,” which is often used as a synonym for “independent” and vice versa, is like hip hop in general in that it is not monolithic. If anything, underground hip hop shows that if there is an essence to hip hop, it is one of creative diversity. Independent hip hop, then, includes a spectrum of values and styles. For example, Detroit’s Slum Village, who are overtly materialistic, are generally considered an underground act, while others such as New Yorker Immortal Technique, who is staunchly anti-capitalist, is an underground artist as well. For these reasons, the commercial / underground dichotomy is a false, misleading one, a claim implied by Talib Kweli’s “Good to You” (Quality), which defines his own music: “It’s not commercial or underground, it’s true.” Kweli’s resistance to categorization is common among hip hop artists. However, there has been no definitive work or statement about the “underground” either from within or outside the hip hop community. It will remain a shifting, elusive, and contested space. For that reason, in the rest of this chapter I consider the commercial / underground divide an artistic chimera, but not a market chimera. The “underground” is largely a function of audience and market rather than a function of style or aesthetics, as there is a broad cross-section of styles, aesthetics, and topical engagements in
the “underground.” However, almost all of the rappers making innovative and political hip hop record on independent labels. For these reasons, I use the terms mainstream and independent throughout the remainder of the chapter as they are more inclusive, permeable, and less divisive. They simply define where the music is recorded.

**Live Hip Hop, Collective Agency, and “Acting in Concert”**

In this section I explore the political potential of live hip hop music at small independent clubs. Unlike the private political exchange possible when an individual reads a poem, a hip hop show is capable of creating a participatory political space involving upwards of 600-700 people. Live hip hop aesthetics are the key element for giving the art form and its performers more political strength than printed poetry.

Given the increasingly oppressive influence of multinational corporations and multi-million dollar campaigns on the American political process, average citizens across the country are largely being precluded from participatory politics. As Michael Parenti writes, “The power of money works ceaselessly to reduce the influence of citizens who have nothing to offer but their votes” (219). Further, an abiding belief in isolated bourgeois individualism forestalls citizens from impacting politics, where only collective, not individual action, is capable of creating social and political change. One of the results of these two conditions is a lack of substantive participation in the public sphere. Richard Sennett notes that citizens’ engagements with public life are now a “matter of formal obligation” and “resigned acquiescence,” which leads to a fundamental suspicion of strangers and “the bond of a crowd” as opposed to the bonds of intimates (3). There are, however, several existing sites where rank and file citizens can participate in a coordinated political practice that enacts collective agency. Live hip hop shows that take place in small, independent clubs are
powerful instances of both community outreach and community building. In these shows, hip hop artists, in conjunction with a responsive audience, create a collective agency, wherein the audience members are at least momentarily empowered to enact change, to practice subversive action, and to speak out about injustice and current political issues. Michael Eric Dyson has suggested that the rap concert “creates space for cultural resistance and personal agency” (5-6), but the primary focus should not be on individual agency because it is problematic in the political realm. Instead, these shows ultimately create space for collective agency and identity, and audience members partly forgo their personal agency for a willingness to “act in concert.”

In this section I draw upon Hannah Arendt’s notion of “acting in concert” in order to illustrate the ways that the live hip hop show can be an interactive space of collective agency and coordinated political practice. In live shows, performers and audience jointly produce a space of interactive engagement in which they can contest dominant cultural values. In the following pages I outline the dynamics of live shows at small clubs, briefly discuss five shows as case studies, and consider some significant problems with audiences at live shows, including the difficulties of translating political action from the clubs into larger public spaces. My face-to-face experience with the live performances of the following artists contributes to my conclusions: Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Biz Markie, The Roots, The Coup, Talib Kweli, Eyedea & Abilities, Living Legends, Murs, Little Brother, Dilated Peoples, Prince Paul, Aesop Rock, Brother Ali, Micranots, Atmosphere, Cunninlynguists, Brand Nubian, C-Rayz Walz, Cannibal Ox, and J-Live. These shows, and others like them at small, independent clubs across the country, help illuminate the ways that hip hop artists utilize alternative channels for community
building and participatory political engagement. These shows all took place in small clubs or on college campuses; such venues are crucial to my interpretation of hip hop shows as examples of Arendtian public spaces and should be differentiated from large arena shows. I return to the problematics of large arena shows later in this section. Finally, all of the shows I discuss as case studies took place at Cat’s Cradle (capacity 600-700), located a mile from the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As such, these examples should be considered local, specific ones, but also ones that provide evidence for the dynamics of live shows at small clubs throughout the U.S. The demographics of Cat’s Cradle, moreover, bring up some difficult but illuminating questions about the state of hip hop.78

The lost experience of the political – citizens acting together in a public space with coordinated effort – is a distinctive characteristic of the hip hop show that points to the inroads many hip hop artists make against a politically disinterested individualism that encourages us “to get what we can for ourselves and not be too troubled by the problems faced by others” (Sennett 31). The hip hop artists I discuss here often challenge this brand of individualism; as such, their shows have different social and political value as well as a different niche in the consumer market than contemporary multi-platinum, mainstream hip hop. Their live shows balance the way that much mainstream hip hop styles “socially competitive consumption as a viable mode of civic participation and personal fulfillment” (Smith 71). In his article on social mobility and the “hip hop mogul,” Christopher Holmes Smith suggests that for wealthy hip hop luminaries such as Sean “P-Diddy” Combs and Master P and the artists who emulate them, a successful rapper’s “upwardly mobile ascent is not tethered to a sense of either individual propriety or communal accountability” (80). Under these prevailing mainstream conditions in which individual wealth and a
“consumptive ethos” (71) are paramount, the live hip hop show at a small club is a sorely needed corrective. These shows unveil an aspect of hip hop culture that is concerned both with collective experience and with collective – rather than individual – identity. As Patrick Neate writes, hip hop must maintain some independence from the “corporate giants that do neither the form nor its worldwide consumers any favors” (257-8). Live shows at small clubs work to counter unchecked individualism, passive consumerism, and big business.

During these live shows artists and audience create a community-based space. Hannah Arendt’s work on the necessity of well-defined public spaces for participatory politics illuminates the hip hop show as a space that enacts collective agency and identity while giving citizens an experience of a practice that is fundamentally political. Arendt’s critique of western representative democracies focuses on the ways that they exclude citizens from “participating, and having a share in public power” (On Revolution 255). She contends that the primary understanding of citizenship in contemporary western cultures centers on the self-interested, economically inclined, politically detached individual. For Arendt, such an exclusion from the political realm is disastrous. Only in these spaces can citizens discover their identities, since identity is only possible as a product of intersubjective relations.

In these public spaces, power is created when “people gather together and ‘act in concert’” (The Human Condition 244). Hip hop artists have figured out how to be political by enacting a sense of collective identity between themselves and their audiences during their performances, by “acting in concert” with their audiences. Thus, despite her embarrassing inability to take into account economic inequality and her claim that freedom is a luxury item, Arendt’s notion of public space frames the hip hop show as a realm of freedom, a place where action can occur and in which spontaneity is enabled. Tricia Rose’s claim that rap is a
“contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless” (125), and that rap groups use the show setting to address social and political issues, is further illuminated by Arendt’s concept of freedom, in that hip hop artists have a certain freedom on stage they may not have in the larger sociopolitical world. Moreover, Arendt wants to carve out boundaried public spaces where action is undetermined. These public spaces call forth performances that would not be possible in other spaces; they also dramatically enable performances that question authority and challenge audience members to act for social change, even as they entertain. For Arendt, this space has two dimensions material to hip hop shows – the individual performance and the intersubjective relations that allow the space to function. Action can occur in this displayed space, which constitutes a political realm, only if there are spectators who are not intimates. These characteristics work toward a description of many hip hop shows with their vibrant and young multicultural audiences full of people who do not know each other, generally affordable ticket prices, and dynamic performances.

While Arendt’s work on public space and freedom illuminates some characteristics of live hip hop, Miriam Hansen’s foreword to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s influential Public Sphere and Experience clarifies some key components of “counterpublic” spaces that can be applied to live shows as well. She points out that in “alternative public spheres” (xiv) lived experience is “organized” from “‘below,’ by the experiencing subjects themselves, on the basis of their context of living” instead of from “above,” “by the exclusionary standards of high culture or in the interest of property” (xxxi). At live hip hop shows at small clubs, performers and crowd act in concert and in doing so “organize” their experience from below, literally from the underground, which is what independent hip hop music is often called. This “radical form of democracy” organizes actors and performers and empowers people who are
often left out of public debates due to age, race, education, and socioeconomic status (xxxi). However, as Negt and Kluge admit, “no local counterpublic can emerge today outside or independently of” larger, more powerful commercial structures (Hansen xxxv). As such, the small club show exists in an implicit relationship to corporate power and mainstream hip hop riches. To begin to address this concern, I want to take a brief detour into postmodernism and hip hop music as a radical political “practice.”

If live hip hop shows can organize experience in order to enact coordinated collective identity and agency, it is crucial to understand hip hop as a political practice. Live hip hop must be the fundamental component of Russell A. Potter’s and Richard Shusterman’s assertions of hip hop as a cultural practice. In 1991, pragmatist critic Shusterman tentatively proposed that hip hop was the “new radical cultural politics” Fredric Jameson claimed was only “hypothetical” in his much-discussed “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (627). Potter claims that hip hop is “a vernacular practice” that depends on audience and performers collectively producing “a zone of sonic and cultural bricolage.” Hip hop, he says, is a “practice in action” (45-6). Shusterman’s and Potter’s notions of hip hop as a practice and as a form of cultural politics is best activated by – and indeed, is dependent upon – live shows, where it is possible to see hip hop as a political practice in action. While both understand hip hop as a fundamentally postmodern art, I want to suggest that even if its production and its musical form are postmodern, the space and form of the small club live show are not. Here, many basic features of postmodernism are trampled: the subject is alive not dead, agency is present not absent, uncertainty and ambiguity are difficult to find (confidence is paramount), and community is active instead of simulated via passively received simulacra. A postmodern musical form need not obviate concerted political action.
In live hip hop shows, finally, it is not futile to dissent, mobilize, and speak truth to power. Active participation works against cynicism and complacency.

Unlike political poetry, where a poem is adjudged to be political based largely on its content or rhetorical strategies, hip hop’s political import is partially a function of the form of its performance and the context for the performance. The shows I discuss here occupy specific historical moments, moments that are important for those live shows in which performers comment on current issues. However, the political work of a live hip hop show does not rely exclusively upon the particular historical moment during which it occurs. A performer can abstain from making any definitive political comment during a show and still work to enact in the audience a sense of collective agency. Therefore, a primary difference between the political work of poetry and hip hop is the striking form / content distinction in hip hop performance. While it would be exceedingly difficult for poets such as Mark Strand, Sharon Olds, Louise Glück, or Dave Smith to politicize a reading of their poetry due to its generally politically disinterested content, hip hop artists have figured out how to make the form of their shows political. Even if the overt content of an artist’s lyrics is not political, their show can be political due to the ways that shows build collective agency and identity. The functional and intimate interaction between performers and audience foregrounds the form of the show, even if its content is not candidly political. In contrast, poetry readings are often dour affairs with polite applause; even in poetry slams there is often little interaction other than in voting or in encouraging.

The primary methods of interaction in hip hop shows are long standing traditions in African American culture. Many of hip hop’s most astute critics have alluded to these techniques, but none have given extended treatment to live hip hop performance, with the
exception of Greg Dimitriadis and Tricia Rose, who ably tackles the “context for its public reception,” primarily focusing on large arena shows during the early 1990s. She also alludes to the form / content distinction when she warns against the pitfalls of saying hip hop artists who do not have explicit political subjects do no political work (124). William Eric Perkins rightly points out the influence of call-and-response on live hip hop techniques, in lines of descent from western Africa to African American gospel performances to the present. He draws a connection between jazz band leaders and hip hop’s MCs in his discussion of the “reciprocity between the band and the audience,” where the performer “shapes the audience’s participation, which then spurs the band leader to further improvisation” (2-3). This reciprocity is the crucial interchange that functionally enables the quasi-public space in which agency is created. Annette J. Saddik, in an essay on the performance of black male identity and hip hop, asserts that hip hop is a “postmodern form of drama that draws on a long tradition of African American performance – incorporating, revising, and re-creating as it sees fit to serve more current social needs” (112). Cheryl L. Keyes also briefly discusses the “verbal and physical interplay” between artist and audience (151), while Nelson George points out some essentials of hip hop performance when he writes that Cowboy of early hip hop group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five invented phrases such as “Throw your hands in the air and wave them like you just don’t care!” (20). Call-and-response staples such as this one help to structure live hip hop. They provide the working blueprint for the fashioning of collective identity and collective agency; in each of the following case studies call-and-response anchors performer / audience collaboration.

On February 15, 2003, when San Francisco-based group Living Legends performed on the “Creative Differences” tour at Cat’s Cradle, it was almost a month away from President
Bush’s declaration of war against Iraq on March 19, during a time when it was becoming obvious that such a course of action was imminent. Although Living Legends, a collection of eight MCs, was primarily interested in entertaining the audience, there was no shortage of social and political commentary. The prominence of calls for peace and demonstrations of peace signs in call-and-response between stage and audience, often done in explicitly stated reference to the building war effort, was one of the most salient features of the evening. The crowd was buoyant and responsive, thus enabling the features Arendt claims are necessary to constitute this public space of action – courageous individual performance, intersubjective relations between relative strangers, “acting in concert,” and collective identity. The participatory form of the show created a politics of engagement between audience and performers and within the audience that superseded the actual political content. Each time the audience called for peace in response to Living Legends, it was “acting in concert” and creating a collective identity.

Nearly a year earlier, on April 12, 2002, Oakland-based rap group The Coup, widely considered one of the most political groups in the hip hop community, performed at Cat’s Cradle. This show, unlike most of Living Legends’ performance, united explicit political content with the political form inherent in small club hip hop shows. On their latest album – Party Music (2001) – MC Boots Riley uses Marxist rhetoric to attack the power of multinational corporations, the oppression of wage laborers via exorbitant rents and unfair wages, American imperialism, unchecked capitalism, and institutionalized religion’s willful ignorance of social justice issues, all the while proclaiming pro-union, pro-Zapatista, and pro-revolution stances. The proletarian message is best distilled in one line, rendered in Spanish: “Pro-La Raza sayin’ ‘Fuck La Migra!’” (“Ride the Fence”). This exclamation is an
explicit refusal to accept the immigration authority’s likely attempts to send Chicanos out of California from land that was ceded from Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. The result of such moves by official power structures and the greedy rich leaves only crumbs to the race ("La Raza" here is read as encompassing African Americans, Hispanics, and the poor of all races). The Coup’s song is a call to action for social change and a dramatic redistribution of wealth via the land.

Between politically resonant songs such as these during the April 2002 show, Boots Riley assumed the role of a grassroots political activist. He spoke to the audience about police brutality and inequality in North Carolina, growing poverty in the United States, the war on terrorism, and the war in Afghanistan. He carefully oscillated between stories of police brutality in Durham (10 miles from Cat’s Cradle) to global issues, continually imploring the audience to fight against war, inequality, and the conditions that enable terrorism. The show ended with what amounted to a demand for assent from the audience. To paraphrase Riley – “You’re not going to go home and forget about this, are you? It’s up to you all to act.”

Crucially, the reception of such a message is contextualized within the public space of freedom, where collective agency empowers the audience to act. Under such auspices, Riley’s message is not unsolicited proselytizing or a threatening demand, but an interactive exchange with the audience. Arendt’s desire to remove a means / end vocabulary from public spaces and the actions contained therein demonstrates that the audience is not a passive recipient of a performer’s message. If the audience is not solely a means to an end for the performer’s goals, the interaction can create a collective political engagement.

On November 17, 2003, Minneapolis-based hip hop group Atmosphere performed at Cat’s Cradle. While Atmosphere’s songs are generally not overtly political, this particular show
had an overtly political ambience, immediately visible upon entering the club. In the small
booth where artists sell CDs, t-shirts, and other products, there were anti-George Bush t-
shirts for sale. During the last section of the show Atmosphere MC Slug (Sean Daley)
derided the policies of the president and implored all audience members to take but one
message from the show – to go to the polls and vote. During the processes of direct address
and call-and-response he urged everyone in the audience to look around at the other audience
members, saying – and I paraphrase – this is your community, the community that is created
through hip hop music; you all must look out for each other and help each other, so get
together, vote, and create change. Miriam Hansen notes that “the language of community
provides a powerful matrix of identification and thus may function as a mobilizing force for
transformative politics,” a possibility I saw at work in this Atmosphere show. However, this
language must also “admit difference and differentiation within its own borders” (xxxvi), a
task many artists view as difficult, a point I return to later in this section of the chapter.

This message of community, though, is largely untenable in a realm other than the public
space of the show, for example in a poetry reading or public speech when it can become
uncomfortable when a poet grows preachy or didactic. For Arendt, the public space of the
political is a “realm of freedom and equality precisely because the realm dissolves when it is
not the product of an intersubjective ‘acting in concert’ in which every participant engages
willingly” (McGowan 73). At a show such as Atmosphere’s, all participants engage in the
collective action willingly. This enthusiastic “acting in concert” both enables the space to
exist and is enabled by the space. Such willingness makes tenable Slug’s attempts to
mobilize youth for a cause. This tactic links to Arendt’s efforts to think of a public space as a
place wherein citizens can interact without the influence of the state, institutions, and
corporations, since institutionalization, she believed, kills the spirit of action. This show encouraged audience members to harness the state (through voting and collective action) even as it circumvented the institutional, corporate influence that undermines so many mainstream musical acts. Recording on an independent record label and performing at venues that are not sponsored by large corporations (such as large arenas, amphitheaters, and concert halls) may allow for more piercing social and political commentary and a political space unhindered by overt commercialization.

On September 30, 2004, the night of the first presidential debates, Cunninlynguists opened for Brand Nubian at Cat’s Cradle. The show demonstrated the potential for what can be done when people “act in concert.” Further, it showed the Arendtian notion of power as a force “that makes it possible to achieve some ends that cannot be reached individually” (McGowan 75-6) – widespread social and political change as well as a collective experience of the political. Cunninlynguists’ call-and-response “Fuck George Bush, say fuck George Bush” united a group of citizens in a coordinated political practice that is literally unachievable in an individual forum. The call-and-response created collective motivation in the audience. Creating political change at the highest level is not possible from an individual perspective, but collective identity and agency are capable of creating change. This show showed citizens acting at a local site that makes possible “the direct participation” of citizens in “the public affairs of the country” (On Revolution 263). While this type of participation is possible at political rallies, these rallies are often party- or organization-sponsored. The hip hop show, on the other hand, is an art form that entertains, enables collective agency, and gives its participants an experience of the political.
“The Best Damn Rap Tour,” which stopped at Cat’s Cradle on June 27, 2005, is the last case study discussed here. The show included C-Rayz Walz (recently featured on an issue of MTV’s Made as a freestyle rap coach), Vast Aire and Cannibal Ox, and J-Live. The most striking aspect of this show was its myriad subversions of the corporate-dominated music world. First, the show cost just $12 for nearly four and half hours of music by three reputable artists; second, the artists mingled with fans in the audience during the opening acts, talking and listening; third, the artists were at the “merch” (merchandise) table selling (and autographing) their records directly to fans. (It is easy to notice the parallels with poetry readings and public speeches by poets which almost always include merchandise tables where you can buy their books afterwards.) This direct relationship between performers and their audience is a much needed intervention in the mythology, distance, and wealth of highly-mediated celebrity and corporate cultures. It moves hip hop away from videos and celebrities and back to its beginnings in the late 1970s and early 1980s when it “was dependent upon face-to-face interaction and small-scale mediation” in which the “event itself was more important than any particular separable discourse” (Dimitriadis 184). For many independent artists, the live show is still the cornerstone of the art, although a skeptic could say that these artists simply do not have access to larger commercial channels and would use them if they did. But as C-Rayz Walz raps on his latest album, “I won’t dumb it down to double my dollars” (“First Words Worse” Year of the Beast 2005). This stated ethic permeates the independent hip hop music scene, but is difficult to parse for its truth-value.

The centrality of live hip hop to independent artists and audiences may partially alleviate the concerns of many critics and fans. Central to their concerns is the prominence of costly videos and marketing at the expense of “face-to-face community building practices”
Regardless of the differences between the two, the visual is key to both. Things were not always this way. In Elizabethan England, theatergoers went to “hear” a play. Now, however, American theatergoers, although largely from a different socioeconomic class than most theatergoers in sixteenth and seventeenth century London, go to “see” a Broadway play. Twenty-first century audiences go to “see” a hip hop show, whether that show is in a small club or in a large arena. Even if the audience attends in part for the aural experience, the visual dimension takes precedence in the way that encounters with live musical performances are explained. This modest sociolinguistic change is just one of many wrought by a visually-dominated consumer culture of films, music videos, television, and the Internet. But, for hip hop, it points to an existential crisis. Nelson George, one of hip hop’s most astute mainstream commentators, laments that music videos, while indispensable in disseminating hip hop culture globally, have transformed the art form’s fundamental aesthetic from its very public gestation period in city parks and on street corners in the Bronx and Queens to one that thrives on sophisticated marketing, image construction, and video editing. He claims that hip hop video “has removed live performance from the center of its aesthetic” (111-13). Of greater consequence is the danger this dynamic presents to the axiomatic exchange between audience and artist key to hip hop aesthetics.

In contrast to George’s claim and Greg Dimitriadis’s concern that there is an “increasing lack of space for live production and congregation” (191), hip hop shows at small clubs work to keep live performance at the center of the aesthetic partly by engaging hip hop fans in a coordinated political experience. But the question remains: What is it about the small club hip hop show that brings the hip hop aesthetic back to live performance as a central aesthetic axiom? What is it more specifically about the hip hop show in a small club that is different
from a hip hop show in a large arena or stadium? Are the dynamics of a politically engaged public space unique to small clubs? In addition to dramatically cheaper ticket prices and a relative freedom from corporate and institutional influence, the primary factor that differentiates small clubs from large arenas is the sense of immersion possible in a small club.

The full immersion of the audience in a show is due somewhat to the close architectural confines, the usually hot temperatures inside, the high decibel sound levels, and the inability to separate oneself from the energy unless one leaves the club. The close confines and small stage – which usually separates the audience from performers not with floor space but vertically by just a few feet – lead to increased intimacy between performers and their audience. In this atmosphere it is not unusual to see artists walking around the club before or after the show, signing records, and directly engaging audience members during the show by addressing them, talking to them, and giving them handshakes. All of these possibilities are dramatically foreclosed during the large arena show. It is reasonable to conclude that large arena shows may be capable of creating a sense of collective identity, but not coordinated collective agency, since collective agency and political practice, as Arendt shows, depend upon intimate intersubjective relations. The large arena show, with its implicit emphasis on spectacle and the resulting wide-eyed consumption of that spectacle, has a fundamentally different and distant dynamic.

American pragmatism’s rejection of Cartesian subject-object dualism is a key to understanding the immersion possible in a live hip hop show at a small club. As outlined by Cornel West in his book on pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey rejected Cartesian subjectivism and its attendant “fictive” spectator theory of
knowledge, which is predicated upon a subject / object dualism in which the self (the “spectator”) is a detached observer who comes to know an object from a position fundamentally apart from what she comes to know. Peirce, James, and Dewey reject the subject / object binary and show that the individual is always embedded in relationships with other people, social, political, and economic conditions, and the “furniture of the world” that predate any separation of subject and object and that are continuously subject to change. The individual always finds herself in medias res – in the middle of things – so that all experience is prior to a subject / object split (West 44, 56, 89, 91-2).

This is exactly the type of immersion that exists in a small club. If we bracket the handful of people lingering at the back of the club, there are few “spectators” at a small club hip hop show. The vast majority are active participants emerged fully in the middle of things. The only way one can really know the small club show is not by being a detached observer but by sweating and participating in the calls and responses, by chanting song choruses when prompted, by joining in the enactment of collective agency, and by “acting in concert.” In many of the live shows I have attended, the artists have often ridiculed (“called out” in hip hop vernacular) or encouraged the few stragglers usually present in the back of the room. These outliers, the artists imply, are antithetical to the art form and to live hip hop aesthetics. In large arena shows, this level of intimacy and interaction is much more difficult, and passive consumption is closer to the norm, especially if we consider applause and screaming not primarily participatory but congratulatory. A crude maxim largely holds: in a small club the audience participates, in a large arena the audience observes, at a poetry reading the audience politely applauds.
Another way of describing the immersion possible in a small club is in terms of synaesthesia. The experience of collective identity and agency created in the space of the live show to some extent cannot be separated from the multiple sensory experiences that merge into each other and the senses that are elicited by other senses. *A Handbook to Literature* defines synaesthesia as “the concurrent response of two or more of the senses to the stimulation of one.” The primary senses directly stimulated during a small club hip hop show are hearing, sight, and touch, which is not to mention the sense of taste often stimulated by alcohol or the sense of smell created by alcohol, sweat, and smoke. Without one of these elements, the others would have a less palpable effect. For instance, if the sense of touch – largely a product of venue size – were sacrificed, the intimate connection with other audience members so crucial to Arendt’s theory would be greatly compromised. One cannot merely “watch” the artists on stage without being assaulted by the sonic power of microphones, recorded bass lines and snare drums, and other people’s bodies. But, perhaps the most interesting synaesthetic-like experience is the way that the audience experiences the political through intense sensory stimulation. It is rare for citizens to have an intimate political experience via their senses, especially an interactive experience that joins them to other people.

A further dynamic illuminated by the form / content distinction in live hip hop is the role of lyrics in live hip hop performances. While actual lyrical content is to some extent immaterial to the political work of live hip hop, it is important to hip hop aesthetics as a whole. Understanding many hip hop lyrics requires intensive listening and well-trained ears. This task is especially difficult at live shows, where the acoustics and sound levels may not be conducive to understanding all of the performer’s lyrics. For example, if the bass levels
are tuned too low (where lower means more bass) and the microphones’ volumes are not loud enough, it may be difficult to understand an MC’s lyrics. So, while it is almost always easy to understand calls-and-responses, it may be difficult to understand the lyrics themselves. But, as Potter writes, “Hip hop audiences do not, at any rate, merely listen – passive reception is no longer possible” (original emphasis 108). Indeed, passive reception is extremely difficult in a live show at a small club as MCs demand that their audiences stay responsive. As such, the live show functionally eliminates the problem outlined in Little Brother’s “The Listening” (The Listening 2002). The song suggests that passive reception is not only possible but may be the norm for many fans who listen to hip hop in their home or car.

In “The Listening,” Little Brother’s two MCs, Phonte and Big Pooh, rap about the current state of hip hop music, reminiscing about their childhood obsessions with memorizing rap lyrics while lamenting that currently, “don’t nobody care what you’re saying.” During one verse, they dramatize an encounter with a fan who says that “all she listens to is beats,” meaning that she cares only about the rhythm, melody, and bass line of the song, not its lyrical content. The quick-witted chorus further elucidates the problem for MCs with carefully written lyrics. It claims that people “ain’t listening / they’re thinking about their Timberlands / they say the shit we talk about ain’t interesting / we got a better chance of blowing up in Switzerland.” According to the chorus, active listening has been symbolically replaced by an icon of consumer culture (Timberland boots). Additionally, they self-deprecatingly claim that they have a much greater chance of becoming popular in Switzerland, where English is not even the primary language, than in the United States. While the song points to some potentially disturbing questions about the state of hip hop (and
American) culture, it also suggests that live shows help to eliminate what Little Brother views as a big problem in contemporary hip hop – disengaged, passive listening. Passive listening, even if one cannot understand all of the lyrics, is exceedingly difficult in a small club hip hop show due to the emphasis given to active participation that is always a product of paying close attention to the performers’ engagements with the audience and responding to them quickly and energetically.

If we consider not participating an untenable option at a small club hip hop show, are there elements of coercion present? In other words, do artists pressure, coerce, and force their audiences to participate as they wish? Some basic assumptions need to be addressed to answer this question. First, artists seemingly must speculate about their audience’s viewpoints. Unlike records, live performances call forth immediate feedback and judgment. As Arendt might have said, individual performances in these public spaces require courage. Further, since live hip hop at small clubs is wholly dependent upon its audience’s active participation and consent, performers must work to ensure that their audience is engaged. However, audience members have presumably entered the space of their own volition with relatively full knowledge of what they must bring to the show. They are also free to leave if they do not want to participate in the collective experience.

The most difficult aspect of the previous question concerns potential “groupthink” problems. Slug of Atmosphere evinced a keen understanding of this issue at the November 2003 Cat’s Cradle show. After an interlude between songs in which his DJ played the Rage Against the Machine lyrics “Fuck you I won’t do what you tell me,” he sheepishly mentioned to the crowd the irony of such lyrics in light of his calls-and-responses that the audience follows without hesitation or deviation. It seems prudent to attribute Slug’s commentary
more to egotism than to a submissive, mechanistic audience. Or, as Hansen points out, he understands that his actions function “as rhetoric” and “as a trope of impossible authenticity” (xxxvi). In any case, “acting in concert” involves collectively working to achieve what cannot be done individually. The power of acting together inherently includes the danger of blindly following.

This issue also points to the indispensability for live hip hop of magnanimous personalities capable of virtuosic performances. Arendt writes that the virtuosity of performance in spontaneously created political space should not be thought of as a consumable product. She writes that “virtuosity” is “an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence” (Between 153). The virtuosity of a hip hop performance is categorically different from the albums fans buy. The quasi-public space of the show, its audience participation, and the ability of performers to connect with that audience create a virtual space of interaction, impossible when a private citizen listens to a record in her home, office, or car. One pressing question remains: Can the agency of a live hip hop show translate from the public space of the show into the larger realms of representative democracy, where urgent social problems and economic inequalities remain, and where money, not virtuosity or audience participation, control politics?

Many readers may question any premise about the political potency of live hip hop shows if it is not also possible for the collective agency and political experience created by “acting in concert” to translate into action and change in the larger world. Angela Ards, in a 1999 article in The Nation, discusses the difficulties of moving from hip hop as entertainment to
hip hop as activism. She claims that “what look like mere social events may represent a *prepolitical* phase of consciousness building that’s integral to [political] organizing” (my emphasis 14). I, however, believe it is important to think of live shows not as “prepolitical” but as fully *political* events in that they establish community-based interpersonal relationships and create democratic, political spaces. They *are* organizing. According to Arendt, action in these public spaces “always establishes relationships” (*The Human Condition* 190). Moreover, the “extent of those relationships and their consequences are impossible to know (and hence control) in advance” (McGowan 68). Arendt claims that every action is a “miracle” since it introduces something new into the world; consequently, it is not possible to predict with accuracy an action’s future effects or how it will translate outside that space. Arendt wants to preserve public spaces for actions that can be creative, world-disclosing, and unbounded by the limitations of reductive cause and effect calculations. As such, the long term political and social effects of a performance are unknowable in advance. An artistic performance, we could say, often enters the world as an Arendtian “miracle” whose effects in the wider world are initially unknowable. Finally, it seems fatuous to claim that at any moment in history one can know the lasting sociopolitical effects of a single hip hop show, poem, novel, or painting. An element of the unknown accompanies all forays into and out of what Arendt calls the public space of freedom and action.

Ultimately, the live hip hop show depends upon the performances of both artist and audience in a way that poetry, most other art forms, and many political performances such as debates do not. For collective agency to be enacted and for assent to be elicited and channeled into creative energy, both artist and audience must “act in concert.”
audience’s collective identity, then, is created intersubjectively between themselves and between the artists and themselves. If we can view live hip hop as a way of making inroads against any notion of art as fundamentally separate from its audience, the live hip hop show at a small club can be seen as a crucial element of localized participatory democracy. In a country where actual participation in politics is becoming increasingly more difficult and expensive, the hip hop show stands out as a remarkable event not only in the music industry, but in a tradition of local participatory politics in American history.

However, as with any art form or consumer product, the greatest power resides largely with audiences. The space of a live hip hop show, then, is enabled by the people who buy tickets and travel to shows. Also, it is advantageous (but not necessary) for the audience to know the music of the artist before they see them perform as it allows audience members to recite song choruses when they are called to do so. So in another way, the audience is in further control of the show’s level of engagement depending on how familiar they are with the artist. For these reasons, when hip hop luminary Prince Paul told the June 13, 2003 crowd at Cat’s Cradle that the future of hip hop is in their hands because they buy both profound and vapid hip hop records, he was largely correct.

While the power of the audience may help democratize and make more dynamic artistic performance, even partial audience control over hip hop music may have serious ramifications when one considers that a large percentage of that audience will likely be white. According to one estimate from “fans, promoters, and independent MCs who play live more than half the year,” overall small club audiences are 85 to 95 percent white (Kitwana). Many African American rappers have long been perplexed by the lack of African Americans in their audiences at shows. In The Roots’s “Act Too (The Love of My Life)” (Things Fall
Apart 1999), guest MC Common evinces a keen awareness of the issue, but without pontificating or editorializing: “When we perform it’s just coffee-shop chicks and white dudes.” Common points out an unavoidable reality for many artists – the large percentage of whites at hip hop shows – but his lack of further comment implies that MCs do not know yet how to interpret this dynamic.

A large white presence in audiences is presumably a more pressing problem for artists who care about the cultural and political impact of their music than for artists who care solely about making money. Nelson George implies that white suburban audiences are a problem within the historical context of hip hop music’s development. When he writes about his perceptions of a 1995 Run D.M.C. show that had a “99.9%” white audience as a “sweet memory of childhood fun” in which “a frenzy of rhymed words, familiar beats, and chanted hooks” allowed the suburban crowd to drink and laugh, he laments that this scene “may not be what many folks want hip hop to mean, but it is a true aspect of what hip hop has become” (75). Scenes like this are common, and while they are striking for their lack of an edge and their lack of resistance to the inequalities against which hip hop has long fought, they should not be overly alarming if they are considered “snapshots of a movement” (Potter 148). And while this scene may not be surprising when it occurs at a Run D.M.C. show – perhaps the first hip hop that suburban white kids listened to in the 1980s – it is perplexing when Run D.M.C. is one of the most important acts in hip hop history and is widely respected in African American communities. Why didn’t African Americans (other than George) attend this show?

This question is especially pertinent for groups such as dead prez and The Coup, who make some of hip hop’s most politically committed music. If their live shows are any
indication, much of their audience is white. Boots Riley, The Coup’s MC, believes that marketing decisions are partly responsible for the predicament. When asked about the lack of African Americans at hip hop shows in general and at The Coup’s shows in particular, “he blames such scarceness on the manner in which promoters advertise his concerts, targeting them specifically for and to white middle-class or suburban youth venues” (Keyes 3). While Riley points to marketing as a primary reason that crowds are white, an assertion I find difficult to disagree with, his claim does beg a question: if The Coup were to play a city venue marketed to African Americans, would an African American audience attend in full?

While Riley’s claim about marketing and promotion is largely correct, many hip hop shows at Cat’s Cradle reveal limitations with any view that does not also consider other factors. Despite doing primarily street-based marketing in the area and the presence of a large African American population in the areas immediately surrounding the club, Cat’s Cradle hip hop audiences are often largely white, even for iconic, Afrocentric groups such as Brand Nubian. In general, the hip hop acts that perform at Cat’s Cradle do not get a lot of mainstream airtime on radio or cable television. As such, it is reasonable to assume that urban radio stations influence not only the purchasing decisions of African Americans, but to some extent they also determine the artists with whom their listeners are familiar. This situation is problematic for groups such as The Coup and dead prez in light of Michael Eric Dyson’s accurate claim that radio executives usually opt for “pop rap as more acceptable than its realistic, politically conscious counterpart” (8). For those urban hip hop fans who do not have ready access to the internet or college radio, this situation could prevent them from not only hearing a group like The Coup, but from hearing of them. So if white kids are attending hip hop shows and listening to music intended primarily for African American
audiences, it is partly due to choices made by urban radio stations, television executives, and corporate media near-monopolies such as Clear Channel. Consequently, The Coup often “acts in concert” with an audience different than the one their music is made to reach.

The blame, though, does not rest solely with promoters, clubs, radio executives, and television producers. The political content of an act such as dead prez may turn off some African American (white and Latino as well) listeners. The cover of their debut album let’s get free (2000) shows young Sub-Saharan Africans raising automatic weapons in a revolutionary stance; a sticker that covers the guns claims: “this artwork has been censored by the powers that be, due to its political content.” Thus, dead prez preemptively claims that their music enters the market under prohibition; they are keenly aware that their message may marginalize them. When dead prez engages an audience with the call-and-response question “Where are all my vegetarians at?” before they perform their vegetarian anthem “Be Healthy,” it is likely that they are not trying to reach a mainstream audience, black or white. They could be said to marginalize themselves in much the same way that the Language poets do (although with entirely different motivations and aesthetics). Finally, revolutionary content may not appeal to listeners who believe in social mobility via striving for individual wealth. Or more simply, some fans now want no more than to be entertained by easily-accessible music.

Shows at small clubs such as Cat’s Cradle do not attract multi-million selling stars, but artists such as The Coup whose record sales may range from several thousand to hundreds of thousands of records. So, while many of these artists will not sell millions of albums, and while many will not achieve great longevity, their shows will continue to create interactive political spaces that enact collective agency and identity. Their shows will give one hundred
to seven hundred young people at a time what has largely become a lost participatory experience in America – “acting in concert” as a coordinated political practice. In part because audiences may include many white people, shows will also continue to “invite identification across forbidden lines” (Potter 10) of race and socioeconomics even if that message is not reaching much of its intended audience. Without live shows, hip hop’s political potency would be palpable, but live shows are fundamental to its status as an evolving cultural practice that challenges various power structures and the meanings of participatory democracy and American individualism.

To sum up, then, the small club hip hop show is just one “snapshot of a movement” (Potter 148). This segment of hip hop culture is a necessary corrective to a largely insipid, corporate-controlled mainstream hip hop obsessed with wealth and individualism. It is also a return to principles that nurtured the culture in its early years – community-building, direct participation, and live performance. When we understand the live hip hop show as Arendtian “acting in concert” in order to build collective agency and vibrant public spaces and to organize experience from “below,” it transforms hip hop from primarily entertainment to powerful political practice. For these very reasons, a small club hip hop show – assuming the audience is sufficiently energized by the artists and vice versa – does not need explicit political content in order to be a functioning political space. In the final analysis, independent hip hop acts need live shows to disseminate their music and messages (and to make a living), while independent-minded hip hop fans seem to crave the energy, creativity, participation, and community that is not possible through mainstream channels. Thus, despite significant problems with live shows at small clubs, not the least of which are audience demographics and occasional less-than-capacity crowds, these spaces actively create a motivated hip hop
community. If these shows were able to reach more African Americans, the small club live hip hop show would be without peer in the intersection of politics and art.

After reading my argument about live hip hop a skeptical reader may ask how live hip hop dynamics differ from a folk music show or a politically-engaged singer-songwriter’s performance. I contest that the audiences at these shows mostly do not participate, but listen and applaud. While the show might have political content, its form is not political. Also, in my view there is an edge to hip hop shows that folk shows do not have. A skeptical reader may ask too how sustainable politically something is that caters only to young people “in the know.” I speak to my own experience (as I mentioned earlier in this chapter) when I say that participating in live hip hop has taught me about community, spontaneity, and about supporting independent, grass-roots movements for change. Most readers, finally, will also note that the problem of being “in the know” is not unique to live hip hop at small clubs. Who reads poetry? Those “in the know.”

**Performing Authenticity: How Hip Hop (Re)Imagines Itself**

In this section I consider notions of authenticity in hip hop. Unlike in much printed poetry, the notion of lived experience is often a key to determining hip hop authenticity. Even in poems of experiential agency, experience does not necessarily need to be “authentic” or extreme, as is the impression one gets when watching some hip hop videos and listening to some hip hop. In hip hop, I argue, “authenticity” should be considered staged image, voice, and rhetorical strategy, a way of projecting one’s identity into the world. Authenticity, I also believe, is staged or performed in printed poetry as well, but with a difference. There are norms, conventions, standards, and acceptable subjects and voices with which poets can choose to abide by to become “authentic” poets; they can also choose to break conventions in
order to challenge what poetry is. When Robert Frost famously quipped that writing free verse was like “playing tennis without a net,” he implied that free verse is “inauthentic” as poetry. In a similar way, some critics may believe that hip hop is not poetry because it breaks dramatically from established conventions of poetic “tradition.” In the following section, I ask readers to keep in mind how staged “authenticity” in hip hop may parallel the ways poets who work in print stage voices and personas. Then it may become clearer how demanding it is to be a rapper; unlike a poet, a rapper may face criticism in changing her voice, persona, or image from song to song. A poet who works in print traditions is encouraged to use different voices and rhetorical guises from poem to poem. The notion of experience, then, can be limiting for rappers in ways that it is not for poets, even those I write about in the first chapter. As I hope will become clear, the notion of “authenticity” is largely bankrupt in both forms.

After exploring notions of authenticity, I consider hip hop’s internal criticism and its role in mediating and debunking “authenticity.” Criticism is a cornerstone of hip hop culture, both of the larger culture of which it is part and of hip hop itself. Printed poetry, too, has a long history of internal dialogue and criticism, although it has usually not been as direct and visceral as it has been in hip hop. Poets always sound off on other people’s poems and on other poetic traditions. I think of Stevens’s “Man on the Dump” and its rejoinder to Romanticism; Lowell’s and Bishop’s poems in conversation with each other about their lives, but also about poetics and aesthetics; or going farther back, it is hard not to see the continuing implicit dialogues between the poems of the Romantics in England in the early nineteenth century. The examples are numerous. From this study, Nikki Giovanni’s conversations with herself in verse are a precursor (along with the Last Poets, signifying, the
dozens, and other Black Arts Movement poetics) to hip hop aesthetics, especially its abiding self-reflexivity. In the first chapter, I looked at two Giovanni poems, the second of which (“My Poem”) features a speaker in dialogue with the speaker-poet of the first (“The True Import”): “i am 25 years old / black female poet / wrote a poem asking / nigger can you kill.” This comfortable dialogue – both with oneself, with past songs, and with others both discrete and composite – is another cornerstone of how hip hop polices, challenges, and (re)imagines itself.

When Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar’s “Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music” appeared in the *Journal of Black Studies* in 1999, it was a much needed rejoinder to the reductive debates of the “culture wars” about violence in hip hop music. Ogbar examined the “marginalized voices” in hip hop that were left out of the debates, voices that were critical of Robert Bork, Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole, and C. Delores Tucker, as well as of hip hop artists whose lyrics were violent and obsessed with material wealth. Over five years later the landscapes of hip hop and the “culture wars” are much changed. Politicians and pundits do not publicly condemn hip hop, as conservative commentators have moved on to other contentious issues such as abortion and gay marriage. The culture wars have left hip hop, race, and violence behind. Hip hop music and culture are now mainstream, extremely lucrative for corporations, and – at least on popular radio and cable television – mostly bereft of the contestatory qualities that made them frightening, divisive, and powerful to so many public figures. Most mainstream hip hop videos explicitly support unchecked consumerism (the “economy”) as a means to happiness and do little to expose the abuses of global capitalism. They are now tools of this economic system rather than thorns in its side.
Critical voices within hip hop have not given up their resistance to racism, poverty, and other social justice issues. Now, however, these critical voices have two major forces to resist—corporate-controlled, hypermaterial mainstream hip hop and the dominant American values it unintentionally supports. In this section I attempt to chart hip hop’s contemporary self-criticism in both its internal and external resistances. Self-criticism is now both internally corrective as well as redirective to problems that plague African American communities and the larger culture. I argue that the major thematic battleground for self-criticism centers on the concept of “authenticity.” Now that hip hop is accepted by American culture—as consumer product, marketing tool, and arbiter of style—it is no longer appropriate to claim that its primary visible aesthetic is resistance so much as indulgence. Because the public accepts hip hop, but only as harmless, mindless entertainment, independent critical voices are more important than ever and “authenticity” more crucial than ever in understanding the culture that produces them.

Two iconic characters of twentieth-century American literature—F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway (The Great Gatsby) and Ralph Ellison’s Reverend Rinehart (Invisible Man)—are apt metaphors for understanding hip hop music’s varied, paradoxical approach to both “authenticity” and self-criticism. Like Carraway, who narrates Gatsby’s story as both friend and observer, many hip hop artists’ internal criticisms are staged both as participants in and as observers of the culture. Hip hop’s participant-observers work from within the structures, norms, practices, and vernaculars they censure in their criticisms. Carraway says: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled” (40). Many of these participant-observers are “simultaneously enchanted and repelled” by violence, materialism, and other issues that have often been considered negative representations in hip hop music.
In contrast to the participant-observer who supplies valuable feedback to the hip hop community, Reverend Rineharts move freely between goodwill ambassadors and self-styled criminal masterminds. When the narrator of *Invisible Man* assumes the identity of Harlem’s Reverend Rinehart, he wonders, “If dark glasses and a white hat could blot out my identity so quickly, who actually was who?” (493). His fluid transition from grassroots communist organizer to infamous reverend is just one instance of the narrator’s fluidity, his paradoxical invisibility. As Bernard W. Bell points out in *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1993), Rinehart – preacher, pimp, numbers runner, and gambler – is the simultaneous manifestation of two of the most common characters in the African American novel, the preacher and the hustler. In *Invisible Man*, Rinehart pimps and preaches, gambles and saves souls, and in this combination he is more than a contradiction; he is one of the community’s leaders, respected by both saints and sinners. A similar functional duality permeates much hip hop music, in which rappers such as the late Tupac Shakur can have songs on the same album as ideologically opposed as the uplifting, feminist anthem “Keep Ya Head Up” and the misogynistic “I Get Around” (*Strictly for My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* 1993).

Many critics have claimed that this contradiction, while baffling to some and cause for outrage among others, symbolizes incongruities inherent in American society, implying that Rineharts are common in American life. Nelson George writes that the “disturbing themes” and insidious “values that underpin” much hip hop music are “rooted in this country’s dysfunctional values” and “national character” (xiii). Ernest Allen, Jr. criticizes the contradictory messages of even the most positive “message rap” (160). These conflicting messages, Russell A. Potter claims, cause some progressives to give up on hip hop’s capabilities for organizing poor African American communities (14-15). However, as in-
depth analyses of authenticity and self-criticism show, blanket denunciations of hip hop because of its contradictions rely on reductive essentialisms; arguments about hip hop culture must be nuanced to be accurate.

The implicit primary term from which most self-criticism emanates is “authenticity,” a concept with various functions in hip hop culture. Perhaps the most widely used marker of authenticity in hip hop is the phrase “keepin’ it real.” Baruti N. Kopano begins a recent article on hip hop music and the black rhetorical tradition with the claim that “for rappers, ‘keepin it real’ means being true to the rich legacy of rap” (204). This phrase, however, is much more complicated than Kopano suggests. He unintentionally brackets off a multitude of various other shadings of the phrase. “Keepin’ it real” has nearly as many potential meanings as there are various voices in hip hop. Discussions of self-criticism and authenticity in hip hop must interrogate the phrase in order to discover the ways that it polices hip hop and the ways that it imperils it.

When a rapper says she is “keepin’ it real” it may have a variety of connotations. It may testify to a rapper’s refusal to deviate from lived experience in a tough neighborhood, one in which the artist may or may not have grown up. It may testify to the artist’s desire to make music that she loves, regardless of how many records she sells, or that the artist will not dilute her music for commercial success. It may suggest that the rapper puts family and friends first. Or, it may mean that the artist willingly plays the capitalist game, pursuing individual wealth at all costs. Or, as Kopano notes, it may be an artist’s proclamation to stay true to tradition and to the pioneers of hip hop music; but, depending on the artist, these pioneers may be very different people. Or the phrase may point to a rapper's desire for acceptance by the culture, to prove that she belongs. Above all, the phrase and others like it
are performed to stage an identity within the established norms of hip hop culture. What “real” is varies, is open to debate, and changes over time. In other words, “keepin’ it real” is staged performance or “keepin’ it fiction.”

In addition to these uses, “keepin’ it real” is important to hip hop historically; the phrase points to hip hop’s role as a discourse of resistance. Michael Bibby’s study of G.I. resistance poetry during Vietnam illuminates this aspect of hip hop authenticity. Because resistant G.I.s opposed military policy and the “jargon of official ideology,” he writes, “authenticity was paramount, realism a politically essential style.” In hip hop, social realism and subversive rhetoric oppose official discourses that have long oppressed African Americans. Authenticity, therefore, can be part of a strategy that opposes discourses that do not address and often exacerbate problems faced by African Americans. Bibby claims that “concrete” realism was necessary “for a movement intent on testifying to the atrocity of U.S. military policies.” This realism, he concludes, was “a means of resistance and counternarrative” (171-2) for disillusioned soldiers. Many hip hop artists have long used “authentic” experience as a resistant counternarrative to official explanations for problems in African American communities.

While it is important for hip hop to retain this strategic use of authenticity, if phrases such as “keepin’ it real” are taken at face value, the result will be ignorance of the complex role “authenticity” plays in hip hop culture. It is critical to move away from any notion of authenticity as unmediated, direct representation of experience. It is also important to move away from any strict dichotomy between “authentic” hip hop artists and those who are “sell-outs,” “co-opted,” or “inauthentic.” Subscribing to any such notion simplifies the intricacies of hip hop’s cultural figurations, sonic structures, and internal criticisms. To claim that only
certain voices in hip hop are “authentic” denies the range of hip hop expression and the ways that many artists question “authenticity.”

The term “authenticity” itself is fraught with ideological baggage, especially as it concerns definitions of identity imposed on minority cultures. Michael Eric Dyson shows that essentialism undermines differences within racial and cultural categories and denies a dynamic history of African American cultural expression; instead, he writes, identity is “relentlessly reshaped” by a variety of factors (xx). Authenticity, then, should remain a constantly shifting signifier in hip hop culture if essentialism is not to undermine the range of creative expressions that comprise hip hop music. Yet, it is also important to maintain parameters for what counts as hip hop, rather than what counts as “authentic” hip hop, so that it can insulate itself from the exploitations that transformed jazz and rock and roll from African American art forms to largely white ones.

These parameters take shape through inclusion rather than exclusion. Stephen Henderson’s book on the Black Arts Movement shows how “authenticity” can remain important but not essentialist in hip hop. He defined the “new black poetry” through the concept of “saturation,” a relatively amorphous articulation of what it means to be loyal to the African American experience (65-66). He proposes that “black poetry” can be poetry which is somehow structurally black, irrespective of authorship. Authenticity in hip hop can be defined via “saturation,” but with a key addition. As it is stereotypically formulated, a rapper must be faithful to the experiences of poor urban African Americans, including their experiences of poverty, violence, racism, police brutality, drug dealing, struggles for civil rights, and prostitution, but also Horatio Alger stories of upward mobility and “beating the system.” Unlike in other art forms, “authenticity” of experience often counts for more than
creativity. But, rappers from middle class backgrounds, such as De La Soul and Public Enemy, and respected white and Latina/o artists, stymie this formulation even as the prestige of gunshot wounds and prison terms maintain currency in some notions of authenticity. However, these formulations focus on experiences of extremity instead of lengthy, collective struggles for civil rights, while eliding varieties of mostly non-violent hip hop and African American experiences.

“Authenticity,” moreover, is neither class nor race specific. Ogbar points out that Ice Cube has portrayed himself as an impoverished gang banger; however, he comes from a middle-class family, went to a wealthy high school, and attended college (173). Class does not have to be “authentic;” it too can be performed. Unlike class, however, race is not performed. Even so, Potter points out that race does not determine authenticity as there is a “world of difference between a white rapper with street respect and a black rapper who has lost that respect” (71). Eminem, for example, is more respected than many highly regarded African American artists. White group Third Bass gained traction in the early 1990s lampooning MC Hammer, while multi-racial Company Flow is probably the most successful (and still most respected) independent rap group. They sold over 100,000 copies of their album *Funcrusher Plus* (1997), a remarkable feat for an independent album. Focusing on one factor, such as race or class, undermines creativity, falsely promotes a simplistic representational art, and denies the performance dynamics. While race, class, and geographic location mediate authenticity, the quality of artistic expression as determined by audiences’ often fickle judgment is most important.

Any formulation that essentializes race or class is at best flawed and incomplete, at worst dangerous. However, the essentialism of lived extremity accurately reflects the position put
forth by Mark Anthony Neal in his study of the “corporate annexation” of African American music. This position is hip hop culture’s elephant in the room or perhaps the dark cloud that follows it while rarely being acknowledged. It, sadly, has a lot of credibility, and this is the dangerous part. It goes something like this: 50 Cent is the most authentic voice because he has suffered gun shots wounds and sold drugs, but only after 2Pac and Notorious B.I.G. because they suffered gun shot wounds and became martyrs, and by the way, Biggie used to sell drugs too. Sales figures support this twisted notion. In other words, these three have the most street credibility and this credibility translates into fame and riches. Yet, this position belies the fact that many rappers have had just as brutal lived experiences and still flopped as artists. So when Neal writes, “Contemporary notions of authenticity within hip hop have little to do with aesthetic quality, and more to do with narrative commitments to the realities of black urban life” (130), he too paints an incomplete picture. As does Potter when he writes that hip hop audiences “regard any movement out of this context as a betrayal, a sell out” (71). While the “realities of black urban life,” especially when Hollywood-esque, are key determinate factors, aesthetic quality and audience perception of it are still more important.

Audience perception and “authenticity” meet in the contentious debate about the perceived divide between “authentic” and “pop” hip hop. Like the authentic/co-opted dichotomy, the authentic/pop opposition is fraught with inaccuracy. According to Nelson George, any claim that financially successful records are not “true hip hop” is, like “purist positions” in art, historically inaccurate (60-65). It is important to avoid “succumb[ing] to the temptation to enter the debate on the terms of rap’s ‘opponents,’ pointing to the ‘good’ rappers in order to deflect attention from the ‘bad’” (Wahl 99). It is also important to avoid “sifting through ‘pop’ material and dismissing work whose primary goal is mass appeal” (Gladney 296).
Authenticity and popular appeal in hip hop music rarely parallel each other neatly. For example, 50 Cent’s debut album sold a record 872,000 copies in its first week of release. Rappers such as 50 Cent, Jay-Z, and Nas have been able to maintain “authenticity” even after selling millions of albums (Nelly perhaps has not), while rappers such as Rakim, Kool G Rap, Gangstarr, and Brand Nubian have not sold millions of albums but have garnered a tremendous enduring respect from their fellow artists. Popular appeal by itself cannot unlock “authenticity.” It can, however, reveal further limitations with the notion of authenticity itself.

The debate about “authentic” and “pop” hip hop has perplexed many rappers and has led some to lament the difficulty of being both authentic and financially successful. For example, Murs (a member of Living Legends as well as a Definitive Jux recording artist) bemoans the zero-sum game of authenticity in “Got Damned?” (The End of the Beginning 2002): “If I don’t go gold, then my people say I flopped, / but if I go triple-platinum, I’m not hip hop.” Authenticity, according to Murs, exists within a narrow framework – if an artist sells more than three million records, the audience will consider the artist “pop” rather than hip hop. On the other hand, if an artist sells less than five hundred thousand copies, much of the audience will say the artist has failed. This rationale restricts creativity, imposes impossible standards for success, and ignores quality, which must not be determined by sales alone.

How do artists stay “authentic” and have mainstream success? Why are others “authentic” but financially unsuccessful? Hip hop is now used in JC Penney commercials during women’s gymnastics at the Summer Olympics – that bastion of innocuous, suburban entertainment – and in countless McDonalds commercials. How have these developments affected “authenticity”? One rapper, Brother Ali, suggests that the mainstream media
determines authenticity. He says that hip hop is “not ours anymore. It used to be anti-
establishment, off the radar, counterculture. People in the streets are now being told what
hip-hop is and what it looks like by TV” (Kitwana). As such, hip hop is partly a product to be
packaged and sold. Listeners, as Brother Ali claims, in many ways no longer determine what
is authentic. As Christopher Holmes Smith writes, hip hop music is an “extremely efficient
device for extracting profit from the consumption habits of America’s youth” (74). But, as I
alluded to earlier, it can also be a valuable tool for teaching poetry, history, sociology, and
cultural studies.

One key to unlocking these contradictions is in artistic performance, regardless of whether
that performance is geared toward profit, innovation, tradition, or some combination thereof.
The performance of authenticity is ultimately a rhetorical strategy. This performance,
moreover, should be viewed within the context for hip hop’s musical production. Hip hop
songs have traditionally included a plurality of voices, rather than a single, direct,
unmediated voice. While the MC’s voice is primary in most songs, it often exists in a collage
of sampled voices of other rappers, politicians, singers, movie clips, and as the primary voice
among other recorded voices of the DJ, friends, family, and other rappers. Hip hop is a
polyglot art form that may appear to outsiders as a type of echolalia. Public Enemy Producer
Hank Shocklee has often said that he created a chaotic soundscape of noises, sampled voices,
and eerie sound effects that would foreground Public Enemy MC Chuck D’s booming voice.
While the MC’s voice is primary, it gains part of its authenticity in juxtaposition to other
voices.

Richard Shusterman implies that hip hop’s “appropriation” of samples has revolutionary
consequences for notions of authenticity. Sampling, he says, “challenges the traditional ideal
of originality and uniqueness” that have long influenced perceptions of western art. For him, sampling, appropriation, and creation “are not at all incompatible” (617). Shusterman’s approach to hip hop’s dual pattern of creation and appropriation threatens simplistic notions of authenticity. A work of hip hop is never fully authentic if “authenticity” means wholly new and original. However, an artist need not work from a blank slate to be creative. Nor is it possible for an artist to avoid inflecting previous works of art. Hip hop artists simply make these connections transparent and productive. But it is important not to make the mistake made by Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace in their focus on “rap’s deep whiteness” (90) due to the sampling of white artists. Their approach foregrounds the samples themselves and not their creative use; it also shows a subconscious allegiance to a definition of authenticity that makes creation and appropriation mutually exclusive.

Rappers’ voices literally write over not only samples, but also the landscapes of urban America, in much the same way that graffiti artists write over walls. In early hip hop, Tricia Rose writes, “graffiti and rap were especially aggressive public displays of counterpresence and voice” used “to inscribe one’s identity on an environment” where “material and social participation [were] inaccessible” (59-60). Within this framework, staging authenticity publicly asserts identity; it is a strategy initiated by artists in order to make their voices meaningful in difficult socioeconomic circumstances. Artists use “authenticity” to assert their identity to the world and to differentiate themselves from other artists. As such, authenticity is not an isolated factor brought to the world based solely on lived experience; it is a dialogue with a variety of ideologies, structures, and social systems in which the “the rapper’s voice is imbedded” (Rose 2-3). Formulations of “authenticity” fail precisely when used to bracket
everything but an artist’s direct voice and experience. This approach limits creativity while ignoring the social, economic, political, and musical contexts for hip hop.

While some hip hop artists do not rely on samples, the most celebrated of which is The Roots, most MCs stage a persona (or personas) in their records, videos, and concerts. Pseudonyms are the most prominent technique for performing a persona. Baruti N. Kopano points out that the “practice of nicknaming has a long history in the African American community” as a creative, often political act (211). A cursory review of CD labels at any record store reveals the prominence of pseudonyms in hip hop compared to its lesser frequency in other genres. Despite a trend toward pseudonyms in independent rock, singer/songwriters in soul, rock and roll, and folk usually use their given names to give the appearance of a transparent, honest voice. However, when a rapper uses a given name, it is an unexpected deviation, which suggests that pseudonyms are somehow fundamental to the performance of authenticity. While MCs have long used names such as Grandmaster Flash and Kool Moe Dee, some successful MCs have used given names. Keith Murray was prominent in the early 1990s, while Kanye West, Mike Jones, and Talib Kweli currently use theirs. Many pseudonyms play on given names – Eazy-E for Eric Wright, KRS-One for Kris Parker, 2Pac for Tupac Shakur, Nas for Nasir Jones. Names such as Flavor Flav, Blueprint, and Ghostface are not as simple.

What are the effects of pseudonyms on authenticity? Is the persona of the pseudonym the voice of authenticity or is the artist who creates the pseudonym? Is Dante Smith more or less “authentic” than Mos Def, Calvin Broadus more or less authentic than Snoop Dogg, Tariq Trotter more or less authentic than Black Thought? A divide between creation and performance suggests that Smith, Broadus, and Trotter write lyrics and Mos Def, Snoop
Dogg, and Black Thought perform them. As Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar notes, Ice Cube and O’Shea Jackson are different people with very different histories (173). Annette J. Saddik claims that the “authentic” violence in hip hop is similar to the violence in films. She claims that “the linguistic violence in rap music” should be understood as “performance” and “play.” These performances do not strictly represent experience in a mimetic fashion; therefore, “the performance should not be confused with the performer” (110-111 original emphasis). Within this context, authenticity is a performed projection of a constructed persona activated in and by a pseudonym.

“Authenticity” in hip hop is an evolving engagement with the creative, appropriative, and representational aspects that comprise the art form. Even though there will always be an authenticity police in hip hop that expose artists such as Vanilla Ice as imposters, it will be increasingly difficult to view “authenticity” solely as a product of life experience, tradition, talent, popularity, class, or race, especially since large media corporations help determine authenticity. Regardless, reductive formulations are limiting, misleading, and fuel for critics such as Sanford Pinsker, who claims that hip hop is “minstrel music”—not some hip hop, but all hip hop (286). He uses a reductive, essentialist notion of authenticity to claim that “rap music’s agenda” is to promote a single authentic image of African Americans as gun-wielding and ignorant enemies of acceptable black culture (284). His viewpoint relies on a misguided notion of “authenticity” implicitly supported by some rappers, listeners, cable television stations, and major media outlets. Even though his claim is woefully wrong, it does dovetail uncomfortably with the elephant in the room I mentioned earlier. Even so, Spike Lee’s powerful film Bamboozled (2000) suggests that some commercial hip hop is a contemporary minstrel show, but Lee does not claim all hip hop is minstrel music. The
reality is close to Lee, not Pinsker. Obviously the latter has not heard a variety of hip hop, but when one of the most popular contemporary groups – Lil’ Jon and the East Side Boyz – include rappers named Big Sam and Lil’ Bo, there is a problem with mainstream hip hop’s authenticity and wealth-at-any-cost ideals. The East Side Boyz, and Spike Lee would likely argue various other popular rap groups, very consciously play a minstrel show because, one could argue, it will sell a lot of records. Unfortunately, unlike in Lee's film, these groups do so with no apparent irony or subversion.

Hip hop voices critical of violence, materialism, and the pursuit of individual wealth at the expense of community, innovation, and the struggle for justice suggest that limiting notions of authenticity are constantly contested. Hip hop’s vibrant self-criticism insures that positive contestation counters often negative images promoted by the mass media, some artists, and corporate-controlled record companies, radio stations, and television networks. Self-criticism is fundamentally recursive because it gives feedback to the culture that sustains it. The primary rhetorical effects of staged self-criticism are an inherent questioning of restrictive notions of authenticity and the practical effects of them on African American communities. They also assert an alternative authenticity. I argue that much self-criticism attacks both hip hop’s problems and the problems of the United States as they impact the hip hop community. The following examples of self-criticism implicitly question materialistic values and limited notions of authenticity.

De La Soul’s “Stakes is High” (Stakes is High 1996), briefly discussed in Ogbar's 1999 article, condemns materialism and violence. The song title suggests De La Soul’s perceptions of the state of hip hop – without refocusing, it is in danger of unraveling into a series of vacuous anthems promoting violence and individualistic hedonism. The song offers a list of
MC Dave’s unapologetic near-invective parodically utilizes the very language of misogyny and violence it denounces: “I'm sick of bitches shaking asses, / I'm sick of talking about blunts, / sick of Versace glasses, / sick of slang, / sick of half-ass award shows, / sick of name brand clothes.”

His disdain for the glorification of drugs and expensive clothes, for using sex to sell hip hop, and for the mainstream media that glamorizes them is expressed in the same language that usually celebrates them. As both participant and observer, De La Soul is inside and outside of the cultural values it criticizes, values that have changed over the past decade. Up until the early 1990s members of the New York hip hop community made illegal “uptown appropriations” of expensive name brand clothes by stitching patches onto cheap imitations. Now, Nelson George suggests, many rappers flaunt expensive name brand clothes, but without subversion, just “‘I’m paid’ consumerism with no subtext” (164). There is, however, a subtext – it is now uncertain whether wearing “uptown appropriation” or name brand is “keepin’ it real.”

Part of the self-criticism of “Stakes is High” focuses on the consequences of pursuing and celebrating individual wealth. The song suggests that urban neighborhoods are nefarious “experiments” that isolate individuals from each other in their strivings to attain the material benefits of the American Dream. They lament that love for others has been replaced by “love” for cars, money, guns, wealth, fame, and a willingness to die for them. This dangerous substitution was first suggested in 1990 by KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions in “Love’s Gonna Get’cha (Material Love).” The drive for the symbols of wealth as described by De La Soul and KRS-One is elucidated by Pierre Bourdieu as a struggle for symbolic and economic capital, where “symbolic capital is the product of a struggle in which each agent”
is “a ruthless competitor.” This capital is defended “by means of a permanent struggle to keep up with and identify with the group immediately above…and to distinguish oneself from the group immediately below” (136). De La Soul suggests that those in the hip hop community who flaunt materialistic values – it is tempting for me to think of icons such as Sean “P-Diddy” Combs, Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and others – strive to identify with America’s ultra rich and to distinguish themselves from poor African Americans, judging them for their perceived inadequacies.

In disidentifying with poor urban communities, some rappers inadvertently identify with the richer, disinterested larger American culture, where “Stakes is High” claims “a meteor has more rights” than African Americans. The racism outside African American neighborhoods helps create a similarly divisive environment within them: “Neighborhoods are now hoods ‘cause nobody's neighbors / just animals surviving with that animal behavior.” In a play on the term “hood,” De La Soul claims – in another play on words – that government housing projects are “projects,” social experiments along the lines of the more infamous one in Tuskegee. However, in their emphasis on sickness the lyrics imply that the ailments are ameliorable through a renewed sense of community built on love. In suggesting that love can improve urban communities, De La Soul verges upon Tricia Rose’s critique of hip hop that “overemphasizes the autonomy of black agency in the face of massive structural counterforces” (141). While De La Soul mentions racism, idealistic lines such as “‘Cause love don't get you through life no more” imply that there was a nostalgic past free of racism and oppression.

While “Stakes is High” focuses on hip hop’s relationship with African American communities, Mos Def’s verse on Black Star’s “What’s Beef?” serves dual functions in its
criticism both of hip hop and of American geopolitics and economics. First performed on Comedy Central’s Chappelle’s Show in the spring of 2003, its main theme is the concept of “beef.” In hip hop a “beef” is a public feud between rappers in which each stakes a claim as the more skillful MC, often using ferocious insults. A “beef” is more than a battle – the latter implies a verbal contest between MCs while the former suggests a more intense personal conflict. Hip hop has had many “beefs,” most of which have produced records rather than physical confrontations, including ones between Roxanne Shante and the Real Roxanne, KRS-One and MC Shan, LL Cool J and Kool Moe Dee, Dr. Dre and Eazy-E, and famously, between 2Pac and the Notorious B.I.G.

“What’s Beef?” is a series of terse statements that redefine “beef.” Mos Def addresses his audience via hip hop terminology, and he speaks for that same audience when he addresses the larger political context. In doing so, he utilizes rap’s “dual identity as both head and limb, speaking both to and for its audience” (Costello and Foster Wallace 38). He begins by referring to the recent beef between Jay-Z and Nas. Mos Def’s re-definition of “beef” dramatically shifts contexts away from music and into the communities in which hip hop was born: “Beef is not what Jay said to Nas / Beef is when the working folks can’t find jobs / Beef is when the crack babies can’t find moms / Because they’re in a pine box or locked behind bars.” Beef, according to Mos Def, is not comprised of what Jay-Z said to Nas, or what “Ja said to 50” (Ja Rule said to 50 Cent); instead, beef is unemployment, crack, jail sentences in lieu of rehabilitation, and the inability to get home loans. Hip hop, Mos Def suggests, loses its focus and its ethic of resistance when it lingers on internal conflicts. Mos Def redirects “beef” in much the same way Public Enemy and Chuck D did. Chuck D has said that hip hop draws power from anger but this anger is often “directed at other rappers.”
Instead, Public Enemy directed anger at “the government and people who were responsible for what was happening in society” (Hillburn 1992). Beef, according to Mos Def and Chuck D, should not be directed at others in hip hop but to the forces, systems, and public officials that oppress African Americans and the poor, a point that suggests the inherent dangers of self-criticism for any participant-observer. Why direct criticism at other hip hop artists when they may only imitate the hypermaterial values of the larger American culture?

When Mos Def addresses the hip hop community, he tries to shatter some enduring illusions. The misconception, Mos Def reiterates, is that “what y’all call beef is not beef at all.” Hip hop’s feuds, he charges, must engage a wider social context and real beffs. This re-definition of “beef” is an aspect of signifying that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses in The Signifying Monkey (1998) – rewriting the received textual tradition, in this case the tradition that defines “beef.” In doing so, Mos Def moves from hip hop “beef” to larger “beef,” including the Iraq war and AIDS. Beef, for Mos Def, is the tension in the Middle East, not the tension on New York radio station “Hot 9-7.” Mos Def unequivocally raps that beef is “geopolitics” and the situations in “Iraq, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip.” For him, beef is the essence of geopolitics, wars, occupations, and greed, and focusing on beffs between rappers takes attention away from problems that plague African American communities – poverty, unemployment, lack of health care, and greedy foreign wars. Mos Def’s desire to redirect anger away from internal targets to the real perpetrators of oppression has long been an impetus for African American artists. In “A Five Dollar Fight” (Black Boy 1945), for example, Richard Wright shows how black men can be turned against each other by powerful white men, both for their entertainment and to turn black men’s frustration inward instead of on their oppressors.
Because an equal chance to beat one’s opponent verbally is a cornerstone of hip hop beefs, Mos Def delivers a supreme insult in demanding that the hip hop community focus on a real beef, rather than on celebrity squabbles: “Beef is not what these famous niggas do on the mic / Beef is what George Bush would do in fight.” According to Mos Def, it is time for hip hop to battle against political policies that oppress African Americans. However, merely changing the ways that the hip hop community understands the term “beef” is not sufficient to force change. Stuart Hall warns that rearticulating values is insufficient to change sociopolitical realities: “No ideological conception can ever become materially effective…until it can be articulated to the field of political and social forces and to the struggles between different forces at stake” (42). The difficult project of addressing African Americans’ actual “beefs,” then, must be shared between rappers, activists, politicians, and people who live in the communities.

Like “Stakes is High” and “What’s Beef?,” O.C.’s “Time’s Up” (*Wild Pitch Classics* 1994) critiques hip hop, but in a way that foreshadows the state of mainstream hip hop a decade later. O.C. focuses specifically on notions of “authentic” experience and materialism that course through hundreds of songs, but he captures their tensions as well as any song since. In “Time’s Up,” authenticity is grounded in verifiable experience: “My album will manifest many things / that I saw, did, or heard about / or told first hand, never word of mouth.” He testifies to the authenticity of his lyrical content, but also claims that many rappers “write about stuff they fantasized” rather than about actual living conditions. Thus, O.C. suggests that “authenticity” in hip hop is often a staged fantasy used to create an *image* of authenticity. He raps that hip hop needs refocusing, but unlike De La Soul and Mos Def, his focus is on the art *itself*, on records “being flipped” and not a “focus on weed and clips /
and glocks getting cocked.” He puts aesthetics and lived experience above fantasy; his lines suggest that glorifying drugs, guns, and wealth betray the realities of both African American communities and hip hop aesthetics.

When O.C. tackles wealth’s central role in mainstream hip hop, he juxtaposes it to “respect,” a term with profundity in hip hop culture. Rappers include the term in numerous song titles, most famously in Notorious B.I.G.’s “Respect.” Recently, while riding the M60 bus on 125th Street in Harlem I noticed a huge billboard featuring rapper Missy Elliot advertising for Adidas. Its large letters read “RESPECT M.E.” On the United States’s most famous street for African American culture and commerce, it was obvious that “respect” is still a pervasive signifier in hip hop culture. O.C. asserts his preference for “respect” over riches but with qualification. After he claims that those who rap “just for dough” have character deficiencies, he raps: “Of course we got to pay rent, so money connects / but I'd rather be broke and have a whole lot of respect / It's the principle of it, I get a rush when I bust / some dope lines I wrote, that maybe somebody’ll quote.” O.C. prefers “broke” with “respect” to rich without respect, a notion that dovetails uncomfortably with the idea that artistic prestige and financial success map negatively to each other. O.C.’s qualification that “money connects” is a desire for money as a means to “pay rent,” rather than a means to buy a mansion fit for MTV’s Cribs. In a recent song about mainstream hip hop’s hypermaterialism, C-Rayz Walz (featured on a recent episode of MTV’s Made as a freestyle coach) echoes O.C.’s “principle.” He raps that spending “80,000 dollars for a chain” is “sick” when it “only costs” $10,000 to buy “a barbershop where you can employ your click.” Choosing obscene wealth over community betterment is “selfishness” (“Music Take Ovah” Year of the Beast 2005). O.C.’s and C-Rayz Walz’s principle concerning wealth contrasts the
wanton materialism of countless hip hop videos full of luxury cars, personal yachts, and expensive jewelry.

The previous songs diagnose problems, but they do little to propose solutions. Jean Grae’s “Block Party” (*Attack of the Attacking Things* 2003) criticizes the negative aspects of mainstream hip hop culture and sketches a plan to make the community more educated and self-aware. In denouncing “materialistic values,” insularity, and violence, she works against two hip hop tropes – defending one’s neighborhood and flaunting material possessions. She raps, “stop acting like your flesh is metal / and your hood’s a magnet” because “protecting your turf” is “bullshit.” Her condemnation of the hypermasculine “thug” posture of toughness, loyalty, and pride is severe, as is her rebuke of individual wealth. For her, “ownership” is “bullshit” and one reason the African American community lacks “wealth” is that in economic terms “it’s every man for himself.” Her criticism is excoriating when she raps that many, presumably rappers, would rather “be chilling with rich white folks” as a sign of individual success. Later she laments that some would let their “kids go hungry” before their “wardrobe is outdated.” For Jean Grae, self-serving avariciousness hurts African American communities. But, as Mos Def does in “What’s Beef?,” she condemns the hip hop community when she could indict instead the dominant American culture it often imitates.

Jean Grae’s criticism of the hip hop community is harsh, and her solutions are admirable but idealistic. Instead of macho posturing and personal possessions, she emphasizes education and travel. Everyone in the hip hop community, she raps, should “pick up a book,” read a paper,” “take a free class,” and “get out your house / get off your block / travel the world.” This plan would create more enlightened communities, but she ignores some key pragmatics. Traveling requires ample leisure time and economic resources, two privileges
most poor people do not have. In a desire to nurture hope and possibility for change, Grae probably attributes too much agency to African American communities. Tricia Rose warns that songs that “overemphasize” capabilities for African American agency ignore social, economic, and political constraints that can prevent poor urbanites from achieving their goals (141-142). As such, the lines “If the system’s corrupt, change it. / Fought for the right to vote, don’t even use it” deny how existing corporate and institutional powers systematically resist progressive change and the empowerment of urban communities. Yet, the spirit of these lines is a direct descendant of civil rights leaders, Freedom Marchers, the SCLC, SNCC, and NAACP, all of whom worked tirelessly for voting rights and an end to segregation. Jean Grae’s song thus shows the difficulty of finding workable solutions to problems in hip hop culture.

While self-criticism is a social conscience in hip hop and an alternative model for understanding hip hop community, it does not cure hip hop’s ills. Self-criticism has been part of hip hop since its birth, but the music (at least in the mainstream) has become increasingly materialistic and indulgent. It does not keep the culture solvent, but it does keep it in touch with values that shaped it in the 1970s and 1980s – resistance to injustice and racism, a premium on creativity, and a community aesthetic. On the other hand, hip hop’s Reverend Rineharts play a different role. They embody hip hop’s contradictions and show that authenticity is malleable. “Authenticity,” they show, is easier to maintain when an artist can perform various identities; it is possible to “keep it real” in many ways. In one song, a Rinehart is a gangster, in another a preacher, in another a rapper with reverence for tradition, and in another a street-smart battler. Rineharts help explain why it is difficult and dangerous
to make essential claims about hip hop. In the following example, hip hop – like the country it was born in – presents many conflicting messages.

Nas is one of hip hop’s most striking Reverend Rineharts. He embodies the contradictions of living and surviving in a tough urban community. Even before he released his first album in 1994, he was a New York legend. His appearances on Main Source’s “Live at the B.B.Q.” and MC Serch’s “Back to the Grill” created immense expectations for Illmatic. Hip hop magazine The Source gave the album its highest rating of five “mics,” a rarity for a first album. I remember vividly the day Illmatic hit the record stores. It was April 18, 1994; I was seventeen years old, and I knew on my first listen that the album was the best I had yet heard.

Over a decade later, Illmatic is widely considered one of hip hop’s best albums. Its cover art signals that the album will tackle the city’s impact on a young African American male. The front features a head shot of pre-pubescent Nas superimposed over a photograph of the Queensbridge housing projects. The projects and streets are visible on and within his cheeks, eyes, and forehead. His skin color, moreover, is nearly indistinguishable from the colors of the streets and buildings. Young Nas does not look angry, nor happy. He is dead-pan, introspective. It is an image of the young black male as both bigger than his urban home, as inseparable from its influence, and as literally textured with streets and projects. The back previews the vivid streetscapes in Nas’s lyrics. A chromatic print shows a sidewalk bound by a chain-link fence, an abandoned lot full of trash, and distant high-rise projects. On the upturned sidewalk are a seatless couch, an industrial cable spool, and a metal pipe. When opened, the back jacket expands into a sidewalk panorama that includes Nas, liquor bottles, old tires, pallets, and a homeless man. These are the materials with which Nas works, the materials of his city life.
On “N.Y. State of Mind” (*Illmatic*) Nas moves between fantasies of wealth and fame and the realities of poverty, between exploiting a poor community and being part of one, much like Rinehart does in *Invisible Man*. Nas dreams of being a gangster, doing robberies, and living lavishly. Drug and gun imagery proliferate, but they are countered by a grim realism that undermines any fantasy of fame. He raps of “bullet holes left in [his] peephole,” NYPD task force investigations, and progressively younger kids “pulling triggers” to bring “fame to their names.” The song is most revealing when Nas shows intimacy with those who live on the streets – “I know this crack head / who says she’s got to smoke nice rock / and if it’s good she’ll bring you customers and measuring pots” – and his interactions with them: “The city never sleeps / full of villains and creeps / that’s where I learned to do my hustle.” Unlike rappers who engage in self-criticism, Nas does not maintain a distance from his environment. He celebrates both positive and negative, almost equally, and he laments kids’ involvement in crime even as he celebrates hustling.

Nas represents rappers who participate in (or fantasize about) actions they often paint as destructive. When viewed through the lens of Rinehart, this contradiction makes sense. As *Invisible Man’s* narrator puts on Rinehart’s costume, rappers put on guises to perform various roles. Rineharts perform personas that comment on the social, political, and economic conditions from which they emerge, conditions rife with contradiction. But, these roles are not purely performative; many rappers grew up in poor communities where contradictions abound, often in the name of survival. Thus, Nas raps that he “loves committing sins,” that his “friends sell crack” (“Represent”) and that he is “well-known like the numbers man” (“Halftime”), but he also has uplifting, religious-themed songs such as “I Can” and often uses Christian imagery, such as he does in the “Hate Me” video. His movement from gangster to
preacher suggests that authenticity is staged and changes from song to song. And when both visions of the world – hope and darkness – merge, it is marked by individualism and materialism: “I switched my motto / instead of saying fuck tomorrow / that buck that bought a bottle could’ve struck the lotto” (“Life’s a Bitch”). This opportunistic materialism may limit possibilities for community-based change, but it symbolizes the way that hope for the future in much mainstream hip hop is a product of potential individual wealth, much as it is in the larger American culture.

Reverend Rineharts “straddle” “social responsibility and [the] glorification of pathology” (Ogbar 170); in doing so, they make “authenticity” a continually shifting term. “Authenticity” is a staged performance that should not be taken at face value; it is a product of language, the clay with which rappers reflect and recreate their worlds. When Nas warns listeners “don’t put me in your box if the shit eats tapes” (“NY State of Mind”), he claims there is no difference between a rapper and his creation. Nas is the tape of his music. For Nas, as for many rappers, there is no separation between art and its creator. Agency, then, is a product of language; there is power and prestige in its creative use. Authenticity, moreover, can be whatever a rapper says because it is controlled by his creative use of language. In this way, mainstream rap is still radically resistant.

The public status of hip hop, though, has changed since the “culture wars.” Hip hop is now an entrenched part of the dominant cultural landscape rather than a threat to that landscape. It is also no longer accurate to quote Chuck D, who once called hip hop the Black CNN; now it is more appropriate to see mainstream hip hop as the Black Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, a connection that MTV’s Cribs makes clear. Now that there are no self-conscious political voices – perhaps with the exception of Kanye West – alongside the merely
entertaining ones on MTV and BET, as there were in the late 1980s and early 1990s, voices of self-criticism are more crucial than ever because they also function as voices of external resistance and criticism. As such, these voices carry the torch for hip hop as a force of resistance to social injustice. However, it is not clear whether self-criticism has any effect, and there remain few sustained voices within hip hop that criticize the culture’s misogyny. Because critical observers of hip hop are also participants in the culture – one way that they merge with hip hop’s Reverend Rineharts – self-criticism is often compromised by artists’ engagements with the cultural practices they criticize. Authenticity, finally, is the frontline of hip hop’s debates with itself. It will remain the shifting marker of hip hop’s ebbs and flows. These debates, after all, are similar to the ways poets have long sought to establish what poetry is and is not in their implicit conversations in verse. In the last section of the chapter I deal with the parameters for agency in hip hop, and more specifically with contestatory urban agency.

“Throw your fists up”: Hip Hop’s Contestatory Urban Agency

With larger, potentially more diverse audiences and live shows that can create a collective experience of identity, many hip hop artists have greater political currency than even the finest poets. However, to be convincing my argument that hip hop has greater political potential than printed poetry needs supporting evidence beyond live show dynamics and engaged self-criticism. The third piece of the picture, I believe, is hip hop’s agency. If hip hop continually (re)imagines itself in its own eyes through “authenticity” and self-criticism, then its underlying understanding of agency is how it (re)imagines its place in the world through that world’s eyes. It also gives us some clues to the ways that rappers see geopolitical, economic, and social issues. Their agency and viewpoints are a valuable
rejoinder to what the American public hears and reads in the news in most media outlets. After all, how many youthful views do we hear? How many African American views do we hear? How many views do we hear from inside impoverished urban neighborhoods, even from working class urban neighborhoods? How many views do we hear that challenge the economic and political system of the United States itself? How often do we hear, on CNN or NPR, a pundit, politician, or creative artist express the community-based values and emphasis on equitable education and health care we hear in The Coup’s “Heven Tonite”: “let’s make health care centers on every block / let’s give everybody homes and a garden plot / let’s give all the schools books / ten kids a class / and given ‘em truth for their pencils and pads” (Party Music). How many politicians do we hear placing that much emphasis on health care and class size?

Rappers are much like poets who work in print in that they offer listeners/readers alternative visions of the world. They offer visions of possibility and of utopia, but also of witness, outrage, and justice. In his discussion of hip hop and poetry, Houston A. Baker, Jr., writes that poetry is an “alternative space of the conditional” (95). Further, as both Martín Espada and Robert Hass have emphasized, one of the best ways to be political in poetry is to make images of justice; their claim is true of many rappers as well. However, at the same time some rappers confirm the worst stereotypes about hip hop culture. Much mainstream hip hop, as I have mentioned throughout this project, embodies a individualistic, hypermaterialistic and consumptive agency. Much of it is also violent and misogynistic. The rhetorical strategies of hip hop’s contestatory urban agency vary widely, but they consistently challenge hypermaterialism and hedonism.
I use three songs and parts of a fourth as case studies to explore hip hop’s contestatory urban agency. Two of these songs are about 9/11 and the complex framework of post-9/11 America. These songs are especially interesting because of their similarities and differences from the Kinnell and Baraka poems I discussed in earlier chapters. They illustrate two distinct, but still overlapping, approaches to political lyrics and contestatory agency. In “Are You Satisfied” (All of the Above 2002), J-Live, a former New York City public school teacher, destabilizes public officials’ unifying post-9/11 rhetoric even as he laments the loss of lives. Mr. Lif’s “Home of the Brave” (Emergency Rations 2002) directly attacks American imperialism, eschewing J-Live’s more even-handed approach. Also, because I am explicitly concerned with urban agency, post 9/11 New York is an apt space to explore it. After those two songs, I write about the Notorious B.I.G., one of hip hop’s greatest icons. The lyrics to “Respect” and “Things Done Changed” (Ready to Die 1994) symbolize the tensions of urban agency as well as any in hip hop. At the end of this section, I talk briefly about hip hop activism as one form of its agency. But first, I want to establish some parameters for hip hop’s lyrical agency.

Hip hop’s contestatory urban agency is bounded by two poles. At each pole, a hip hop foundation marks the territory – on one side braggadocio, on the other pessimism. The first pole is best expressed in the title of Nas’s “The World is Yours” (Illmatic), which implies that urban actors are capable of realizing any dream. The previously discussed “Block Party” echoes this pole when Jean Grae raps, “The world is what you make it.” This sentiment has been expressed countless times in what are usually referred to as “uplifting anthems” or some derivation thereof. This pole inadvertently and unfortunately echoes conservative political orthodoxy often used to represent the welfare mother as a straw woman, to suggest that
poverty is proof of bad character, and that the poor are lazy and that the rich have simply worked harder than they. The other pole is best stated by Mos Def in “The Rape Over” (The New Danger), a parody of Jay-Z’s “The Takeover” in which hip hop megastar Jay-Z exhails that he and his crew are “running” the game of rap. In Mos Def’s version, “old white men,” MTV, Viacom, and “corporate forces” are “running” hip hop. At this pole young African Americans in hip hop do not even control their own culture or music, a claim echoed earlier by Brother Ali. It is starker in dead prez’s “I’m a african” (let’s get free), which states unequivocally that urban actors are “made” by the social conditions in which they live: “my environment made me the nigga I am.” The truth is somewhere between these two poles (as are most hip hop visions of agency), but they are useful in defining the preliminary terms of the debate. They provide the outer boundaries for action in urban neighborhoods, but the scene is usually much more complicated and mediated than either position asserts.

The complex sense of agency in many hip hop lyrics often envisions resistance as fundamentally possible within urban landscapes that have the effect of working against the goals and aspirations of poor, young, mostly African American agents. The tension between acting according to one’s purposes and negotiating the constraints of racism and socioeconomic inequality frames many conceptions of agency in hip hop. Tricia Rose emphasizes the tension between individual agency and determining social and political counterforces for poor urban actors. It is dangerous, she writes, to “overemphasize the autonomy of black agency in the face of massive structural counterforces.” The desire to preserve agency, she points out, must not result in the elision of the “structural forces that constrain agency” such as racism, poverty, and the lack of resources and adequate education. She concludes that the desire for inner city youth to exercise individual agency / free will
“outside of racist and discriminatory contexts within which such action takes place” is an illusion (141-142). According to Rose’s view, any lyrics that stress autonomy and the formation of purposes as wholly individual are incomplete and misleading if they do not also acknowledge that all actions are responses to a variety of conditions, some of which constrain possibilities for action. While such a view is accurate from a theoretical standpoint, it can limit the range of expression for lyrics as political statements. Foregrounding autonomy and agency, though, may be part of a rhetorical strategy intended to uplift or organize potential actors. In Jean Grae’s and Nas’s cases, it likely serves to inspire and to mobilize energy for positive social change. If they give too much weight to agency and too little to constraining factors, it is *strategic* as well as unrealistic.

There is, then, a palpable discursive tension between agency and the determinate factors that limit agency for poor urbanites. Stuart Hall’s distinction between determinism and determination, where the former identifies causes that dictate outcomes, while the latter identifies limits and constraints that affect action rather than dictate effects (29, 44-45), suggests a way to understand these factors in hip hop. Determinism, he shows, is too crude a model because it leaves out the chance for revisability. It also allows little room for actors to achieve even realistic goals. Determinate factors, on the other hand, suggest that no outcomes are impossible, but that many are unlikely. The determination approach suggests that moving from poverty in the South Bronx to the ownership of a private yacht is highly improbable, becoming a millionaire small business owner less so, and so on. This approach establishes useful parameters without demarcating absolutes.

Before I discuss examples, I want to consider hip hop’s distinctive linguistic codes. Agency in hip hop lyrics is province of a poetics with its own forms of knowledge. First time
listeners can attest that understanding hip hop lyrics can be tough. These difficulties are partly due to the speed of a rapper’s delivery, complex rhyme schemes, bass heavy beats that drown out lyrics, or an inability to understand a rapper’s denotations. Although these issues affect a novice’s capacity for digesting content, another overarching factor is paramount – an ever-mutating hip hop vernacular. This vast set of terms, phrases, substitutions, metonyms, metaphors, and coded meanings requires active listening and a vast knowledge base. As in Wolfgang Iser’s reception theory, there is no work of art without the continuous active participation of the reader/listener. His theory indicates that the reader/listener must understand the conventions and codes that a work uses to create meaning. While Iser’s theory has its limitations, such as his implication that only certain readers are capable of a “proper” reading, it suggests the prominence of shared codes of understanding, which are used to disseminate knowledge in a community. In much the same way, Russell A. Potter discusses hip hop as embodying and employing its own forms of knowledge, discursive forms, and traditions (22). The political content and contestatory urban agency in hip hop lyrics, moreover, is expressed in vernacular specific to the hip hop community. Rappers understand their place in the world, as I mentioned earlier, through the lens of their own language(s).

My first example, J-Live’s “Are You Satisfied?,” uses several hip hop tropes to take on post-9/11 America. His criticism vacillates between the general and specific: the brutality and inequality of free-market capitalism, President Bush’s policies, and what he perceives as the disturbing quietude of the African American and hip hop communities on these issues. The chorus of “Are You Satisfied?” places the song in an general critique of American capitalism and imperialism, especially under Bush: “The rich get richer, / the world gets
worse, / do you get the picture? / Whoever told you that it was all good lied, / so throw your fists up if you’re not satisfied.” The chorus decries policies that increase economic inequality, but more importantly it directly questions the hip hop community and issues a collective call for action with the “fists up” rhetoric of black power and political-minded hip hop. Further, “It’s all good” is a decade-old hip hop expression usually uttered as a dismissal of problems or as a celebratory declaration. In his reference to this phrase, J-Live denounces MCs and listeners who do nothing but say “punchlines and puns” while ignoring urgent social, political, and economic problems, especially those stemming from 9/11. He frames his reproach in terminology that his audience will respond to with heightened awareness and sensitivity. He also questions the courage of those who have been oppositional critics in the past, when he implies that the President’s calls for unity and patriotism have made MCs “scared to debate” with the “same devils” they “used to love to hate.” Times such as the present, he suggest, require more courage and persistence in fighting inequality and oppression.

When J-Live specifically denounces President Bush, he does so via one of hip hop’s primary conceits – time. Potter explains the frequent usage of the question “What time is it?” in hip hop vernacular: “With this question, rappers situate themselves within a black diasporic timezone, outside the ‘official’ time of calendars” (7-8). Further, Richard Shusterman discusses rap’s “frequent time tags” as a “metaphysical position associated with American pragmatism” (626). Both show that hip hop has its own dynamic conception of time that turns not with the financial centers on Wall Street or Bond Street, but with the social, economic, and political realities of dispossessed African American communities. This is the world from which they project their viewpoints and the lens from which they
understand the wider world. Within this framework, one of J-Live’s most potent lines asserts that Bush’s policies will be so detrimental to these communities and so disorient the country that the hip hop community will no longer be able to tell time: “By the time Bush is done, you won’t know what time it is.” For J-Live, Bush’s policies dramatically affect not only African Americans, but the ability of those in the hip hop community to orient themselves, to make sense of their worlds, to \textit{tell time}.

The ingenuity of J-Live’s approach is best not in his denunciation of Bush and a right-wing government that “trades books for guns,” but in his recontextualization of post-9/11 America. While careful to say there is nowhere else he prefers to live ("the grass ain’t greener on the other genocide"), he cleverly combats the popular belief that 9/11 changed the world forever: “Now it’s all about NYPD caps and Pentagon bumper stickers / but, yo, you’re still a nigga.” He goes on to rap that the attack was “tragic, but it damn sure ain’t magic.” Here, he takes the most piercing logical step in the song, pointing out that 9/11 has no agency to effect positive change. Events, he implies, may change temporary conditions, but they may not change existing beliefs, practices, and attitudes, especially negative ones that impact poor urban communities. Most critically, events do not change the prevailing global economic structures that insure the increasing wealth and power of multinational corporations at the expense of the poor, nor do they change the U.S.’s political corruption. He raps in incantatory parallel structure: “It won’t make the brutality disappear, / it won’t pull equality from behind your ear, / it won’t make a difference in a two-party country / if the president cheats to win another four years.” Here J-Live juggles the necessary conditions for discussing agency that Tricia Rose outlines. He calls for action, vigilance, protest, and a contestatory agency within the constraining contexts of racism, economic and power
inequalities, corruption, and the complications of a war on terrorism. He points out that even an event as initially unifying as the 9/11 attacks is incapable of changing the fundamental dynamics of racism and other inequalities. Without succumbing to simplicity, he constructs a song that protests even as it analyzes a variety of competing variables that affect the exercise of agency.

“Home of the Brave,” Boston-based Mr. Lif’s commentary on post-9/11 America, is more didactic and aggressive than J-Live’s “Are You Satisfied?” If J-Live is careful to say 9/11 was tragic, Mr. Lif is – as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) once wrote in “Black Art” – happy to write “poems / like fists.” He smashes America square in the face and makes no apology in doing so. Throughout the song Mr. Lif works against an artificially constructed consensus and any prohibition on dissenting opinions. Like J-Live, he critiques American capitalism, but does so with more venom. Mr. Lif claims that the only function of the current administration is to increase the wealth of the rich and to protect American monetary interests – “their only function is to keep the funny money where it’s at.” After giving a brief history lesson on Afghanistan – its war against Russia, American support of the Taliban, the role of the Northern Alliance, and American energy interests there – Mr. Lif protests the war in Afghanistan. He raps: “Bush disguises bloodlust as patriotism.” This base substitution, Mr. Lif claims, “demonizes Afghans / so Americans cheer when we kill their innocent families.” The brutal, unapologetic imagery reaches a denouement in a recontextualization of 9/11: “You can wave that piece of shit flag if you dare / but they killed us because we’ve been killing them for years.” Here Mr. Lif seeks to undermine the flag, represented following the attacks as a sacred symbol of American unity and freedom. The flag, for him, is not a symbol of innocence. Instead, it shrouds killings and justifies further
killings. Unlike J-Live’s lamentations for the loss of lives on 9/11, Mr. Lif’s lyrics contest any declarations of American innocence. He makes no such concessions; his interests lie in unmasking and contesting the brutality of American imperialism, and in calling attention to the socioeconomic conditions in Muslim countries partially created and sustained by American foreign policy.

In “Home of the Brave” Mr. Lif takes on a role common in hip hop, especially in the politically conscious era of the late 1980s and early 1990s. First, he references black historical figures and compares himself to them, rapping that he has the “mind of Mandela and the heart of Rosa Parks.” After establishing this activist revolutionary link, he moves on to his agenda to dispel illusion. When he raps “here’s what your history books won’t show: / you’re a dead man for fucking with American dough” he engages an emceeing tradition that flows through Chuck D, KRS-One, Paris, X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, dead prez, Talib Kweli, and others. A big part of hip hop’s contestatory urban agency is its truth-teller function. Many rappers feel charged with liberating listeners from falsehoods, lies, and illusions perpetrated by the United States government, multinational corporate powers, the military-industrial complex, public school curricula, and the police. They redress what they feel are historical inaccuracies that slight black achievement and educational imbalances that maintain racial inequalities and the “official story.” Part of this technique is an occasional indulgence in conspiracy theories, some of which do have credibility. So when Mr. Lif raps that “it’s easy to control the scared / so they keep us in fear / with their favorite Middle Eastern villain named Bin Laden” he engages a long history of hip hop’s distrust for the government and their stated reasons for wars and other policies detrimental to urban African Americans.
While J-Live and Mr. Lif are independent artists, even those largely unfamiliar with hip hop will recognize the name Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace), if only for the circumstances surrounding his murder and that of Tupac Shakur. The year his debut album was released (1994) is widely considered as one of the brightest years in hip hop history, due in part to the release of the B.I.G.’s *Ready to Die* and Nas’s *Illmatic*. The lyrics and sensibilities on *Ready to Die* illustrate both of the poles that bound hip hop agency. They illustrate the perplexing binary enabled by the conditions of city living: an obsession with death – the elephant in the room – readily apparent in the record’s title, and a revelatory celebration of life. The young urban African American male, for B.I.G., is hemmed in on one side by the likelihood of a violent death and on the other side by a life that is difficult to live free of violence, crime, and abject poverty. Under these conditions, *Ready to Die* is an album obsessed by the material conditions of childhood poverty, the trappings of drug dealing, and the financial benefits of hip hop success.

On “Respect,” B.I.G. envisions the individual’s entrance into the social world and the formation of self beginning prior to birth. Thus, chances for successful actions are shaped by the conditions into which an individual is born. Even in the womb, though, the individual has powerful agency. B.I.G. raps that his “moms is late,” so after “ten months” in her womb, he decides to “plan [his] escape” into the world. Is this claim overcompensation as Rose would claim, rap braggadocio, or a plea for a world in which African Americans have greater control over their lives from birth to death? Or is it a preemptive attack on the socioeconomic conditions faced by poor urban youth? The last question strikes the deepest chord, especially as the following lines reveal a desire to seize life actively rather than to enter it as a passive figure: “I wish moms’d hurry up / so I could get buckwild, juvenile, ripping mics.” Here,
B.I.G.’s persona expresses a desire to begin life as a hip hop star, bypassing the poverty of city life. Thus, B.I.G. does not ignore Stuart Hall’s determinate factors; he expresses a wish to erase them via hip hop, which points to a sadly limited field of possibilities for poor black males.

The lyrics of “Respect” suggest anxiety about the determinants that precede action as well as abiding impatience with the inability to act. B.I.G. raps, “I’m seeing my death / and I ain’t even took my first step.” Here, he imagines dying in the protective – but ultimately restrictive – womb. However, a potential death in the womb inflects the historical oppression of African Americans – the “umbilical cord” is wrapped “around [his] neck.” This disturbing image, intentionally or not, alludes to Southern hangings and lynchings during reconstruction and Jim Crow. It suggests that African Americans always enter the world subject to the weight of historical oppression and violence. Before he takes his “first step” the song’s persona is immersed in a world of racism and violence.

One other troublesome social condition encroaches upon the impending birth. The persona’s mother is a single mother; as such, she must go by herself to the hospital without support from friends, family, or the child’s father. Self-reliance, then, is a necessary cornerstone in many urban communities with high out-of-wedlock birth rates. Given this factor, when rappers give too much credence to autonomous individual agency, it seems more reasonable because of the role of self-reliance as a survival tactic for single mothers who have often experienced deep cuts in welfare and other support services. It is notable as well that braggadocio does not prevent lyrical complexity. In her article on the difficulties of using hip hop as a tool for political activism, Angela Ards argues that “organizing for social change requires that people tap into their mutual human vulnerability and acknowledge their
common oppression.” She continues by claiming that hip hop will have difficulties as part of any such movement because it “builds walls to shield” against vulnerability. While she is right in suggesting that braggadocio is in part a shield against vulnerability, she says that it will be tough for the music to begin to “speak of individual frailty and collective strength” (19-20). I believe, on the other hand, that there is great vulnerability and frailty in many hip hop lyrics, especially in B.I.G.’s lyrics above. They just seem dwarfed by macho posturing. He never makes it to collective strength, but many others do. Collective strength is more a province of independent artists than mainstream ones, perhaps for the obvious reasons that community-based marketing, distribution, and performance are closer to their aesthetics then the high-budget marketing of mainstream artists. The ensuing brief discussion of activism suggests that hip hop artists are starting to tap into a notion of “collective strength.”

Although difficult conditions mark the African American child’s entry into the world, the persona in “Respect” nonetheless imagines his birth into a city of pleasure and cutting-edge performance. He “bring(s) mad joy” into the world and is born to be a hip hop star “ripping mics.” After the birth, the doctor says that the baby will be “a bad boy.” Naming the speaker “a bad boy” at birth helps produce identity through existing negative social definitions in which black males are thought more likely to go to prison than college. As Judith Butler might say, selfhood is produced through social networks of meaning, one of the most prominent of which is naming. Naming, moreover, is an act that occurs under existing sanctions and power structures. The way Butler understands public power as literally “writing” one’s selfhood is so invidious that it allows little of the individual agency B.I.G.’s song so desperately wants to ascribe to young African Americans. If the persona is “a bad boy” at birth – and here the name should be seen through Butler and through the allusion to
Sean “P-Diddy” Combs’s Bad Boy Records, B.I.G.’s record label – his chances of avoiding violence are radically delimited.

When B.I.G. ponders the narrow field of possibilities for poor urban youth, he calls attention to the ruthless competition that can permeate global capitalism, especially in areas with limited resources. As I discussed earlier in relation to De La Soul’s “Stakes is High,” the struggle for symbolic and economic capital is potentially devastating for urban communities. For Bourdieu, I mentioned, symbolic capital is gained only when the individual agent is “both a ruthless competitor and supreme judge” (136). In B.I.G.’s “Things Done Changed,” an urban African American male has but three feasible options for gaining either type of capital – hip hop, drug dealing, and athletics. This is a common but dangerous perception in much hip hop. He raps: “if I wasn't in the rap game / I'd probably have a key knee deep in the crack game / because the streets is a short stop / either you're slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jumpshot.” Being a drug dealer or star basketball player can provide inner-city youth with symbolic capital – status, distinction, and a command on resources independent of economics – and potential economic capital. For the former “occupation” the economic gains can be immediate; for the latter, however, there are no guarantees and a big payday may not arrive even for an extremely gifted individual. An even greater danger exists in the hip hop pipe dream; Cheryl L. Keyes suggests that hip hop music is a symbol of socioeconomic mobility in the “average youth ghetto” (172). While her claim is technically correct, it is also disturbing in that it glosses over a lack of practical, achievable alternatives for poor African American youth. How many, after all, become rap stars?

In “Respect,” however, B.I.G. ultimately exposes the mutable nature of material ambition. Like a Reverend Rinehart, he extols material success even as he laments his – in hindsight –
bad decisions. While he celebrates money made from selling drugs (“making cream / on the
drug scene”) and his hopes of becoming the “king of New York,” he realizes that these
pursuits are fraught with peril. After being incarcerated he realizes that “all the money [he]
stacked was all the money for bail.” Even though socioeconomic conditions limit the
individual’s possible actions, until actions fail, the individual will not likely change them.
But, when they do fail, the individual, in this case B.I.G.’s drug dealer persona, can move
from “practical consciousness,” which is based on a tacit knowledge of constraints – here a
lack of choices and economic resources – to conscious reflection (Giddens 5). B.I.G.’s
persona’s conscious reflection leads to a reassessment of the relative worth of drug dealing.
“Respect” indicates that this type of feedback is built into both the actions of inner-city actors
and hip hop’s sense of agency.

Hip hop’s contestatory urban agency, if these songs represent the ways rappers approach
agency and contest social, political, and economic conditions both within and outside the
African American community, is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple formula. Hip
hop artists struggle mightily with the conditions that shape their communities. They express
visions of both their cities and the wider world in a vernacular that frames those worlds in
specific hip hop terminology. While unchecked individual agency is a utopian dream in some
lyrics, artists often acknowledge the factors that influence any actor’s capacity for achieving
her purposes. This fundamental dynamic frames contestatory urban agency and hip hop’s
legion of protest songs. So while there is great truth in the claim that “old white men” run hip
hop, there is also some truth – at least through rap music – that for young urbanites “the
world is what you make it” when we consider that rappers constantly remake the world each
time they grab a microphone.
If hip hop lyrics are one way of accessing hip hop’s conceptions of agency and of discovering some of its political commitments, direct political activism makes up the least visible but most rapidly growing segment of hip hop’s agency in American politics. Hip hop artists and poets who work in print face many difficulties when writing and communicating songs with political import; even rappers and critics constantly remind each other that hip hop’s political poets face an uphill battle. These impediments are often viewed as a consequence of the hip hop community’s fundamental disconnection from mainstream political processes. Nelson George writes that hip hop is not a “political movement.” It does not, he says, “elect public officials,” “present a systematic (or even original) critique of white world supremacy,” follow a “manifesto for collective political agitation,” produce leaders along the lines of Malcolm X or Dr. King, or create “grassroots activists organizations” like the SCLC, the BPP, or the NAACP (154-155). While his observations are well-founded, hip hop artist-activists have made impressive strides recently in counteracting this apparent inability to engage in politics.

There are some key distinctions between artists and activists, even between politically-engaged artists and political activists, the former activists through their music, and the latter activists by profession. Although any distinctions one can draw are necessarily crude and reductive, even these crude differences are helpful. Artists usually value creativity, innovation, and, even if they hope to encourage collective political action in their audiences, individuality. Activists, on the other hand, generally favor collective action in their work. Whereas a work of art may represent a kind of symbolic action, a work of grassroots activism values the verifiable material consequences of that action in the external world. Where, then, are the potential intersections between these two types of action? The examples that follow of
hip hop’s engagement with mainstream politics are examples of grassroots organizing that attempt to join activism to art.

George’s claim that “hip hop’s main problem as a political movement is that MCs are not social activists by training or inclination” (155) may still apply to MCs’ training, but not to their inclinations, as countless MCs are currently working both as artists and activists. The last few years have seen a dramatic increase in hip hop’s direct involvement in politics, and perhaps a slow rewriting of the trends George cites. Much of the political activism revolved around the 2004 election season. As reactions to Reaganomics, crack cocaine, and the first President Bush created the impetus for some of the most brilliant, incendiary, and revolutionary hip hop in history, widespread anger at the second Bush have not only helped cultivate passionate hip hop, but to foster activism.

The most prominent hip hop activist organization is probably the Hip Hop Summit Action Network, whose president, Dr. Benjamin Chavis Muhammad, has SCLC and NAACP roots. The Hip Hop Summit Action Network was a partner in the largest voter registration campaign in American history – the New Voters Project, which was established for the fall 2004 elections by the Pew Charitable Trusts, The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management, and The State PIRGs, with the intention of registering 265,000 young voters nationwide. Further, Dr. Muhammad has claimed that the network has registered twelve million new voters in the last three years, a claim that I find impossible to believe (Goldstein 15). Further, the Hip Hop Summit Action Network and America Coming Together (one of the much discussed 527s) co-sponsored the Hip Hop “Get Out the Vote” Bus, which traveled to twenty-six cities in ten states as part of a get-out-the-vote drive to
encourage young voters to go to the polls. The bus was modeled on the Freedom Rides of the 1960s, but unlike the Freedom Rides, these buses utilized well-known hip hop artists.

Concerts and benefits also represent forms of activism for hip hop artists. On September 1, 2004 during the penultimate night of the Republican National Convention, a group of hip hop artists held a benefit concert called *Who’s America?* in New York City’s Bowery Ballroom. It was sponsored by the alternative urban music magazine *URB* and independent hip hop record label Definitive Jux. The event was hosted by Chuck D of Public Enemy and featured performances by Definitive Jux artists El-P, Aesop Rock, The Perceptionists, and Hangar 18. The event, which included a voter registration drive, was part of a larger group of benefits, shows, performances, and concerts organized for Music for America, an organization with a bold mission: “Through live concerts and an interactive website, we are connecting culture and politics, exposing political hypocrisies, and igniting a grassroots movement.” Part of the concert’s proceeds went to Music for America, the League of Pissed Off Voters, and the League of Independent Voters. These groups had a stated goal of registering one million new young voters. Further, the Slam Bush Political Action Committee and the Slam Bush National Rhyme Contest, judged by Chuck D, Wordsworth, Supernatural and others, conducted MC battles against Bush in major swing states, and was but another example of localized political action from the hip hop community. Also, the We the Planet Music and Activism Festival (November 2004) in Oakland featured The Roots and The Coup, included workshops on activism and voting, and was powered using bio-diesel fuel and solar panels.

Rappers are beginning to bridge the gulf between art and political activism, countering the perceived separation between the two. They are, to use Ernest Allen, Jr.’s complaint about rap as political tool, working to undo their “decapitation” from “mass political movements
for social change” (160). Yet, two complications remain, the most confounding of which Christopher Holmes Smith points out in his article on hip hop moguls – much of mainstream hip hop’s portrayal of “socially competitive consumption as a viable mode of civic participation and personal fulfillment” (71) in lieu of community-based movements. The second – the difficulties inherent in any mobilization of people for a cause – is elucidated in Black Star’s (Mos Def and Talib Kweli) “Thieves in the Night” (Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star), which aptly ends this section.

“Thieves in the Night,” in part an interpretation of a passage in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970), laments the inability of African American communities to mobilize resources in the fight to better their lives. This lack of mobilized or “directed” power helps perpetuate poverty and violence. Actions that are not community-minded, according to the chorus, are “not strong, only aggressive / ‘cause the power ain’t directed / that’s why we’re subjected to the will of the oppressive.” Here, Mos Def establishes a contrast between strength and aggression; aggression is brief action that prevents an organization of power and further subjects the community “to the will of the oppressive,” while strength is the capacity for channeling (“directing”) power to improve communities. Directed agency is only possible if and when the community works as a community instead of as Machiavellian individuals, as Mos Def implies later when he raps that the mantra “get yours first, them other niggas [are] secondary” is “filling up the cemetery.” “Directed” power puts community first; this is precisely what many hip hop activists have been attempting to do recently. These artist-activists have not worked to create engaged art, but to engage political process through direct, collective action.
Summary and Conclusions: A Global Hip Hop Future?

To watch videos on MTV and BET for an afternoon is to see hip hop as a shallow, image-driven culture of exaggerated masculinity, misogyny, gratuitous sex, audacious wealth, and unabashed consumerism. In this visible segment of hip hop, individual consumption and wealth are primary values and means to social advancement. Much of commercial hip hop’s ethos of hyperconsumerism, which includes the ostentatious flaunting of luxury items such as jewelry and cars, serves in part to encourage listeners and viewers to “‘buy in’ to the emerging paradigm of accessible luxury” (Smith 71), a key component of a fictitious American Dream in which everyone can get rich, drive a Bentley, and live in a mansion. Hip hop thus becomes a symbol of upward mobility via material gain that drives an economy based on consumption. Christopher Holmes Smith suggests that this symbolic representation moves away from “communal development blueprints from the civil rights era” (71). Mainstream hip hop is thus arguably a support mechanism for some negative values that the civil rights movement fought against.

Yet, what is most interesting about this mainstream dynamic is initially suggested by Patrick Neate. He claims, “It is white, corporate America that bestrides the globe economically,” but “it is black America in general and hip-hop in particular that bestrides the world’s popular culture” (13-14). If this is true, and I believe it is, then these two previously disparate forces have joined together in a strange partnership in the ultimate service of wealth creation for a select few. In this connection there is also hope; independent artists are gaining traction in the U.S. and often enjoy success in places such as Japan and western Europe. Much hip hop is still subversive, even in the mainstream. Even if the form of the art is becoming part of the dominant consumer culture, the ways that hip hop has remained
countercultural on the independent scene and in foreign cities should further its viability as political art, live performance, and activist tool.

Given hip hop’s changing roles in American and global cultures, Rose’s claims about rap’s marginality in 1994 now seem tenuous. She wrote that hip hop was “part of the dominant text, and yet, always on the margins of this text; relying on and commenting on the text’s center and always aware of its proximity to the border” (19). Now, though, rap is so imbricated in the dominant text that the margins within hip hop comment on the center, both in hip hop and in the greater culture. This dynamic makes small club live shows and self-criticism so critical to hip hop because independent artists often resist the consumerism that marks commercial rap. Potter’s analysis of this commodification aptly sums up this situation: “since bourgeois culture craves difference, appropriating subcultural forms and turning them into commodities solves two problems in one blow” (120). As such, dispossessed black youth are transformed from threat to commodity, and now, more dangerously, into tools for promoting capitalism and consumerism.

Strangely enough, what threatens hip hop culture can also be seen as invigorating it. As such, there is both a creative and market equilibrium that keep the diverse culture in balance, at least for those participants who are willing to dig further than MTV and mainstream radio. However, there is much less balance than there was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which suggests that hip hop values may be cyclical; that corporate-run record companies and radio and television stations have greater control than they did then; or that there is just too much money to be made and the temptation to make it is just too great. In any case, what I have written in this chapter is just a few “snapshots of a movement” (Potter 148) that is always changing.
I am certain, though, that along with all of us hip hop faces a future in which responses to urban crises of racism, oppression, poverty, and inadequate water supplies and health care will be more important than ever. Here’s why: In 1950, the world had 86 cities of one million or more inhabitants. In 2004, there are 386 cities with populations of more than one million. By 2015, at least 550 cities will have populations exceeding one million. Further, the current global urban population of 3 billion is greater than the world’s 1960 population, and, in 2004, the world’s urban population surpassed the number of rural inhabitants for the first time in recorded history (Davis 17). How are these demographics relevant to hip hop? With the remarkable growth of urban populations and of “megacities” (over 8 million) and “hypercities” (over 20 million), poor urban residents around the world will struggle to survive and to be heard, and since much of this population will be ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, they will battle institutionalized racism. Hip hop artists have struggled with these forces in similar contexts for nearly three decades, asserting their rights to be heard. Their voices will echo, whether consciously or not, millions of pleas from Bogotá, Mexico City, Lagos, Dakar, Rio, and Jakarta. Governments in the developed and developing worlds will not be able to ignore the issues that affect urban dwellers. Hip hop, the art of disaffected American youth, may metamorphose in these crowded urban spaces as poetry, politics, and voices of hope, revolution, resistance, anger, and, for the foreseeable future, darkness and decay. Most voices will likely remain young and black, while others will be white, and yet others Latina/o and mestiza/o. They will all be part of the expanding range of hip hop expressions, always changing and always refashioning the world it engages.
CONCLUSION
Part I

In this study I have tried to chart what I perceive are the major rhetorical strategies of political poems in the United States from the late 1960s to the present. In order to explain the general distinguishing features as well as the subtleties of each strategy, I chose poems that I believe best represent that strategy’s overall qualities. However, the poems I chose to discuss push, challenge, and sometimes overrun the strategy boundaries I established. While I fully believe that the strategies are distinct, they can overlap in interesting ways. I mostly leave it to the reader to make the overlapping connections between strategies within individual poems. I tried to strike a balance between having firm, well-delineated categories and flexible ones that are critic, reader, poem, and poet friendly. In other words, I did not want to isolate strategies in a mutually exclusive way. Levine’s “They Feed They Lion” (Chapter 2) exemplifies a poem that shades into another category of political poetry. While its primary strategy is *particular equivocal agency*, as I pointed out Levine draws heavily on his own experience in the poem – his own *experiential agency*. Yet he abstracts, disguises, and redirects that experience to conceal its connection to him. Further, it is possible to see his experience mostly due to comments he has made in interviews about his experience of writing the poem. “They Feed They Lion” thus shows *primarily* strategies of equivocal agency. Only an extensive reading reveals how experience informs the poem.

Just as poems that evade categorization and reveal the limits of my definitions can tell us a lot about poets’ nuanced approaches to political poetry, the poetry I have left out of this study
can tell us much about my strategies, proclivities, and commitments. The political party “big tent” platform inevitably excludes capable participants and constituencies (or takes them for granted and thus ignores them). My big tent approach similarly leaves out some types of political poetry. I did not include any spoken word, performance, or slam poetry. I have chosen not to discuss poems performed at vibrant, multicultural, often political spaces such as El Puerto Rican Embassy, Nuyorican Poets’ Café, Tía Chu Cha Café Cultural, and Def Poetry Jam. I decided to leave them out for several reasons. First, the lack of space. I prioritized printed poetry and hip hop over spoken word. Second, my knowledge and interest bases. I know printed poetry and hip hop much better than I do spoken word poetry.

Many readers may take issue with some of the poems and poets I have chosen and with some I have not. It is possible to find countless other poems that fit into the strategies I outline. I view this not as a problem but as a positive generative quality of my categories. That generation, after all, is part of the purpose of this project. To reiterate, I also chose to discuss poems only by living, working poets. Thus, I did not include political poems by deceased poets such as June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Etheridge Knight, Audre Lorde, James Wright, Denise Levertov, and Ricardo Sánchez. Others may see an oversight in my decision to exclude Language Poetry (while yet other readers may cheer). I believe, as many other critics and readers do, that while Language Poetry is certainly political in its conscious subversion of poetic tradition(s), commodified language(s), MFA workshop poetry, and various other capitalist, corporate discourses, it fails as a language of politics. Another reason is the lack of human agency in most language poetry, which is one of my primary concerns in this book. Alicia Ostriker claims that Language Poetry is politically vacuous, despite its practitioners’ insistences to the contrary,
because it denies that “the morally responsible human subject is even theoretically possible” ("Beyond Confession" 35). This claim is also outlined in depth by Charles Altieri in “Without Consequences is No Politics.” As I discussed in relation to Michael Palmer’s “Sun” (Chapter 2), if the political content of a poem is concealed, obscured, and inaccessible, it likely fails as a language of politics.

In summary, then, this book explores ways poets engage with pressing social and political realities and the ways they figure human agency. In chapter one I discussed poems of embodied agency, which includes poems both of experiential and authoritative agency. The poems in this chapter take their cue from Adrienne Rich’s claim that a poem is “not a philosophical or psychological blueprint; it’s an instrument for embodied experience” (What is Found 13). Poems of experiential agency include what Muriel Rukeyser called the poetry of “documentary fact” (cited What is Found 21), poems that comment on events in the empirical world, but it also includes poems that engage personal and collective experience not identified with specific historical events. These poems are often criticized as mere documentary or polemic, especially when they are written by women or minorities, but they re-imagine experience in a way that documents as well as transforms. Poems of authoritative agency embody experience, but they extrapolate from that experience the authority to speak for entire communities. They are uncompromising and unyielding. They are “poems / like fists” that directly attack what they see as urgent sociopolitical, environmental, and global problems. They do not, as poet David Mura writes, “surrender vast realms of experience” to the “objectivity” of disciplines such as journalism, economics, and political science as “the sole voice[s] which speak on events and topics of relevance to us all” (cited in What is Found 121).
In chapter two I discussed two types of *equivocal agency*, *comprehensive* and *particular*. These strategies are not as easy to pinpoint as those of the first chapter. By nature, these poems are often indirect, mysterious, haunting, enchanting, duplicitous, or some combination thereof. They generally depart from simple linear narratives and from identifiable first-person speakers. They often have parodic, distant, satirical voices. While Simic uses first-person speakers, they are ghostly, more present in their absence than in any physical body. His speakers and characters “vanish / With a touch of the hand.” Overall, though, poems of equivocal agency are primarily political through the imagination. Imagination is itself the political force that refuses to capitulate to any limiting, repressive political or social system or any poetry of experience.

In chapter three I discussed poems of *migratory agency*. These poems are not simply “hybrid.” They do not use or adopt multiple languages in order to create a hybrid work of art. They migrate between languages, cultures, worldviews, and geographical spaces. They are political both in these linguistic and cultural interfaces, as well as in the sociopolitical issues they tackle. The *skin* of these poems holds a multiplicity of living, breathing communities moving between languages, geographies, and cultures. Their poets are creating the new multicultural, multilingual poetries of the Americas and of the United States. They are, moreover, at the forefront of a burgeoning Latina/o century in United States literature and culture.

In chapter four I discussed various aspects of hip hop culture. I tried to paint an overall portrait of where the culture is at this moment in 2005 fully aware as I went that hip hop changes faster than any critic, listener, or observer is capable of tracking. I also attempted to avoid generalizations, but I occasionally asserted them as departure points to clarify and
explore the many confusing aspects of the culture. I hope that those readers familiar with hip hop will find the chapter illuminating, innovative, and occasionally perplexing as I have left many questions unanswered. For those readers who came to this study as poets who work in print, lovers of printed poetry, and poetry critics, I hope that the inclusion of hip hop has been a thought-provoking introduction to the culture as well as a way of opening up the poetry world to its most dynamic and popular version of itself.

Now that I have summed up the project, for the remainder of the conclusion I want to make some concluding comments. First, I discuss a poem that transcends the categories I put forth in the previous chapters. Then I consider briefly the use of humor as a strategy for making political poems and its conjunction with poetry written in form. I finish up, in the second part of the conclusion, with some general closing observations.

In “The House Slave” former U.S. Poet Laureate (1993-1995) Rita Dove uses the speaking “I” to describe the first-person experience and witness of a slave. The speaker narrates the poem contemporaneously as if she were physically present on a nineteenth century southern plantation. She speaks in present-tense, active first-person verbs in order to describe the horrors of watching her family’s brutal mistreatment – “I watch them driven,” “I cannot fall asleep again,” “I lie on my cot,” and “I weep” (29). The reader knows that Dove was not a slave herself, but the poem works because we are willing to go along with her experience of being an African American woman. Yet, what is more important is the poet’s and reader’s temporal distance from slavery. Just as the house slave in the poem is insulated from the greatest suffering – she is inside and not subject to the horrors of the fields – and witnesses it from the windows, the poet is both insulated by over one hundred years but still witnesses it through the window of the poem, the history that informs it, and the racism that still pervades
American society. After all, how many million African American women keep house, so to speak, in large corporations and universities, where mostly rich white men own and control the house? The poem enacts the isolation of the house slave, the isolation of the poet, and the suffering that surrounds them and that they both witness.

Dove thus uses two primary strategies in “The House Slave.” It is a poem of experiential agency, but with a difference. There is the first-person speaking “I” witnessing and narrating. There is the reimagining of collective experience. There is the force of her status as an African American woman. But, there is also a palpable discursive tension with equivocal agency. The scene she describes certainly happened, but it never happened to the poet or to anyone she has known. This poem illustrates perfectly how and why poems are not subject to verification or evidentiary justification. Dove stages a voice that taps into her historical imagination and likely as well her sense of collective suffering and oppression as an African American. The voice is both hers and not hers. But, for me at least, I do not feel duped. The phrase this did not happen never enters my mind. The poem is convincing precisely because its speaker becomes not the poet’s voice but the slave’s.92

If there are poems such as Dove’s that span the strategies I have discussed, there are also poems whose primary strategy does not fit into any of my categories. While I do not want to outline the possibilities of a political poetry based on the agency that is produced by humor, I do want to reflect for a bit on its possibilities. One could make the claim that humor is one of the best political tools in the United States in the twenty-first century. Jon Stewart’s “fake news” show The Daily Show not only has brilliantly subversive political commentary, it is also the most insightful news program on cable or network television. Parody and satire have long been not only tools in trade for comedians, but for poets as well. Comedy (both dark and
uplifting) can work as a form of political commentary on the stage, on film, and in poems. As far as contemporary American poetry goes, a few are lodged prominently in my mind: Gregory Corso’s “Marriage,” Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” Martín Espada’s “Revolutionary Spanish Lesson,” Victor Hernández Cruz’s “It’s Miller Time,” Gina Valdez’s “English Con Salsa” (discussed in chapter 3), Campbell McGrath’s “Capitalist Poem #5,” among countless others, including many by Sherman Alexie.93

Gary Soto’s “Mexicans Begin Jogging” is an adroit example of a contemporary poem that uses humor in a political (but subtle) way. In the poem, the speaker-poet narrates a worker’s experience of being kicked out of a factory by his boss upon the border patrol’s surprise arrival. Thinking he is an illegal immigrant, the boss yells at him, “‘Over the fence, Soto’” (cited in Suárez Red, White, and Blues 173). The speaker-poet protests that he is an American, but the boss insists and “press[es] / A dollar into [his] palm.” So, the speaker-poet follows the crowd of illegals “through the back door” saying to himself “I was on his time.” The second stanza begins with the speaker-poet running with the others. The image he constructs of this run is fascinating, absurd, and sadly comic. The image feels like a surreal road race – a marathon or a charity 10 K – that the Mexican factory workers flowed into unknowingly. They run “past the amazed crowds that lined / The street and blurred like photographs, in rain” and past “sociologists” who “clock” the speaker-poet as he goes past on a “jog into the next century / On the power of a great, silly grin.” The fact that the poet’s name appears in the poem makes it more humorous, not only because such a move is difficult to pull off, but also because it likely points to an actual experience that was funny for one and only one participant – the poet. Thus, the absurdity and hilarity of the image and event for the speaker-poet opens up the poem to the undertones of fear, ethnocentricity, xenophobia,
repression, dangerous working conditions, and potential heartache of being apprehended by the border patrol.

Soto’s poem is humorous and political, even if it gains part of that political edge from a position of privilege over the running Mexican immigrants. But, what about poetry that is not so subtle or sophisticated, that does not have complex images and voices. Can humorous light verse be political? Calvin Trillin’s “Deadline Poet” column, which appears regularly in *The Nation* suggests that humor can be a strategy for making political poetry, even if that poetry is what few if any readers would consider “good” poetry. The “Deadline Poet” poems comment on current events – thus the moniker – and usually do so in a dogmatic, hyperbolic way. The July 4, 2005 poem “Cheney Says Iraq Insurgents are in ‘Last Throes’” (6) is not so much doggerel because it is in regular meter, but it is bathetic and formulaic as is intended.

Its six lines – in rhymed couplets in perfect iambic pentameter – are humorous and politically charged, but ultimately unmoving for readers. These lines score cheap points and cheap laughs, but little more. The poem takes as its title and subject a comment Vice President Dick Cheney made about the Iraq War. Here is the first couplet: “When rockets fly and battle smoke is thick, / It’s good to hear from ‘Four Deferments Dick.’” Savvy readers can easily deduce what the next two couplets will be like, so I do not reprint them here. So while the Deadline Poet certainly is political poetry, a poem written in form such as the Elisa Griswold poem I mentioned at the end of the first chapter is a much more moving formal political poem, even though it too suffers from the simplicity of its form. Humor, then, although I chose not to explore it at length in this study, is a viable if occasionally risky strategy for making contemporary political poetry in the United States. I finish in the second
short part of the conclusion with some general observations about politics and poetry, returning to the issues and contexts that framed this project in the preface and introduction.

**Part II**

Anyone dealing with poetry and the love of poetry must deal, then, with the hatred of poetry, and perhaps even more with the indifference which is driven toward the center.


In 1949, when Muriel Rukeyser wrote about the “hatred” of and “indifference” toward poetry, she was engaging a long tradition of poets who have felt compelled to view poetry through the lens of its detractors. In eighth century China, Tu Fu wrote about “brood[ing] on the uselessness of letters” and about “Poetry and letters / Persist[ing] in silence and solitude.” What good is poetry, he asked, when his country is “overrun with war” and other citizens view poets with “contempt” (6, 29, 8, 15). As Rukeyser suggested in 1949, and which is still true today, the “economy of the nation” and the “empire of business” within it, “both include in their basic premise the concept of perpetual warfare” (61). If it is true that the United States exists in a state of real or imagined perpetual warfare, then poetry will always face some degree of hatred, indifference, and contempt.

Tu Fu knew better than most this strained relationship between poetry and a society at perpetual war. His poems were valued in the Chinese T’ang Dynasty for their Yi, or Confucian moral instruction, as well as for his rigorously rule-bound verse. During the second half of his life Tu Fu became increasingly concerned with the ravages of war, and for good reason. In 742 AD, the Chinese census numbered nearly fifty million; in 764 AD – just 22 years later – China had approximately seventeen million citizens. The great capital city of Chang-an, where Buddhists, Taoists, Christians, Jews, and Manicheans held counsel together, was destroyed by a rebellion led by a Turkish general.94 Tu Fu – a descendent of
thirteen generations of Confucian literati and an exile from Chang-an – and his poetry reveal an abiding obsession with the place of poetry when the world is at war. But, I have learned that my time is more similar than not to Tu Fu’s. While the wide scale devastation now happens in other than my country, those who make war and those who make poetry are still at odds and may always be so.95

The debate about the usefulness and value of poetry began in earnest again in 1991 with the appearance of poet-critic Dana Gioia’s “Can Poetry Matter?” in The Atlantic. There have been numerous forays into the debate on both sides; nothing, however, is resolved or calcified in these debates but the debate itself. To return to a point I made in the preface, the debate pits – centuries after Tu Fu and thousands of miles away – those who want to make poetry “obviously important” and those disparate factions in the world who want to disparage art as useless at best, a potential impediment to might and power at worst.96 My goal in this conclusion is not to stake my own claim in this debate; I mention it simply as a checkpoint to pass through to what is really at stake in ongoing debates about poetry in the United States, both inside and outside the academy. We have been lamenting the place of poetry when we are missing most of its places in society. Tu Fu wrote that, in the same piece that laments the silence and solitude of poetry, “Everywhere the workers sing wild songs” (29). This is poetry. It is Bob Dylan’s and Bright Eyes’s and soul singer Jill Scott’s songs; it is slave spirituals and the songs sung by working class fans in the stands of soccer stadiums in Quito and Glasgow. It is Rita Dove and June Jordan and Anthony Hecht and Simon Ortiz as well as Def Poetry Jam, but it is also most powerfully now the force that inspires, enchants, and mobilizes countless urban dwellers around the world in the many forms of hip hop music – in Tokyo, New York, Cape Town, Mexico City, Vancouver, and Los Angeles. What we all
need, and what I have tried to create in this project, is a wider frame of reference for poetry and for the criticism that should nurture, challenge, and promote it.

Poetry is not dying – especially not political poetry – it is just reinventing itself much as hip hop does as it goes. While it may be lamentable for poetry as a printed form, David Haven Blake’s recent article “Reading Whitman, Growing up Rock ‘n’ Roll” claims that if Whitman were writing and performing in the 1960s and 1970s instead of one hundred years before he would have been a first-rate rock star and singer-songwriter.97 Bob Dylan, one of rock and roll’s greatest poets, has mentioned in passing that if he were born in the 1970s or 1980s he would probably be a rapper rather than a singer-songwriter. These two anecdotes suggest that poetry – both performed and printed – reifies itself in unpredictable ways over time in the United States. Critics, unfortunately, have a difficult time keeping up with the changes and the ways that poetry lives and reinvents itself in the margins.

Moreover, both anecdotes indicate that poetry is reifying as a part of music. We now see contemporary poets such as Joy Harjo, Miguel Algarín, Sherman Alexie, and others performing their poetry with bands. Robert Hass’s comments about the political nature of rhythm point more directly to the power of poetry and music as one. Hass writes, “Because rhythm has direct access to the unconscious, because it can hypnotize us, enter our bodies and make us move, it is power. And power is political.” He then claims that this relationship between rhythm and power makes rhythm a perpetual “revolutionary ground.” Rhythm, he continues, “announces the abolition of tradition” through its energizing power (Twentieth Century 108). Hip hop especially, then, foregrounds this relationship between rhythm and power in the creation of a new revolutionary ground that announces the abolition of more
reserved, distant, printed poetic traditions. Its poetry enters the bodies of listeners and makes them move.

Despite the real possibility that much commercial rap music unwittingly displays and promotes Republican Party values, a claim made recently by performance poet, MC, and actor Saul Williams, it can unleash the political powers of rhythm in ways that printed poetry often cannot. As such, if the following question were posed to me, as it was when I began thinking about and writing this book, I would have an answer I did not have the first time when I had none: Do you have an idea of the “perfect political poem” in your mind? My answer now: a hip hop song, precisely because it moves me in a way that the printed page cannot. I get chills sometimes when I read a remarkable poem, but when I hear a remarkable hip hop song, I get chills and nod my head to the rhythm. Also, the physical experience of attending live hip hop shows gives songs more experiential resonance and memorial power than printed poems. I think of Public Enemy’s “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” (1988), a song I listened to for the first time as a twelve year old, not yet capable of understanding all of its subtleties, its extended metaphors. It engages a long tradition of African American art in its eloquent, angry depiction of the quest for freedom from oppression – from Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” to Robert Hayden’s Middle Passage to Invisible Man to Toni Morrison’s Beloved.

However, for my ears, Public Enemy’s song sounds more powerful. The booming amplification, directness, urgency, and conviction of Chuck D’s voice resonate for me more than the sound of my own voice when I read even the most moving political poem. While it is probably true that hip hop gives us more quotable soundbites suitable for political rallying cries than printed poetry, partly because songs’ meanings are often more immediately
accessible than many poems, the key to the potential political power of hip hop is not only live performance, lyrical content, and rhythm – it is in the voice of the performer. In finishing up the final draft of my hip hop chapter I noticed a major difference in how I write about voice in that chapter compared to the first three chapters. In the first three, I use the “speaker,” “narrator,” or occasionally “speaker-poet” when I write about a poem’s voice. In the fourth chapter, I never use the “speaker” or “narrator.” I use, albeit awkwardly, “persona” when discussing a Notorious B.I.G. song, but I mostly use the artist’s name. For example, I write “J-Live raps” or “Mr. Lif claims.” I have come to believe that this difference is not merely one of convention or personal preference. Even though rappers rhetorically stage a variety of voices and personas in their songs, their voices are more direct than the voices in printed poems. The sound of the human voice in all its inflections, intonations, rhythms, and emotions makes hip hop more immediate and personal. I think this is exactly what Adrienne Rich means when she writes about how “the art of the griot, performed in alliance with music and dance” can be used “to evoke and catalyze a community or communities against passivity and victimization, to recall people to their spiritual and historic sources.” This use of voice, she says, is “at the heart of the renascence of poetry as an oral art” (What is Found 86).

Hip hop voices, too, show us that we live in a country constantly at war and in which poetry and institutional powers are usually at odds. For many rappers, there is never a reprieve from the conditions of war in urban ghettos. Mobb Deep’s “Shook Ones Part 2” expresses it best: “there’s a war going on outside no man is safe from.” If the United States as global hegemonic power is in a state of perpetual warfare, then questions about its authority and usefulness will always hound poetry. Poets will always face varying pressures
– to tackle geopolitical realities, to evade them, to feign indifference, to defend poetry, to lament poetry’s place in the world, to create images of justice, possibility, and community. As such, the various articles and books that appear every so often about “the writer in wartime” or some deviation on that title miss the point somewhat. If poets take for their imaginative realm the entire world, then there is never a time when the debates about “the writer in wartime” do not apply, especially in the U.S. where in one way or another we have our hands in all conflicts. If there’s not a war on directly involving the U.S. there is one brewing, or one in a country from which many people have immigrated to the United States. Or, there is one on that cultivates the disgust, sympathy, or fear of U.S. citizens, some of whom are poets. As Galway Kinnell writes in “When the Towers Fell,” the searchlight that looks for bodies “always goes on / somewhere, now in New York and Kabul,” soon Baghdad, Darfur, Uzbekistan, London.

In a column in The American Book Review (2005) aptly titled “The Writer in Wartime,” Harold Jaffe debunks the illusory binary between “committed or engaged writing” and “so-called autonomous writing,” which he says is a “quintessential” American notion. In other countries, he points out, committed writing does not face “condescension.” Jaffe debunks as nonsense the argument that writers need independence from events in the world to maintain artistic integrity. He says that the “restrictive imaginative repertory” (no political themes) of MFA programs and many journals and presses does not make a writer independent, but the opposite. Jaffe cites South African Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee’s claims that all writers should promote works of literature “as instruments of action” and social change because “it is not in the interest of those who actually wield power to disabuse anyone” of the idea that
literature is ineffective, just idle people playing with words while the powerful make decisions about real issues (3, 6).

It is always wartime and the writer is never autonomous. Poetry is thus always “a reflection of and a response to contemporary culture” (Jaffe 3). But, the question that still persists is what authority do poets have to write about war, genocide, poverty, capitalism, globalization, and other issues. Jaffe’s suggestions, for me at least, ring hollow. He says that writers have authority from three primary conditions: the freedom from a 9 to 5 job and thus more time to think, they are not “beholden” to “benefactors,” and they can publish and thus distribute their ideas to readers (3). I believe, however, that writers have no more authority than any other citizen of the world to speak about injustice. They are simply better at the speaking than other citizens, so they have a type of authority from their creative talents. However, discussing a writer’s authority misses the point. The issue is not authority but power. Who has the power to speak? This is why it is crucial that at least some poets and rappers stay engaged with geopolitical and sociopolitical realities. They have powers that most citizens do not. While they do not have the power of CEOs, bankers, politicians, filmmakers, and the wealthy, poets and rappers have the power of their voices and visions, and if they can make it through the interference of the corporate world, the potential ability to disrupt the hegemony of that world.

When we speak of authority in debates about poetry’s usefulness, we are really speaking about power. And I think that there is an underlying fear of poets, rappers, and artists gaining any sort of traction against elite forces in governments and corporations that control the flow of ideas. I end then with Charles Molesworth’s rhetorical questions about Gary Snyder’s “authority” as a citizen-poet because it suggests that power, not authority, is the issue at
hand. He asks, “Can Snyder claim for his (or can his readers claim on his behalf) any authority other than that of the aesthetic realm?” Molesworth then goes on to ask if it is possible to understand Snyder’s “notion that trees and animals should be represented in Congress” as “anything but an amusing [literary] conceit.” We have to believe, as Coetzee suggests, that it is much more than a simple conceit. Molesworth allows that Snyder’s claim might be a “serious critique of representational government” because “banks and corporations command a share of representative power in our legislatures, and they are no more capable of speaking for themselves, without human mediation, than are trees and animals.” He concludes, asking “If humans can find a way to define the rights of a corporation, why can they not do the same for the forest?” (154-155). What power do poems and rap songs have? The power readers, listeners, critics, writers, rappers, and citizens ascribe to them. And, unfortunately, what power corporate moguls, politicians, and moneyed interests cede to them. As both a critic and poet, I am ready to give American poets who work in print and in song the power to start the widespread shift in consciousness needed to make this country and world a more just and equitable place for all. That, after all, is faith in poetry, in the human voice itself.
NOTES

1 I use the terms “rap” and “hip hop” interchangeably during the course of this book. I usually prefer the term “hip hop” because I see it as more inclusive and encompassing. Most critics use the terms interchangeably as well, as do most in the culture. Some artists, though, see rap as a style of music, hip hop as the larger culture of which rap is a part. KRS-One, for instance, draws a distinction between rap “as something you do” and hip hop as “something you live,” in other words a culture. Hip hop culture includes four basic elements – rapping, dj’ing, graffiti writing, and breakdancing. See the liner notes to KRS-One: A Retrospective (Zomba Recording Corporation, NY, 2000). I also use the terms “rapper,” “MC,” and “hip hop artist” interchangeably.


3 Don L. Lee, “From a Black Perspective,” Don’t Cry, Scream (Detroit, MI: Broadside P, 1969). The full text of the poem:

wallace for president  
his momma for vice-president  
was scribbled  
on the men’s room wall  
on  
over  
the toilet  
where  
it’s  
supposed to be.

4 Zinn cites these particularly powerful lines from the poem: “Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number! / Shake your chains to earth, like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you— / Ye are many, they are few!”

5 However, as contemporary United States politics show, political discourse may appear to be clear, but much is actually smoke and mirrors and deception. Giddens, for example, believes ideology is primarily rhetorical. It is the form argument takes in the public sphere. In other words, the speeches given to the public usually appeal to universal needs or welfare. There is thus a striking contrast between the “front” and the “back” where the “front” is the appeal to general welfare (for instance, “what’s good for General Motors is good for the country”) and the “back” is the underlying, unspoken intent (to siphon off wealth to the rich at the expense of local communities and workers).

statement: “I think I began at this point to feel that politics was not something ‘out there’ but something ‘in here’ and of the essence of my condition.”

7 Dove’s “Parsley,” which explores the brutal actions of Rafael Trujillo, former dictator of the Dominican Republic, has two sections. The first is a nonrhyming villanelle, the second a sestina. See Selected Poems (NY: Vintage Books, 1993, pgs. 133-135).

8 See Helen Vendler’s pithy The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham (Boston: Harvard UP, 1995) for an extended discussion of why and how these three poets changed their style from poem to poem as well as over their careers.


10 See Gibbons’s discussion of Burke on pgs. 280-281.


12 In the last decade there has been a shift in much mainstream hip hop music into rural places, especially in the South. Groups such as Nappy Roots show that hip hop can be thoroughly rural as well. In fact, traditions such as playing the dozens and signifying, which have contributed greatly to core hip hop values, have rural roots. However, for my purposes and due to my interests, all of the artists I discuss are thoroughly urban.

13 Clear Channel owns over 1,200 radio stations and controls 70% of major live music events in the United States. See Damien Cave, “Clear Channel: Inside Music’s Superpower” in Rolling Stone, September 2, 2004, pages 53-56 for background on the corporate influence on both recorded and live music.

14 This begs a question. Do poets who work in print engage in a form of braggadocio akin to hip hop posturing? In What is Found There (200), Adrienne Rich suggests they do. She writes that Wallace Stevens, a poet whom she much admires, often bothers her sensibilities because he can be “irritating and alienating in tone” and “mere virtuosity carrying on at great length,” especially in the long poem “The Comedian as the Letter C.”

15 Poetry and testimonio are usually considered very different traditions. See Silvia N. Rosman’s essay on Neruda for an example of how they have been studied together. For background reading on testimonio, see John Beverley’s Against Literature (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989); the Georg M. Gugelberger edited The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America (Durham: Duke UP, 1996); two special issues of Latin American Perspectives titled Voices of the Voiceless in Testimonial Literature (1991) edited by Gugelberger and Michael Kearney; and the special edition La voz del otro: Testimonio, subalternidad y verdad narrativa of the Revista de crítica literaria latinoamerica (1992)
edited by Beverley and Hugo Achugar. The premier example of testimonio is usually considered *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* as told to Elisabeth Burgos by Guatemalan Indian activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú (Barcelona: Editorial Argos Vergara, S.A., 1983).

16 Was Komunyakaa familiar with Forché’s poem when he wrote “We Never Know”? Given that Forché’s book is well-known, it is safe to assume that Komunyakaa was aware of “The Colonel.” Whether or not he consciously imitated her line is less certain.

17 Throughout this project I use the term stanza as a matter of simplicity and convenience. While some poetry critics would insist that a “stanza” is part of a formal, metered poem, and that a “stanza” in a free verse poem should actually be called a verse paragraph, I think the semantic difference is a bit unnecessary. If it looks like a stanza, I call it a stanza. For instance, I would call the first six free verse lines of W.S. Merwin’s “For a Coming Extinction” (*The Lice* 1967) a “stanza” because it is a self-contained unit of lines separated from the next “stanza” by a blank line:

  Gray whale
  Now that we are sending you to The End
  That great god
  Tell him
  That we who follow you invented forgiveness
  And forgive nothing

18 “Homo Will Not Inherit” is also an interesting study in numerology. The poem is comprised of 33 unrhymed tercets and a final, single line, for a total of 100 lines. The importance of the number 3 in Christianity, and especially Catholicism, is well-known. The Holy Trinity, the Three Wise Men, and the original holy family (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph) are amongst the prominences of the number 3. 33 1/3 is also a holy number in the Nation of Islam, a prominent African American branch of Muslims.

19 Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA) has suggested that gay marriage is the greatest threat to the national security of the U.S. He has been adamant that the “sanctity of marriage” is more pressing than terrorism. He said, “ Isn’t that the ultimate homeland security – standing up and defending marriage?” (see p. 104 in *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2004).

20 The best creative work on the “official story” occurs in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990). See especially “How to Tell a True War Story” for a fascinating perspective on the folly of objectivity in the context of war.

21 Reginald Gibbons explains that exteriorism was developed by Cardenal in response to the abstractions, romanticism, and symbolism of much Latin American poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. Cardenal’s poetics utilize “a diction that is concrete and detailed with proper names and the names of things in preference to the accepted poetic language, which was more abstract, general, and vaguely symbolic” (“Political” 278).
Altieri’s conception of this visionary leap is strikingly similar to von Hallberg’s understanding of much Vietnam-era poetry.

Collins’s poem (pages 76-77) has eerie reverberations with Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi’s story “El prócer,” which is about the life, geopolitical ramifications, and malleability of a war memorial statue in an unnamed Latin American city square.

See “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch” for the humiliations of giving concessions to white people and “staying in your place.” See also “Fire and Cloud” for the tension between active resistance and protest and the need to “wait” and be patient. For Nina Simone, see The Best of Nina Simone (NY: Polygram Records, Inc. 1969).

David L. Smith’s essay “The Black Arts Movement and its Critics” suggests that “Black Arts writing directly addressed a black audience.” As such, it “demands of its reader (or listener) a sympathy and familiarity with black culture and black idioms” (102). In contrast Phillip Brian Harper’s essay “Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s” claims that “The True Import” has its “maximum impact” when “understood as being heard directly by whites and overheard by blacks” (247 original emphasis).

See US congressman and former SNCC leader John Lewis’s memoir of the civil rights movement for an excellent interpretation of the tension between working within existing political and social structures and an unyielding and uncompromising dedication to social change. For Lewis, the two are not mutually exclusive. See Lewis with Michael D’Orso, Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Rich’s strategic use of apostrophe is both clever and perhaps self-defeating. While it certainly challenges readers to understood the import of their inactions, if we consider the audience for Rich’s poetry, it is highly likely that they are already acutely aware of social justice issues. Such a poem might be an apt example of “preaching to the choir.”

Many readers remotely familiar with hip hop may instantly object that hip hop is no longer a “fugitive means of expression” since it is so commercially successful, ubiquitous in many different media, and supported heavily by suburban white kids. These readers have a legitimate point, one which I explore in the final chapter.

It is crucial not to mistake AAVE or other vernaculars as improper or inferior. They should be understood as systematic, dynamic, rule-based variations on SAE rather than lesser manifestations of English.

Joan Didion’s Salvador, Washington Square P, 1983, is a short, captivating, impressionistic sketch of El Salvador during this time period. One passage is particularly resonant for Forché’s poem. Didion writes, “Whenever I hear someone speak now of one or another solución for El Salvador I think of particular Americans who have spent time there, each in his or her own way inextricably altered by the fact of having been in a certain place at a certain time. Some of these Americans have since moved on and others remain in Salvador, but, like survivors of a common natural disaster, they are equally marked by the place” (98).
Two otherwise wonderful poems that glorify their own witness and their speaker’s heroism in the face of atrocity, albeit in different ways, are Thomas McGrath’s “Fresco: Departure for an Imperialist War” (see p. 653 in Forché’s *Against Forgetting*) and Martín Espada’s “The Meaning of the Shovel” (see pages 135-137 in *Alabanza*).

As I noted in the first chapter, this discussion is not to imply that all poems in this chapter are about war. War simply provides the most accessible and most easily illustrated context with which to frame the ways that poems of equivocal agency depart from poems of experiential agency.

In *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1987), Bernard W. Bell briefly discusses the dynamic between truth of sensation and truth of fact in relation to Toni Morrison. See the chapter on Poetic Realism.


See Albee’s *The American Dream* (1961), Baraka’s *Dutchman* (1964), and Dragún’s *Historia del hombre que se convirtió en perro (History of the Man who was Converted into a Dog)* (1957). Also see Leslie Catherine Sanders’s chapter on Jones/Baraka and her discussion of the Theater of Cruelty in *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988).

Vendler writes, “The poem says nothing explicit about Empire and the oppression of colonies, about dialects of white English and island English, about the power to rise above the immediate that is conferred on a poet by his allegiance to song, about the social identification that a black poet especially feels for those who share dark holes in houses, or about the betrayals and desertions entailed in a life lived between black and white, empire and outpost, island and mainland. But the poem is the transcendent clarification of all that darkness; and it holds the darkness back for its own instant of phantasmal peace. It is unashamed in its debt to Shakespeare, Keats, and the Bible; but it has assimilated them all into its own fabric” (“Poet of Two Worlds” 33). Here Vendler emphasizes the poet himself, rather than the poet’s visionary imagination, as if the poem represents Walcott’s first victory over himself by explicitly excluding his identity and experiences from the poem.

There were thirteen years between the publications of *The Country Between Us* and *The Angel of History*. Forché’s editing, compilation, and introduction to the voluminous *Against Forgetting* by many accounts took a remarkable amount of Forché’s time and energy. In a 1988 interview, Forché hints that work on *The Angel of History* had already been underway.

38 Palmer’s reference to Benjamin in one of the series of title poems suggests some interesting connections. The couplet “This is how one pictures the angel of history / signed Series B, signed A or letter of A, signed Bakhtin’s Names” (227) directly references Benjamin’s work. The title of Forché’s book and the inclusion of the entire passage from Benjamin’s work as an epigraph in her book indicate that whatever their differences, Palmer and Forché have similar theoretical influences and interests.

39 Wright’s “Laguna Blues” (The Southern Cross 1981) expresses a similar sentiment. Each of the poem’s five-line stanzas ends with a haunting “Whatever it is, it bothers me all the time.” This pervasive anxiety, presumably due to the concern expressed in the previous line – “Something’s off-key in my mind” – suggests the later ubiquitous presence of dread in “Against the American Grain.”

40 These examples are from Richard Wilbur’s “Grace” (1947) and Adrienne Rich’s “The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room” (1951).

41 Bly writes that he used this line in The Teeth Mother Naked at Last (1970) in the brief essay at the conclusion of Selected Poems, but it applies retroactively and especially well to “Counting Small-Boned Bodies.”

42 In their introduction to W.S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry (1987), Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson point out that the word “enigma” became a prominent “part of the vocabulary” in writings about Merwin’s poetry beginning in the mid-1960s (9).

43 Much the opposite may actually be true. See John Perkins’s Confessions of an Economic Hit Man (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004), an interesting memoir about the American “corporatocracy” that keeps developing nations under its economic and political control through, among other things, massive World Bank loans, IMF structural adjustment programs, and incentives to “liberalize” their economies.


45 Five consecutive poems in Pyramid of Bone are apt examples of equivocal agency. “A Reconsideration of the Blackbird,” “There Will Be Animals,” “To Eliminate Vagueness,” “Passover Poem,” and “Running Out of Choices” (pages 10-19) are beguiling political poems, the first, third, and fourth of which can be thought of as examples of particular equivocal agency and the second and fifth of which are comprehensive political poems.
This “Problem” and “Solution” section of Moss’s poem is reminiscent of Merwin’s “Some Last Questions” (*The Lice* 1967), except that Moss’s eerie solutions are often more literal (even if absurd) than Merwin’s surreal, disconnected images.

In Chapter 42 of Melville’s *Moby Dick*, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael describes in detail how horrifying and disconcerting Moby Dick’s whiteness is to sailors. He goes into a lengthy treatise about how whiteness “typifies the majesty of Justice” (192) as well as the way it “exaggerates” the “terror of objects otherwise terrible” (197). For Ishmael, as for countless indigenous people around the world, white signifies fear and uncertainty rather than desirability. See *Moby Dick; or The Whale*, Ed. and Intro. Tony Tanner, (NY: Oxford UP, 1988).

Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado’s traveling exhibit and its accompanying book, *Migrations: Humanity in Transition*, has garnered both acclaim and scorn. His remarkable photographs of refugees and displaced people (from war, environmental disaster, and migration to cities) in the megacities and countrysides of Asia, the Americas, and Africa suggest that it is possible to make beautiful the horrific despite pressing questions of appropriation and exploitation. Susan Sontag’s criticism of Salgado in The New Yorker is especially fierce. See Salgado, *Migrations: Humanity in Transition* (NY: Aperture P, 2000) and Sontag, “Looking at War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death,” *The New Yorker* (9 December 2002). See also, for a more balanced view, Ian Parker’s article “A Cold Light: Sebastião Salgado sails to Antarctica” also in *The New Yorker* (18 April 2005, pp. 142-159).


Chicana/o refers specifically to those of Mexican descent born in the United States. Latina/o is a more encompassing term often used to refer to all people in the United States of Latin American descent. Latina/o is more inclusive and thus more artificial, but I use it for matters of convenience for the remainder of the chapter except in instances in which the poet is Chicana/o. Regardless of the poet’s ancestry – Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Ecuadorian, or Colombian – I use Latina/o. Rafael Pérez-Torres writes that while the move to define Chicano literature “represents an empowering act of agency and self-identification, it also leads to an inadvertent erasure of difference within the term Chicano” (*Movements* 9) or
“Latina/o.” I take the good with the bad. The -a/o suffix, which I use throughout this chapter, includes both the masculine and feminine endings.


53 Robert Bly’s translation of Neruda’s “La United Fruit Co.”: “When the trumpet sounded, it was / all prepared on the earth, / and Jehovah parcelled out the earth / to Coca-Cola, Inc., Anaconda, / Ford Motors, and other entities” (*Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*, Ed. Bly, Boston: Beacon P, 1971, pp. 84-87).

54 In a similar vein, whenever I watch fútbol / soccer on a Spanish-language channel such as Univisión or Telefutura, especially when it involves a Latino team and a largely Anglo team, I am struck by how odd and jarring the North American names sound in the play-by-play commentary. Obviously, this phenomena is not limited to bilingual poetry.

55 In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot repeatedly suggests that language and writing are incapable of being mastered. For Blanchot, the idea of one language mastering another would be absurd. Here’s one of his more pertinent fragments about writing: “To want to write: what an absurdity. Writing is the decay of the will, just as it is the loss of power, and the fall of the regular fall of the beat, disaster again” (11). For a short story about the dangers of one culture trying to “master” another, see Angela Carter’s “Master” in *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (NY: Penguin Books, 1974, 78-87).


57 There are numerous examples of epigraphs in bilingual poems (seemingly more than in monolingual poems). In Villanueva’s “I Too Have Walked My Barrio Streets” (*Shaking Off the Dark* 51-54), the Spanish epigraph is from Neruda, the opposite of the case in “Nuestros abuelos.” Another interesting example is “The Easter Revolt Painted on a Tablespoon” by Maurice Kilwein Guevara (cited in *Touching the Fire: Fifteen Poets of Today’s Latino Renaissance*, page 207) in which the Spanish epigraph creates a fascinating and powerful political element with its “Popular Chant.”

58 Although the concept of markedness was developed by Roman Jakobson and the Prague School of Linguistics and later conceived as a Markedness model by Carol Myers-Scotton to account for code switching in speech, for current purposes it is most simply elucidated by Eva Medieta-Lombardo and Zaida A. Cintron.


Many of Virgil Suárez’s poems about Cuba have a similar sensibility. In *Guide to the Blue Tongue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State P, 2002), see “The Reconciliation Between Los Que Se Fueron y Los Que Se Quedaron” (21) and “After Forty Years of Exile, The Poet Arrives in Cuba” (65). Also see Suárez’s *Banyan*, Louisiana State P, 2001. In the book-length poem *South America Mi Hija* (Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 1992), Sharon Doubiago shows an interesting semblance to Castillo’s bodily metaphor: “Inside our bodies / four hundred years of America” (4).

See Pérez-Torres (*Movements* 118-119) for some details about Baca’s life: orphaned at 5, a runaway at 11, his mother murdered by her second husband, a father killed by alcoholism, and over six years in prison for robbery, including solitary confinement for four of them. Baca’s first poems were first published while he was in prison in *Mother Jones*, then edited by Denise Levertov.

Mexican playwright Victor Hugo Rascón Banda’s play “La mujer que cayó del cielo” (*The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*) (Mexico City: Escenología, A.C., 2000) is a fascinating trilingual (Spanish, English, and Tarahumara) commentary on cultural and linguistic miscommunication. It is based on the true story of Rita Quintero, an indigenous woman from Mexico who inexplicably appears in a small Kansas town in the early 1980s without a clue as to how she arrived there. The action that ensues is disturbing, sad, and in all ways remarkable.


There is a great speech in the 2004 Walter Salles film *Los diarios de motocicleta* (*The Motorcycle Diaries*) about the young Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna’s motorcycle trip through South America. After serving as a volunteer in a leper colony in the Peruvian Amazon, Guevara (played by Gael García Bernal) claims that América should be unified and that nation-states are illusory and corrupt contrivances. América, he claims, is one race of people from Tierra del Fuego to the Yucatan Peninsula.

José Vasconcelos developed the idea of *la raza cósmica*, which is “the race of synthesis, that is integral – made of the spirit and the blood of all peoples, and, for that reason, more capable of true fraternity and a really universal vision.” See “La Raza Cósmica” in *Vasconcelos: Prólogo y Selección de Genaro F. MacGregor* (México, D.F.: Ediciones de la Secretaría de educación pública, 1942 [1925]), p. 130.
67 There is also a bit of quaint, naïve nostalgia for pre-conquest America in the poem. His notion of progress is seemingly inseparable from “cities mountains of flying metallic / cars and consumer junk” and “plush media inventions.” In the essay “Mountains in the North” he also expresses disdain for the superficiality of North American culture and fast food, but these things are present in the south too. Here I’m thinking of sprawling cities like Lima, Buenos Aires, Guatemala City, Medellín, Rio, Mexico City, and Guayaquil. Of course, the presence of multinational corporations is partly (or largely) to blame.

68 See “What is Freedom?” (especially 163-165) in Between Past and Future. Arendt writes, “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce” (165).

69 This line echoes Ginsberg’s “America,” when the speaker-poet asks his country, “When will you take off your clothes?”

70 Actresses Linda Carter and Linda Lovelace (Deep Throat) and singer Linda Rondstadt are prominent examples.

71 Balaban’s translation of a Georgi Borisov poem, “Let Him Be,” New Orleans Review 11.1 (1984): p. 82, is one of my favorite contemporary translations. His book Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon P, 2000) has garnered critical acclaim, commercial success, as well as some controversy. Ho Xuan Huong was an eighteenth-century female Vietnamese poet, and some Vietnamese still believe that she never existed and that hers was a pen name for a (male) government official and poet. For others in Vietnam, she is a national hero.


73 In Hip Hop America, Nelson George writes, “One of the prevailing assumptions around hip hop is that it was, at some early moment, solely African American created, owned, controlled, and consumed. It’s an appealing origin myth – but the evidence just isn’t there to support it” (57). Latino, Caribbean, and white influences where in fact important even in the origins of the music. So, the claim that rap was a “closed show” may have been true for some aspects of the culture in 1990, but it was largely unsupportable even then, but especially today, as I show throughout this chapter. Costello and Foster Wallace, for all their perceptive insights, are guilty of the outsider (they admit as much), hierarchical, condescending approach to hip hop I mention soon hereafter.

74 Foreign Exchange, a hip hop group that includes Little Brother’s Phonte Coleman and Nicolay Rook, recently released their first album (Connected 2004) on Barely Breaking Even Records. What’s remarkable about this album is that Coleman lives in North Carolina, Rook in Amsterdam. They met on the OkayPlayer message board and began corresponding via the internet with digital music files. What transpired was an album created by an MC (Coleman)
and a DJ/Producer (Rook) who never met each other until shortly before the album was completed. For an informative interview with Foreign Exchange, listen to NPR’s October 21, 2004 Morning Edition at www.npr.org.

75 It is also possible that many listeners do not like music with challenging political content and that they simply want to be entertained. However, such a position gives too little credit to listeners and too little credit to artists. After all, entertainment, education, and political content are not mutually exclusive entities.

76 See Damien Cave, “Clear Channel: Inside Music’s Superpower” in the September 2, 2004 issue of *Rolling Stone* (pp. 53-56) for background on corporate influences on both recorded and live music. See also New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer et. al.’s (the New York State Department of Justice’s) report on their settlement with Sony BMG Music Entertainment. It details the corruption of pay-for-play schemes between corporate record labels, independent promoters hired by the labels, and commercial radio stations. See www.oag.state.ny.us/press/2005/jul/jul25a_05.html.

77 Mos Def garnered much praise for his leading role on the Broadway stage in Suzan-Lori Parks’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Topdog/Underdog* in 2002.

78 Smaller clubs such as S.O.B.’s in Manhattan, North Six in Brooklyn, the 9:30 Club in D.C., and Five Spot in Philadelphia feature cutting-edge hip hop on a fairly regular basis.

79 It is interesting to consider this effect in printed poetry. Eliot's *Wasteland* is probably the modernist equivalent to hip hop with its multiple voices and collage-like effects.

80 This begs the question. Do poets sample? Perhaps not in the way hip hop artists do, but they certainly occasionally “sample” lines, images, rhetorical guises, and sensibilities from previous poems. Poets, as it were, do not have a blank slate either. Hip hop shows us that all voices (even our best poets) are derivative. As such, critics such as Vendler and Bloom (whom I mentioned earlier in their concerns about the originality of Walcott's voice) are harboring fantasies in their desires for wholly authentic voices.

81 Bright Eyes (Conor Oberst) and The Mountain Goats (John Darnielle) are two of the most interesting and well-known independent rock examples of pseudonyms. Bob Dylan (Robert Zimmerman) is perhaps the most famous example of a singer-songwriter pseudonym.

82 These groups are implicitly criticized by a variety of independent rappers, including The Perceptionists (Mr. Lif, whom I discuss in the next section, Akrobatik, and DJ Fakts One). Little Brother’s major label debut (Fall 2005) is entitled *The Minstrel Show*, a not so subtle jab at the problems of mainstream hip hop. There was an unsubstantiated rumor floating around on the internet shortly before its release that BET was refusing to air the video for their first single because it was “too intelligent.” The irony seems too precise to be true.

84 LeRoi Jones’s “Black Art” first appeared in the *Liberator* (1966). It is considered to have established many of the commitments and aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement.

85 This claim was borne out by Bill Moyers, one of America’s best journalists and currently a straw man for the attack on PBS. See “Bill Moyers’s Keynote Address: Call to Renewal,” in *Sojourners Magazine* (August 2004), online at www.sojo.net.

86 One of the most portable “conspiracy” theories in hip hop is the much discussed link between the CIA and crack cocaine, more specifically the CIA’s orchestration of the crack cocaine epidemic in the late 1980s and the agency’s connections with huge drug operations in Latin America. There is ample evidence for extensive CIA involvement in drug trafficking in the 1980s. See Michael Parenti’s *Democracy for the Few* (p. 156) for an array of evidence and sources.


88 Obviously it did not work well enough. Although they registered record numbers of young voters, young voter turnout for the 2004 presidential election was not substantially higher than in previous elections (at least as a percentage of overall voters). The 12 million number is outrageous, but there is little doubt that huge numbers of young people did register to vote.

89 Again, I recognize that hip hop in the United States has become increasingly rural, southern, and Midwestern in recent years (and many of its loyal followers suburban). Even so, hip hop is, in my opinion, a thoroughly urban art form, especially abroad.


91 Over the last half decade hip hop has developed its own version of language poetry. It is experimental, often frustrating, but usually entertaining, challenging, and thought-provoking. It is overtly political only in small snapshots and in its overall approach. Some MCs who make what I call an exploratory language-based hip hop (but still remain grounded in its
basic values, principles, and aesthetics) are underground icons MF Doom, Aesop Rock, Del (formerly Del the Funky Homosapien), and El-P, amongst others.

92 Dove uses this dual approach often. Others appear close by in her Selected Poems (NY: Vintage Books, 1993): “Belinda’s Petition,” “The Abduction,” “the Slave’s Critique of Practical Reason,” and “Kentucky, 1833” are notable ones. See pages 28-40. “The House Slave,” though, is the most concise, sincere, and subtle of them. James Wright’s “Saint Judas” has a similar historical imagination and is just as moving and haunting as Dove’s.


94 John Balaban’s “Reading the News and Thinking of the T’ang Poets” deals with these very issues. See Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New & Selected Poems (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon P, 1997), p. 135.

95 It is prudent to note that poems such as The Iliad and The Odyssey celebrate warfare, and in a different way even Milton’s Paradise Lost celebrates war.

96 Victor Hernández Cruz has suggested that a hypercapitalistic consumer society may not value poetry because it has no extrinsic sale-value. He says, “In the United States, people see poets as just playing word games, unimportant to the real operation of a materialistic society. In capitalism, there isn’t a place for poetry. ‘The books don’t sell,’ they would say. This doesn’t change the function of the wordsmith in society. The poet makes awareness available to the masses” (Dick 62).

97 See The Virginia Quarterly Review (Spring 2005, pages 34-47). This issue celebrates the 150th anniversary of the publication of Leaves of Grass. All of its articles are about Whitman.

98 “Commercial rap is Republican” is a contentious, but legitimate claim. The dominant tropes of much commercial hip hop are: individual wealth is key to happiness, upward social mobility, and power; anyone can achieve his or her (material) dreams if he or she works and hustles hard enough (nothing can stop you from getting rich if you want it enough); there are clearly delineated traditional gender relations with men having more power than women; negotiation and compromise are for the weak; and militant action can solve many problems. I understand that these are caricatures, but they hold as generalizations. See exhibit one: 50 Cent’s multi-platinum debut album is titled Get Rich or Die Tryin. On a different note, Slam, starring Saul Williams as a performance poet in the housing projects in Washington, D.C. won the grand prize at Sundance Film Festival in 1998. The film is an excellent introduction to the energy, creativity, and multiculturalism of spoken word poetry slams.

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