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**Impossible Telling and the Epistolary Form: Contemporary Poetry,
Mourning and Trauma**

Volume 2

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature and Contemporary
Poetry

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is the result of my own original and independent research, except where otherwise stated; due acknowledgement has been made in the text to material cited. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any degree at any university.

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to specify the key critical components of epistolary poetry as separate and distinct from other poetic genres. This thesis does not provide a comprehensive genealogy of the letter form in poetry, rather it maps significant moments of epistolary eruption across the poetic landscape, tracking important instances of its use and change over time. In doing so this thesis abstracts five key characteristics of the epistolary form in poetry: 1) Doubleness, 2) Indeterminacy / Indiscernibility, 3) Reciprocity / Sociality, 4) Division, 5) Contingency. This thesis does not tell a story of historical development but of form and variation, mapping how these key characteristics are seeded and re-emerge throughout the literary canon.

By considering a diverse spectrum of poetic practices this research avoids making the essentialising and highly political value judgements which dominate much of the critical discourse surrounding poetry's opposing aesthetic dispositions; judgements which tend to valorise accessibility and emotionality on the one hand, and materiality and difference on the other. Rather, this enquiry uses the notion of epistolarity to think across poetic traditions and schools, exposing the overlapping ethical concerns that motivate each. In doing so this thesis is able to identify a significant transition in the uses and focus of contemporary epistolary poetics. This transition is perhaps best defined as the movement from confession, towards testimony.

This research constitutes a practice-based, autoethnographic intervention into knowledge, initiated by and drawing upon my own experience of letter writing as both therapeutic strategy and poetic practice. As such, this research is particularly focussed on critical points of intersection between the use of letters in therapeutic practice, and their mobilization by

various cohorts within contemporary poetry, united by their thematic concern with trauma, difficulty, and what we might usefully term the unconsoled experience.

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INTRODUCTION

This project's concern with the aesthetic implications of epistolary in poetry grew out of a life-long fascination with the letter form. As a child I never kept a diary. I was, rather, an avid epistolarian. Letters were exciting to me, in the first instance, because they traversed great distances, passed through many pairs of hands; they were involved in the world in a way that other forms of writing were not, which meant that I, as their author, was involved in the world, a participant in events and ideas taking place far beyond the parochial orthodoxies of *home*. In a pre-internet era, the letter was a scene of adolescent validation. I borrowed both authority and glamour from its material presence: stamps and stickers, 'fancy' notepaper, a range of coloured inks; the smudgy administrative marks that covered the envelope. More than once packages went astray, were intercepted, opened and resealed by the faceless unspecified agents of national security. This added an extra frisson, a feeling somewhere between indignation and excitement.

These early experiences have shaped my understanding of epistolary spaces as complex and highly ambiguous; appealing to both confessional and performative impulses; negotiating ground between private and public forms.

This thesis addresses the epistolary form's relationship to poetry. On the subject of the letter, and in particular the form's historical relationship to narrative fiction, a robust body of work, both popular and scholarly, exists. On the letter's relationship to poetry, however, we encounter a strange silence, a sad critical neglect.¹ Studies of individual epistolary projects

¹ Notable exceptions include Sam Hamill's essay 'Epistolary Poetry: The Poem as Letter; the Letter as Poem' *Northwest Review*: Vol. 19, Issue. 1 (Jan 1, 1981), Ben Howard 'Letters Mingle Soules' *Syracuse*

abound, but little attempt has been made to seek out and explain their commonalities, or to map their points of intersection and divergence across the literary canon.

Existing research has tended to characterise the epistolary form as, if not quite incidental, then relevant only as it applies to the intellectual and aesthetic projects of individual poets, or to discrete historical periods; little has been written on the epistolary poem as genre, with scant attempt to unpack its singular traits, capacities and affordances.² Indeed, some modern scholars, such as Jay Arnold Levine suggest that the epistolary poem is not a genre at all, merely a 'manner of writing [...] adaptable to such fixed forms as elegy and satire'.³ This thesis will offer a counter-contention to Levine's: that the letter form in poetry does indeed possess distinct, identifiable characteristics, most significantly in the epistolary poem's unique relationship to various kinds of pressure or crisis.

Although this research will touch upon formative and important examples of the epistolary poem throughout history, it is not intended as a comprehensive genealogy of the letter form in poetry. It will, perhaps more usefully, specify the key critical components of epistolary

Scholar: Vol. 8, Issue. 1 (Spring, 1987), and more recently Natalie Pollard *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (OUP Oxford, 2012).

² My understanding of why an exploration of the epistolary form as genre is important is sparked by concepts from Genre Theory. Genre itself shares something with epistolary communication in that it is an open exchange with the past; that it builds cohorts, and offers us a chance to think through subject positions both unique and shared. See Aviva Freedman & Peter Medway eds. *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (Taylor & Francis, 1994). Also, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech genres and other late essays* (University of Texas Press, 2010) p.78.

³ J. A. Levine, 'The Status of the Verse Epistle before Pope' *Studies in Philology* 59 (1962) pp. 659-84.

poetics, and map significant moments of epistolary eruption across the poetic landscape, tracking important instances of its use and change over time. In doing so, this thesis traces the trajectory of epistolary poetics throughout history, demonstrating that the epistolary form in poetry initially emerged as a political device, mobilised to navigate, negotiate, and to stage acts of political intervention within the public sphere at moments of social unrest or instability.⁴ This model of poetic epistolarity persisted into modernity but was complicated and ultimately usurped by the notion of epistolary space as uniquely interior, with the epistolary voice in poetry understood as a cipher for emotional authenticity and speaking from the authority of embodied experience.⁵ This conception of the epistolary form in poetry is exemplified by the confessional movement, and signifies the transition of the poetic epistle from a medium of political rhetoric to one of personal disclosure. This thesis contends that the current moment within poetry marks another important transition in the use of the poetic epistle in its relationship to crisis. Specifically, the movement of the letter form as a medium of personal disclosure to a medium of personal disclosure towards political ends.

This thesis abstracts five key characteristics of the epistolary form in poetry: 1) Doubleness, 2) Indeterminacy / Indiscernibility, 3) Reciprocity / Sociality, 4) Division, 5) Contingency.

This thesis does not tell a story of historical development but of form and variation, mapping how these key characteristics are seeded and re-emerge throughout the literary canon.

⁴ Samuel McCormick, *Letters to Power: Public Advocacy Without Public Intellectuals* (Penn State Press, 2011) p.148.

⁵ For example, James Howell in *Familiar Letters* (1645) writes: '[letters] open all the Boxes of one's Breast ...and truly set forth the inward Man.' Hamill (pp.228-34), makes the explicit link between the epistolary form in contemporary poetry and the emergence of the American confessional school.

This research constitutes a practice-based, autoethnographic intervention into knowledge, initiated by and drawing upon my own experience of letter writing as both therapeutic strategy and poetic practice. This critical enquiry is driven by two book-length collections of poetry, *narrowcasting*, and *halting sites*, as well as the long, process-led performance piece, *caoin*. The inciting event for these several writing projects was the death by suicide of my oldest and closest friend, and my subsequent enrolment in various therapeutic and psychoanalytic programs designed to treat the trauma of sudden and shocking bereavement.⁶ As such my research is particularly focussed on critical points of intersection between the use of letters in therapeutic practice, and their mobilization by various cohorts within contemporary poetry, united by their thematic concern with trauma, difficulty, and what we might usefully term the unconsoled experience.

This research draws upon discourses of psychoanalysis and trauma studies, alongside the work of poets spanning generations and writing across a broad range of aesthetic and intellectual projects. In this eclectic approach I follow Marjorie Perloff's sensible determination as outlined in *Radical Artifice* to avoid writing about 'the overt poetics of this or that school' and to focus instead on 'specific practices in their broader implications'.⁷ This approach produces insights into the affinities between modes of practice typically considered as separate and distinct by the existing literature, and demonstrates the deep levels of connection and indebtedness between, for example, the experimental overtures of American Language poetry, and the contemporary lyric and its performance culture in the United

⁶ For a detailed defence of the autoethnographic research methodology please see the introduction to the creative material.

⁷ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the age of Media* (Chicago University Press, 1994), p.174.

Kingdom. By considering a diverse spectrum of poetic practices this research avoids making the essentialising and highly political value judgements which dominate much of the critical discourse surrounding poetry's opposing aesthetic dispositions; judgements which tend to valorise accessibility and emotionality on the one hand, and materiality and difference on the other. Rather, this enquiry uses the notion of epistolarity to think across poetic traditions and schools, exposing the overlapping ethical concerns that motivate each. In doing so this thesis is able to identify a significant transition in the uses and focus of contemporary epistolary poetics. This transition is perhaps best defined as the movement from confession, towards testimony. For the purposes of this enquiry testimony is defined as a radical act of witnessing, an act that has implications for both poetry and politics.⁸

Using my creative practice as a fulcrum, this research attempts to triangulate three key ideas that are central to my own developing poetics: the epistolary form as genre, the aesthetic disposition of a poetics of grief, and a concern with poetic models of listening across a range of intellectual projects and experimental practices.

This research is therefore timely in two significant ways: it contributes to our understanding of the epistolary poem as a genre, and it attends to an under-investigated tendency in contemporary poetry, exposing the intimate yet hitherto unexplored relationship between the epistolary and the traumatic turn in contemporary poetry.⁹

⁸ Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Wendy Chung, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 2002) pp.29, 57, 94.

⁹By 'traumatic turn' I understand a significant - in every sense - preoccupation among contemporary poets with traumatic experience, whether explored through more conventional narratives of self-disclosure, or through opaque experimental forms.

*

The critical reticence that surrounds epistolary poetics as genre, might, at least in part, have a practical cause in the lack of coherent definition for either the poetic epistle, or, indeed, for the letter itself. Horace, the Latin model for most verse letters in English, and author of the *Ars Poetica*, a verse letter *on* poetics, offers no such definition. Despite the form's flourishing during the 1700s, scholarship of the period had little to say on the subject. Even Alexander Pope, arguably the most famous exponent of the English verse epistle, is equally inexplicit.¹⁰ Modern scholars such as Ben Howard reference the verse letter's 'rare mixture of dignity and familiarity, uniting graceful talk with intimate revelation', suggesting that the form's survival into the modern era may be due precisely to its 'lack of crisp generic definition, its unusual adaptability [...] The form has been so adaptable because, in part, it is so protean or so ill defined.'¹¹

This is certainly true, but to define something as ill-defined is hardly intellectually satisfying. Howard does go on to write of the letter's parallel conventions of 'intimacy' and 'declaration', and the modern epistolary poem's fruitful exploitation of the tension between its public and private traditions.¹² This is far more suggestive ground, and it encapsulates our first key

¹⁰ For example, Nicolas Boileau does not mention the epistolary form at all in his *The Art of Poetry*, originally published in 1674 and written in imitation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, dealing with all forms and genres of poetry (Bloomsbury, 2018). Thomas Blount in his *Remarks Upon Poetry*, originally published in 1694, is equally silent (Forgotten Books, 2018). And in Joseph Trapp's *Lectures on Poetry*, written in 1742 (Books on Demand, 2018), the epistolary form is nowhere mentioned.

¹¹ Howard (p.1).

¹² Howard (p.3).

critical feature of the epistolary form in poetry, that of doubleness. Doubleness is here defined as the way in which the epistolary form in poetry is constituted from and negotiates the letter's parallel conventions of intimacy and declaration.

As Howard notes in his 1987 essay 'Letters Mingle Soules', the convention of intimacy in letter writing is 'only one of two parallel strands in the epistolary tradition. Interwoven with the idea of the letter as a diary or confession is the idea of the letter as a declamation, the written counterpart of a formal oration.'¹³

Let us supply, then, a brief overview of when and how these 'parallel strands' became entwined in epistolary practice. According to Howard, and to scholars such as Judith Rice Henderson, and Owen Hodgkinson, we owe this contemporary understanding of the epistle form to Renaissance humanist thinkers such as Erasmus, and to Juan Luis Vives.¹⁴ Both Vives and Erasmus published compilations of rhetorical rules for the familiar epistle, Erasmus in 1522, and Vives in 1536.¹⁵ The purpose of these compilations was to redefine 'the letter as a distinct genre in the light of contemporary practice.'¹⁶ For Erasmus, it was also an opportunity to synthesise, or attempt to reconcile mediaeval and classical epistolary traditions: that of the *ars dictaminis*, 'a highly developed and rigidly formulated art of official

¹³ Howard (p.4).

¹⁴ Howard (p.4-6).

¹⁵ Judith Rice Henderson, 'Defining the Genre of the Letter in Juan Luis Vives' "De Conscribendis Epistolis" *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* New Series / Nouvelle Série, Vol. 7 (May 1983) pp.89-105. Also Owen Hodgkinson, 'Epistolography' *The Oxford Handbook of the Second Sophistic* (OUP, 2017) p.510.

¹⁶ Henderson (p.98).

letter writing', and the classical tradition of familiar letter-writing as practiced by Cicero and Seneca. The conventions of this latter practice are perhaps best exemplified by Quintillian:

There are then in the first place two kinds of style: the one is closely welded and woven together, while the other is of a looser texture such as is found in dialogues and letters, except when they deal with some subject above their natural level, such as philosophy, politics or the like.¹⁷

Both Cicero and Seneca made similar distinctions between epistolary and oratorical style, with Cicero asking 'What similarity is there between a letter, and a speech in court or at a public meeting? [...] I am not in the habit of dealing with them all in the same style. Private cases, and those petty ones too, I conduct in a more plain-spoken fashion, those involving a man's civil status or his reputation, of course, in a more ornate style; but my letters I generally compose in the language of everyday life.'¹⁸

The classical conception of epistolary practice, then, is one rooted in intimacy, 'the language of everyday life', and predicated upon ideas about the division of *sermo*, which is ordinary conversation, from *contentio*, which is the formal speech of the orator.¹⁹ According to Rice Henderson, it was not until the publication of humanist texts such as *Opus De Ratione Conscribendi Epistolis* that our conception of the letter became skewed towards a synthesis

¹⁷ *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian* trans. H. E. Butler (Loeb Classical Library: Harvard University Press, 1921) part III, p.517.

¹⁸ As quoted in Henderson (p.99).

¹⁹ Henderson (p.90).

of these two parallel sets of practice, in which the classical familiar mode was generally predominant.²⁰

An understanding of this synthesis possesses a special relevance to epistolary poetics, not only in the legacy of epistolary scholarship upon verse-letter luminaries such as Dryden and Pope, but in those examples from classical antiquity where the conventions of the familiar epistle have been subverted or cleverly disguised in order that their authors stage covert and complex interventions into the fabric of society and the heart of the state. These interventions are echoed in current poetic practice, and demonstrate the continued relevance, and unique affordances of the epistolary form within contemporary poetry.

Taking the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* by Seneca the Younger as my example, I will demonstrate the ways in which the epistolary mode is used to exploit the seemingly private for political ends, and how this intersection of oratorical and intimate epistolary styles is reflected within historical and contemporary poetic projects. In doing so, I will expose the ways in which this particular set of epistolary practices emerge from and responds to moments of great social anxiety and political crisis.

By the use of contemporary examples in the work of Sean Bonney and Rob Halpern I will further demonstrate how epistolary doubleness engenders a high degree of indeterminacy or indiscernibility, whereby the epistle form in poetry uses its status as a 'minor rhetoric' or 'minor literature' to negotiate between rhetorics of deference and dissent, obedience and

²⁰ Henderson (p.98).

opposition; to destabilize and reshape hierarchies and economies of power, while working covertly to secure their author's survival within that system.²¹

*

Writing in his moral letters to Lucilius, Seneca states:

You have been complaining that my letters to you are rather carelessly written. Now who talks carefully unless he also desires to talk affectedly? I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together, - spontaneous and easy; for my letters have nothing strained or artificial about them.²²

And yet, as Steven Lowenstam argues, Seneca's letters to Lucilius *are* carefully written; crafted and staged to a high degree, both in terms of their construction and in the ways they disguise 'that very organization.'²³ Seneca adopts and professes the conventions of familiar letter writing current between the years 62 and 65 A.D. in order that he might both mobilize

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p.16. By 'minor literature' is meant not the literature of a 'minor' or subaltern language, but the literature minorities make within the semantic and syntactic limits of a 'major' or dominant language or discourse. This is notion I return to in subsequent chapters.

²² Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, 'Epistle 75, On the Diseases of the Soul' *Moral letters to Lucilius* Volume 2 (Aegitas, 2015) p.146.

²³ Steven Lowenstam, 'Epistle Sixty-five' *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* Vol. 43/44 (1998/1999) p.65.

and subvert those conventions in such a way as to disseminate Stoic philosophy without courting disapprobation from inside the Neronian state.²⁴ In *Letters to Power: Public Advocacy Without Public Intellectuals* (2011), Samuel McCormick describes this strategy as a way of ‘remaining concealed in hazardous political landscapes.’²⁵ McCormick claims that the epistolary’s place, and Seneca’s understanding of the form, as a ‘minor rhetoric’ allows it to ‘toggle inconclusively between rhetorics of deference and dissent, obedience and opposition’, in other words to use the ‘weapons of the weak’ to undermine, destabilize and reshape the hierarchies and economies of state power, while working covertly to secure their author’s survival within that system.²⁶

Amanda Wilcox, writing in *The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome: Friendship in Cicero's Ad Familiares and Seneca's Moral Epistles*, argues persuasively that the value of Lucilius as a named addressee in Seneca’s letters is not primarily historical, nor indeed biographical.²⁷ Lucilius, then procurator of Sicily, was a real historical person, but evidence as to whether he and Seneca ever corresponded has proved consistently contentious.²⁸ Wilcox maintains, and I find this view persuasive, that Lucilius’ chief value is as a rhetorical cipher and *not* a historical person. The moral epistles are not one half of a ‘careless’ and intimate correspondence, but a fictional intimacy constructed for the purpose of political and social intervention or persuasion.

²⁴ McCormick (p.148).

²⁵ McCormick (p.148).

²⁶ McCormick (p.150).

²⁷ Amanda Wilcox, *The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome: Friendship in Cicero's Ad Familiares and Seneca's Moral Epistles* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012) p.155.

²⁸ Marcus Wilson, ‘Seneca's Epistles to Lucilius: A Revaluation’, in *Ramus*, 16 (1987) pp.102-121.

It is vital, however, that we do not over-simplify Seneca's politics of concealment. It is not accurate to suggest that the perception of epistolary privacy allowed Seneca's Stoic politics to enter the public sphere unnoticed or unchallenged. To begin with, the epistles were written to be read, and indeed they were circulated among city council members, maintaining a presence in public life and political discourse. I argue that the letters are rather spaces of mediation that fruitfully exploit classical Roman understanding of the rules governing the familiar epistle, to create what McCormick describes as 'a zone of indiscernability', both enduring and eluding the 'the broad daylight of public appearance'.²⁹ The epistle, and the epistolary poem, then, exist in space at once public and private.

Within familiar epistolary space exists a system of permissions not granted by other forms of text. It is not quite that the letter-form allows for an ideal free speech to be enacted, unencumbered by the threat of censorship, sanction or political retaliation, but that its nominal status as a personal correspondence allows the speaker to use 'authorship of the text as a warrant for its authoritative interpretation', and that the very nature of an evolving epistolary correspondence provides opportunities for its author to 'insinuate and multiply interpretations within the communicative gap between an earlier act of epistolography and its various moments of reception'.³⁰

The acknowledged status of the familiar epistle as inferior to oratorical speech or political treatise, provides an acceptable opportunity for infiltrating criticism into political space. It is not that Nero or the Neronian state were unaware of Seneca's potentially subversive epistles, nor fooled by their outwardly private character, rather the special status of the familiar

²⁹ McCormick (p.150).

³⁰ McCormick (p.79).

epistle allowed for these criticisms to be made. As McCormick writes, the letter's liminal character afforded an opportunity of political intervention 'for citizen-subjects like Seneca who are in close proximity to political power but ultimately excluded from its exercise.'³¹ Further, we might consider this gesture of conscious carelessness as a form of collaboration between speaker and audience in a confessional signal towards honesty; both speaker and audience are aware of the text's inherent artifice, yet by silent mutual consent, agree not to acknowledge it, but to accept its professions of sincerity on its own terms in the privileged and 'disreal' space created by the epistle form.³²

The best evidence that Seneca intended his moral epistles as spaces of careful political negotiation comes from within the epistles themselves, which throughout evince a complex rhetoric of withdrawal and concealment. These themes are present in many of the epistles, but the best example is perhaps in epistle 43:³³

Men are asking what you do, how you dine, and how you sleep, and they find out, too;
hence there is all the more reason for your living circumspectly. Do not, however,

³¹ McCormick (p.79).

³² Lyotard defines 'disreal' spaces as 'autonomous spaces no longer subject to the laws of so-called reality, regions where desire can play in all its ambivalence.' Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Dream-Work Does Not Think', *The Lyotard Reader* ed. A. Benjamin (Blackwell Publishers, 1989) p.156. Also, Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester University Press, 1988) p.11.

³³ Also in epistles 4, 5, 8, 10, 14, 19, 22, 36, 43, 62, 68, 72, 94 and 108.

deem yourself truly happy until you find that you can live before men's eyes, until your walls protect but do not hide you...³⁴

It is the last statement that is key. When Seneca speaks of walls that 'protect but do not hide', he proposes what McCormick calls 'a tactical enfoldment of the self in publicity'.³⁵ When remaining concealed in surveilled circumstances Seneca suggests that publicity may also be a form of protection, a sentiment he echoes in epistle 68:

Certain animals hide themselves from discovery by confusing the marks of their footprints in the neighbourhood of their lairs. You should do the same. Otherwise, there will always be someone dogging your footsteps. Many men pass by that which is visible, and peer after things hidden and concealed; a locked room invites the thief. Things which lie in the open appear cheap; the house-breaker passes by that which is exposed to view.³⁶

Seneca's epistles, then, serve as both a treatise on and an exemplum of artful negotiation with and within the state. His example demonstrates the early development of the letter form as a mode with special status, uniquely able to manipulate its 'indiscernability' to infiltrate dominant ideology and discourse. This notion of the letter, and its interplay between public and private rhetorics, is crucial in deciding the form's use across poetic generations and

³⁴ Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, 'Epistle 43, The Relativity of Fame' *Moral letters to Lucilius*, Volume 1 (Aegitas, 2015) p.284.

³⁵ McCormick (p.44).

³⁶ Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, 'Epistle 68, On Wisdom and Retirement', *Moral letters to Lucilius*, Volume 2 (Aegitas, 2015) p.44.

cohorts. Seneca's letters to Lucilius began to circulate at a time when Rome was facing 'the deepest moral crisis of its history'.³⁷ This is not a coincidence. Collective social acknowledgement of the letter as a privileged category of communication allows for its use as a tactical method of negotiating political crisis. Not only, then, does the letter emerge as a profound psychic response to such crisis, but as a practical tool for introducing political or social dissonance within the body of the state.

*

In the contemporary poetic landscape we can best discern this key critical use of epistolary poetics in the work of Sean Bonney. Bonney's use of the epistolary form is perhaps best viewed through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'minor literatures'.³⁸ Minor literatures are profoundly contextual and deeply situational, operating within the same territories as major literatures, but in radically different ways. For minor literatures there are neither landmarks, milestones nor open spaces into which the subject might escape. Instead, the subject encounters a continually evolving system of blockades, checks, circumscriptions and repressions, which can only ever be evaded or transformed through experimental practice. Minor literatures, therefore, will be concerned with questions of identity, authority and legitimacy; 'territorialization and reterritorialization'.³⁹ In *Letters Against the Firmament* Bonney uses the letter form to negotiate blockades, both spatial and social. Majoritarian discourses, and the political territories they inhabit are everywhere

³⁷ John Penwill 'Compulsory Freedom' *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) p.193.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (p.16).

³⁹ Nicholas Thoburn, 'Deleuze, Marx and Politics' *Deleuze, Marx and Politics* (Routledge, 2003) p.41.

signalled: from Glenda Jackson's speech in parliament to the 'bourgeois' op-eds of middlebrow broadsheets.⁴⁰ Bonney holds these discourses in contempt. They are suspect, fraudulent, and culpable in the creation of a totalising and conventional identity politics: Us versus Them. Bonney deploys the letter's mode of intersubjective openness to posit and summon forth a crowd, a diverse and porous – as opposed to an undifferentiated and othered – 'we'. Bonney's use of the epistolary form works fruitfully against claims to authority and aims of domination; collective political identity emerges as relational, profoundly social, and constantly shifting across affinities, allegiances and shared experiences; not static or homogenous, but mercurial and vivid.⁴¹ The letter form for Bonney becomes the textual counterpart to the unofficial occupations of protest cohorts, enacting a makeshift and spontaneous relationality within borders of the dominant discourse.

I will return to Bonney's work in depth when I come to write about Contingency. At this juncture it is important only to note that the characteristics of epistolary poetics seeded in Seneca, the qualities of doubleness and indeterminacy / indiscernibility, re-emerge within and are of continuing relevance to contemporary poetic practice in its response to social pressure and political crisis.

⁴⁰ Sean Bonney, 'Letter Against Ritual' *Letters Against the Firmament* (Enitharmon Press, 2015) pp.98, 99 respectively.

⁴¹ This understanding of Bonney is influenced by my reading of Adorno. Theodor Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society' *Notes to Literature*, Volume 1. ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, 1991) pp.37–54. In this essay Adorno posits a notion that the work of lyric poetry is the subjective expression of a social antagonism; that the lyric 'I' is neither a privileged outsider, nor a mouthpiece for some monolithic collective. Rather, lyric poetry enacts a socially enmeshed subjectivity.

Before considering the related notion of contingency it is necessary to further define and to map the uses of doubleness and indeterminacy/indiscernibility in epistolary poetry across the literary canon, beginning with perhaps the most famous and exemplary exponent of the English verse-letter, Alexander Pope.

*

Pope is widely credited with popularising the English verse-epistle, as well as being a prolific writer of his own familiar epistles. Heavily influenced, as were many of his contemporaries, by the notion of letter writing as outlined by Erasmus in *Opus De Ratione Conscribendi Epistolis*, Pope's surviving correspondence contains many of those Ciceronian professions of artlessness and sincerity that dominated classical examples of the familiar epistle, with Pope describing his epistolary communication as 'thoughts just warm from the brain without any polishing or dress, the very dishabille of the understanding.'⁴² Later, in a letter to Jonathan Swift he (perhaps consciously) echoes Seneca when he claims that loving Swift better than most, he 'inevitably' writes to him 'more negligently...'⁴³ Leaving aside for one moment the dubious veracity of such statements, what is evident is that Pope's verse-epistles were anything but negligent and owe much to classical notions of both satire and the rules governing the familiar epistle. Horace, in particular, was a central figure within Renaissance verse culture, whose epistles and satires served as a spur for the imitations of poets such as

⁴² Alexander Pope, *Letters of Mr. Pope, and Several Eminent Persons, from the Year 1705, to 1711*, Volume 1, originally published in 1775 (BiblioBazaar, 2016) p.39.

⁴³ As quoted in Dustin Griffin, *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) p.197.

Pope, Dryden and Ben Jonson. Within Horace Pope finds an ideal synthesis and embodiment of satirical and epistolary traditions.⁴⁴ As Pope writes in 'An Essay on Criticism' in 1711:

Horace still charms with graceful negligence,
And without methods talks us into sense,
Will, like a friend, familiarly convey
The truest notions in the easiest way.⁴⁵

Pope's epistle poems are explicitly oratorical and performative, using satirical conventions of double register, within which it is 'possible to speak to one audience directly while always addressing another by implication.'⁴⁶ Pope mobilizes the letter as satirical space, using his poems to level accusations or moral criticism at a debased and corrupted society through vital characterisation. The figures in Pope's major epistolary poems serve as representatives of either 'opposing faults' or virtues, what Pope referred to wryly as the 'Golden Mean'.⁴⁷ In 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot' Pope's targets are pedantry and bad taste, and a certain dullness of

⁴⁴ Jacob Fuchs, *Reading Pope's Imitations of Horace* (Bucknell University Press, 1989), also Frank Stack, *Pope and Horace: Studies in Imitation* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Robin Sowerby, 'Pope and Horace' *Horace Made New: Horatian Influences on British Writing from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century* eds. David Hopkins, Charles Martindale (Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp.159-183.

⁴⁵ Alexander Pope, 'An Essay on Criticism', *An Essay on Criticism with Introductory and Explanatory Notes* (The Floating Press, 2010) p.37.

⁴⁶ William C. Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment: The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (Princeton University Press, 2014) p.12.

⁴⁷ Adele Edna Woollard, 'Irony in Alexander Pope's Five Major Epistles', Ph.D diss. Thesis (Simon Fraser University, 1968) p.1.

wit. In his 'Epistle to Cobham' and 'Epistle to a Lady' it is moral depravity that is under attack. In 'Epistle to Burlington' Pope sets out to criticise vulgarity and excessive opulence, while 'Epistle to Bathurst' deals with the evils of misused wealth against the standards of religious propriety.⁴⁸

These satirical interventions represent an important point in epistolary history, and a crucial stage in the movement from fictional intimacies for the purpose of political and social intervention to the use of the genuinely private. In the previous section I focussed on the epistle's parallel traditions of public and private speech, mobilized in order to – adopting McCormick's memorable phrase – 'toggle inconclusively between rhetorics of deference and dissent, obedience and opposition'.⁴⁹ This use of the form has had a significant impact on the development of my own creative practice and sense of epistolary ethics, as I discuss in my poetic work and its numerous reflective paratexts. As a reading of the poetic epistle's relationship to publicity, however, it is incomplete.⁵⁰ In this section, then, I will use the example of Pope and his epistolary peers, to examine another critical strand in the development of epistolary poetics: specifically, the treatment of the epistle as an explicitly public form with the ability to stage direct moral, philosophical and political interventions in the state and in society. In doing so this section exposes both an under-investigated epistolary

⁴⁸ Alexander Pope, *Epistles to Several Persons* originally published in 1744 (On Demand Publishing, 2018).

⁴⁹ McCormick (p.148).

⁵⁰ For example, the 2nd 'gentle reader' poem in *narrowcasting*, makes explicit reference to these tensions. McCormick's notion of the epistolary form as uniquely able to 'toggle' between rhetorics of deference and dissent is explored in my reflective journal, archived at: <https://dog-sealion-43cn.squarespace.com/config/>

lineage and crucial moments of intersection in epistolary space between satire and ethics, protest and performance.

Our first and, in terms of influence, most important example of the epistolary poem as consciously shaping the social and cultural world, is the Roman poet Horace. Written between 20 and 14 BCE, Horace's satirical *Epistles* had an enormous impact on the classical and Augustan imitations written by Enlightenment era poets, most notably upon Pope, who described his *Epistles to Several Persons*, arguably the best-known example of the English verse epistle, as 'a system of Ethicks in the Horatian way'.⁵¹ To fully understand Pope and his epistolary ethics, we must first briefly consider what a system of Horatian epistolary ethics might be.

Persius, who also became a model for eighteenth century satirists, described Horace's *Epistles* thus: '...as his friend laughs, Horace slyly puts his finger on his every fault; once let in, he plays about the heartstrings...'⁵² This quote is key for understanding Horace's notion of satire, and the letter's role within it. Crucially, the satire of Horace is a benevolent satire, with the aristocratic subject-recipients of Horace's epistolary wit serving to modulate (and moderate) the poet's tone, and reflecting an image of a civilised society in which the authority of the rich and powerful is tempered by moral instruction from a contemplative class of philosopher poets, as in this extract from his *Satires*:

⁵¹ As quoted in Howard D. Weinbrot, *Alexander Pope and the Traditions of Formal Verse Satire* (Princeton University Press, 2014) p.174.

⁵² Persius *Satires* (Francis Cairns, 1987) p.8, lines 116-117.

...That such malice shall be far from my pages, and first of all from my heart, I pledge myself, if there is aught that I can pledge with truth. If in my words I am too free, perchance too light, this bit of liberty you will indulgently grant me. 'Tis a habit the best of fathers taught me, for, to enable me to steer clear of follies, he would brand them, one by one, by his examples...⁵³

Horace's satires imply a particular kind of reader, a recipient who embodies a specific set of determinant values and knowledge, and a perception of the world engendered by these, a perception that is carried by and enshrined within the text.⁵⁴ In other words, as Howard D. Weinbrot states, the 'norms' within Horace's epistles are 'named and known', they 'personify the deservedly thriving, at least properly functioning state'.⁵⁵ The recipients of Horace's epistles are friends, who are capable of profiting from moral instruction, not a systemically corrupt orthodoxy worthy of attack.

It is this notion, or 'system of Ethicks' that we see echoed in *Pope's Epistles to Several Persons*, satirical addresses that take to task traits or 'norms', follies rooted in human nature, not individual and irredeemable wickedness, nor the wholesale corruption of political systems and social institutions. Pope's addressees, like Horace's, are aristocrats with the power to 'make positive changes within their world and within themselves'.⁵⁶

⁵³ Horace, 'Satires I' *Horace, Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 1929) p.57.

⁵⁴ Weinbrot (p.174), and Dowling (2014).

⁵⁵ Weinbrot (p.174).

⁵⁶ Dowling (p.89).

The poet-pamphleteers of the eighteenth century believed that poetry had the power to steer public morality and positively intervene in social life.⁵⁷ The prevailing dynamic between poet and audience in this situation, and a metaphor prevalent through Augustan poetry also, was that of the satirist as moral physician, as with Pope's 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot'.⁵⁸

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As Elizabeth Cook writes in *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*, the eighteenth century letter narrative provokes a very specific question about epistolary publicity, namely 'What does it mean to write from the crossroads of public and private, manuscript and print, at this particular historical moment?'⁵⁹

This is indeed a germane question, and to answer it, something must be briefly said about the place of the letter in eighteenth century society and its sheer discursive range. The letter carried two contradictory sets of connotation in the eighteenth century, that of the sincere and unaffected speech exemplified in classical notions of the familiar epistle, and that of a playful and potentially deceptive form, a species of rhetorical trickery, a 'deliberate

⁵⁷ Cynthia J. Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (University of Georgia Press, 2010), but more specifically Isobel Grundy, 'Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce: An Unpublished Poem by Lady Mary Wortley' *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 23, No. 92 (November, 1972) p.422.

⁵⁸ Weinbrot (p.189).

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford University Press, 1996) p.5.

performance', to quote Samuel Johnson in his *Life of Pope*, describing the scandal that attended the publication of Pope's letters.⁶⁰

Pope's satirical epistles existed in a wider context of epistolary saturation. Epistolarity abounded in novels, poetry, moral conduct texts, newsletters on subjects as diverse as fashion, literature and botany; periodicals such as *Gentleman's Magazine* and *Covent Garden Journal* were often made up almost entirely of letters, typically generated by the editor to 'invoke an impression of community'.⁶¹ There were travel letters, letter-writing manuals, and, towards the end of the century, open letters, printed cheaply and anonymously and disseminated as broadsides, inciting civil disobedience and expressing discontent. The Enlightenment era was characterised by rapid change and advancement in scientific understanding, technology and politics; as new political and scientific ideas percolated throughout English society, letters also provided a pivotal function as a relatively inexpensive and swift way to circulate discrete/discreet chunks of information across the political and geographical borders. But more importantly to test and to refine these ideas within a space of privileged, coterie communication.⁶²

⁶⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The Life of Pope* originally published in 1779 (Forgotten Books, 2018) p.273. The publication of collected correspondence was still a rarity in 1794 when Edmund Curll, a notoriously reprobate publisher, released an apparently unauthorized edition of Pope's letters. As it would later transpire, Pope had edited this collection and delivered it to Curll in secret, thus circumventing, or attempting to circumvent eighteenth century notions of epistolary morality.

⁶¹ Cook (p.17).

⁶² Christian Thorne, 'Thumbing Our Nose at the Public Sphere: Satire, the Market, and the invention of Literature', in *PMLA* Vol. 116, No. 3 (May, 2001) pp.531-544. See also Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Epistolarity, then, was a central and fundamentally social feature of eighteenth century literary life, and the epistolary satirist, as Howard D. Weinbrot notes, existed in 'a social world whose communication is played out before us'.⁶³

In Pope, several key characteristics of the poetic epistle are at work: doubleness, present in the parallel conventions of intimacy and declaration which Pope both acknowledges and exploits. indiscernibility / indeterminacy, present when Pope calls upon the letter's status as a site of gentle satire to introduce scathing criticism into the social realm. And sociality / reciprocity, manifest in the way in which Pope's epistles emerge from and partake of the material and social world. Pope recognised the epistle as a fundamentally social form; one with a unique set of possibilities and responsibilities. In his 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot', published in 1735, Pope uses epistolary address both to savage his detractors and defend his character, yet it is also a Satire in the 'Horatian way' with Pope himself as the moral physician to the socially sick 'norms' or types exemplified in the persons of 'Atticus' and 'Sporus', ciphers for the real Joseph Addison and John Hervey. Atticus possesses great talent, according to Pope, yet this talent is adulterated and diminished by jealousy. Sporus, meanwhile is malicious, perverse, absurd and dangerous, as this short passage indicates:

...Satire or sense, alas! can Sporus feel?
Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?"
Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
This painted child of dirt that stinks and stings;
Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,

⁶³ Weinbrot (p.17).

Yet wit ne'er tastes, and beauty ne'er enjoys,
So well-bred spaniels civilly delight
In mumbling of the game they dare not bite.
Eternal smiles his emptiness betray,
As shallow streams run dimpling all the way...⁶⁴

It is hard to read this gleefully vituperative attack and take seriously Pope's own claims within the text that he writes for impersonal 'virtue's better end'.⁶⁵ Rather, by inserting his scathing satire into epistolary space, Pope creates a hedged benevolence; a posture of friendship and familiar exchange. This posture, a prominent feature of Juvenalian – as opposed to Horatian – satire allows Pope to unburden himself of such ferocious sentiments.⁶⁶ Pope's thinly veiled criticism of Hervey, then, is doubly sanctioned: first by the Horatian tradition of the satirical epistle, and secondly by Arbuthnot's presence as the named recipient, with Pope calling upon the particular permissions and claims to moral authority embodied by the letter form: letters 'open all the Boxes of one's Breast', writes James Howell,

⁶⁴ Alexander Pope, *Selected Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1998) p.93, lines 305 – 333.

⁶⁵ Pope (p.95, line 368).

⁶⁶ After the Roman satirist Juvenal (late 1st century – early 2nd century CE). This style of satire is characterised by a contemptuous and abrasive tone; addressing social evil through scorn, outrage, and savage ridicule. This form is often pessimistic, defined by irony, sarcasm, moral indignation and personal invective. Politically, it is often highly polarized / polarizing. Pope seems to combine both the Horatian and Juvenalian forms with his verse epistles to create the kind of 'hedged benevolence' alluded to. See John Strachan, Steven E Jones eds. *British Satire, 1785-1840*, Volume 3 (Routledge, 2020).

'and truly set forth the inward Man.'⁶⁷ This was a well-established conceit among the cohort of scholars to which Pope belonged, and who constituted his most immediate readership. Pope's satire, then, however personal and however savage, gains a gloss of virtue from the epistolary form.

By using Arbuthnot, not only as an addressee, but as an interlocutor within the poem, Pope situates the epistle as part of an ongoing dialogic exchange or argument. The figure of Arbuthnot functions as a device by which Pope can defend himself from the potential accusations of his wider readership, without seeming to mount a public apologia. 'Good friend, forbear! you deal in dang'rous things', Pope has Arbuthnot declare.⁶⁸ This provides Pope with the opportunity to develop a counter argument for doing anything but forbearing. When Arbuthnot asks Pope 'why insult the poor? affront the great?', Pope replies 'A knave's a knave, to me, in ev'ry state', a point he goes on to elaborate:

Alike my scorn, if he succeed or fail,
Sporus at court, or Japhet in a jail,
A hireling scribbler, or a hireling peer,
Knight of the post corrupt, or of the shire;
If on a pillory, or near a throne,
He gain his prince's ear, or lose his own.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ James Howell, *Familiar Letters*, originally published in 1645, (Nabu Press, 2013), p.304.

⁶⁸ Pope (p.93, line 84).

⁶⁹ Pope (p.96, line 388).

From this we see that not only does the epistolary form offer Pope an occasion for delivering and justifying the caustic satirical statements he wished to make, but that the letter's inherently dialogic form provides the structure in which these statements are made: a question, a pithy response, and an elaboration. By invoking Arbuthnot as a wise epistolary interlocutor, Pope heightens the poem's sense of moral responsibility, creating the impression that the speaker is morally answerable to Arbuthnot. To Pope, the poetic epistle was a mixture of rhetoric and poetry, manipulating the conventions of both before an audience at once external to the speaker and internal to the discourse of the poem.⁷⁰

Epistolary poetry as Pope understood it was an ideological intervention, with the poems themselves, as William C. Dowling has noted, functioning as 'symbolic acts with enormous consequences in the domain of the real'⁷¹ The poetic epistle provided Pope with a tradition and a structure in which to exert a moral pressure on society. The letter's inherent sociality allowed Pope, and his fellow epistolarians to, individually and collectively, develop the ideal audience for which they wrote. This last point is crucial in understanding the significance and uniqueness of the epistolary form in poetry: through repeated acts of address to an implied audience, one that embodies the determinant values, knowledge and moral perspectives carried and enshrined within the poem, the poets begin to mould their audience. Prior poems, by individual poets, or by poetic cohorts interacting through their texts, serve to create and refine their imagined audience to such an extent that real readers and the societies to which they belong are effectively shaped. The epistolary poem, as

⁷⁰ Dowling (p.12).

⁷¹ Dowling (p.13).

Richard Horvath puts it, is 'a textual transaction accessible to multiple readers', which works to address a wide disparate readership alongside the addressees it explicitly targets.⁷²

Because Pope wrote with a deep consciousness of the letter form's sociality, it is germane to briefly acknowledge Pope's epistolary cohort and the social and literary milieus that provoked and shaped his epistolary practice. In this regard a pivotal figure is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who numbered Pope, Jonathan Swift and William Cowper among her contemporaries and occasional epistolary sparring partners. Pope, Cowper, Swift and Montagu belonged to a cohort of 'poets militant' who used their published pamphlets as tools for both literary and political campaigning.⁷³ Wortley believed, with her male counterparts, in the power of verse to persuade and convince; to steer public morality and affect real political change. In this sense her work was as openly oratorical as Pope's. Further, she actively and explicitly sought to utilize the private letter's status in eighteenth century literature as a minor or specifically feminine rhetoric to challenge, layer and complicate prevailing notions of female epistolary practice.

As Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven note, the form of writing 'most available to and acceptable for women' in the eighteenth century was letter writing, with feminine letters traditionally focussed on interior space both domestic and emotional.⁷⁴ Critical discussions of

⁷² Richard P. Horvath, 'Chaucer's Epistolary Poetic: The Envoys to Bukton and Scogan' *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 37, NO.2 (2002) p.174.

⁷³ Isobel Grundy, 'Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce: An Unpublished Poem by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu' *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 23, No. 92 (1972) p.422.

⁷⁴ Amanda Gilroy, W. M. Verhoeven, *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy, W. M. Verhoeven (University of Virginia Press, 2000) p.2.

the epistolary practices of women in the eighteenth century has tended, therefore, to view such practices as, if not marginal, then marginalised, both reflecting and exposing the conflict between a natural desire for self-expression and the need for, or obligation towards, self-suppression inscribed within the wider culture.⁷⁵ Accordingly, the feminine letter's prevailing tropes within literary scholarship have been those of authenticity and intimacy, with the letters of women seen to perform, in the words of Gilroy and Verhoeven 'a written mimesis of the heart', worthy of attention and critical appraisal because they expose the inner workings and private lives of individuals and groups not commonly accounted for by the dominant, patriarchal discourse. Vivien Jones, for example, introduces the anthology *Women in the Eighteenth Century* with the assertion that the dominant ideology of the eighteenth century created and fostered 'the natural association between women and the private sphere, domesticity and leisure.' This spatial restriction, according to Jones, is mirrored in the assigned literary practices of women.⁷⁶

Jones's assertion is not incorrect, but it is perhaps incomplete, and Montagu's own extensive epistolary practice provides some of our strongest evidence for this: her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, appearing posthumously to great acclaim in 1763, and reprinted in numerous editions long after her death, demonstrate in their very publication and popularity that women's letters could enjoy a spirited participation in public life. Further, the letters paint a portrait of women as rigorous and engaged actors in the world, if not entirely free ones. The

⁷⁵ Vivien Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge, 2006) p.114, also see Lawrence E. Klein 'Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 The Public and the Nation (1995) p.97.

⁷⁶ Vivien Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge, 2006) p.114.

letters' sheer diversity of theme broadens dramatically the scope of the feminine letter from the narrow confines of the domestic into the wider contingent world.⁷⁷

Montagu's epistolary poems are also located in social reality, often provoked by the scenes and scandals of the society in which she moved, and enjoying a fruitful exchange with poet-peers such as Pope, Swift, Cowper, and Horace Walpole.⁷⁸ Where Montagu's epistolary projects differ most dramatically from those of her male contemporaries is less in their formal tendencies or treatment of classical themes than in their literary legacy. Certainly, it is true that her poems have not enjoyed the same lasting attention as those of her male epistolary contemporaries, and one can read in this an act of deliberate patriarchal erasure of a writer who threatens to disrupt the self-serving fiction of an all-male poetic canon. Indeed, the literary afterlives of other writers such as Aphra Behn and Judith Cowper bare this thesis out. This neglect in turn has driven extensive contemporary rediscoveries and reappraisals, both popular and scholarly, of Montagu's work; acts of important feminist scholarship in themselves, yet often provoking what I contend is a misreading of Montagu's epistolary practice as inherently, overtly, and uncomplicatedly feminist.⁷⁹ Instead, I argue that Montagu's epistolary politics are far more ambiguous than that.

⁷⁷ Cynthia J. Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter*, (University of Georgia Press, 2010) p.229.

⁷⁸ Lowenthal (pp.64, 161, 249).

⁷⁹ For example, Pat Rogers ed., *The Eighteenth Century: The Context of English Literature* (Holmes and Meier, 1978) p.29. Montagu is described as a 'brave spirit' who 'challenged the male domination of the literary world'. Also see Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them: From Aphra Behn to Adrienne Rich* (Pandora, 1982) pp.68-69. Here Montagu is referred to as 'a staunch advocate of feminism'. Also Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism* (Cornell

In her essay on Montagu, written for the Poetry Foundation, Carol Barash speaks about the poet's 'feminism' in her treatment of themes such as sexual double standards and enforced marriage and demonstrates how popular and pervasive the notion of Montagu as a feminist foremother has become in recent years.⁸⁰ And in Montagu's 'Epistle from Mrs. Y to Her Husband', written in 1724, these themes are the inarguable core of the text:

Defrauded Servants are from Service free,
A wounded Slave regains his Liberty.
For Wives ill us'd no remedy remains,
To daily Racks condemn'd, and to eternal Chains.⁸¹

To a modern reader this striking stanza resonates as unequivocally feminist, and yet, as Isobel Grundy points out in 'Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce: An Unpublished Poem by University Press, 2018) p.20. Despite implicating Montague in the Orientalism theorised by Edward Said, Lowe nevertheless identifies Montague with an 'emergent feminist discourse'. For a more nuanced reading of Montague, Susan Ostrov Weisser, *Feminist Nightmares: Women At Odds: Feminism and the Problems of Sisterhood* (New York University Press, 1994) is particularly useful.

⁸⁰ Carol Barash, 'Lady Mary Wortley Montagu' on the Poetry Foundation website: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lady-mary-wortley-montagu> For a more scholarly treatment of Montagu's complex feminism also see Jennifer Keith, 'Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762): Haughty Mind, Warm Blood and the "Demon of Poesie"' *Women and Poetry, 1660–1750*, ed. S. Prescott and D.E. Shuttleton (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁸¹ Oxford Scholarly Editions: <http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198124443.book.1/acrade-9780198124443-div1-40> (lines 20-24).

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu', the theme of women's trepidation upon entering marriage was a 'commonplace' of seventeenth and eighteenth-century literature, used to generate dramatic tension, with popular texts proliferating images of forced marriage and divorce as instruments of plot and emotion.⁸²

Neither is it safe to assume that Montagu's poetry was used primarily to 'give public form to her private feelings'. Montagu's 'Epistle from Mrs. Y to her Husband' is a profoundly social text: an imagined address from his disgraced wife to William Yongue, whose divorce in the year 1724 had been the subject of much scandalised public comment within the circles in which Montagu moved. It is true that Montagu uses her poem to attack the legal system that allows a flagrantly adulterous husband to profit economically from divorce: 'Too, too severely laws of honor bind / The weak submissive sex of womankind', while in more general terms decrying the injustice that insists a woman must shoulder the stigma of her husband's actions, her freedoms as curtailed and circumscribed by an etiquette of social shame as by the marriage from which she has ostensibly been liberated:

To custom (though unjust) so much is due;
I hide my frailty from the public view.
My conscience clear, yet sensible of shame,
My life I hazard, to preserve my fame.⁸³

⁸² Grundy (p.424).

⁸³ As featured on the Oxford Scholarly Editions website:

<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/acrade/9780198124443.book.1/acrade-9780198124443-div1-40lines> 46-49.

Yet, such poems exist within the context of a poetic practice, popularised by Dryden and Pope, of transposing classical Ovidian themes to factual and modern settings.⁸⁴ Self-described as an early and ‘precocious Ovidian’ Montagu participates in the eighteenth-century poetic trend for repurposing Ovidian tales as vehicles for veiled (and sometimes not so veiled) social comment.⁸⁵ The speakers in the *Heroides* – a collection of letters written from the perspectives of classical heroines, many lamenting erotic betrayals – are women with whom Montagu may have found it easy to identify, at the very least they are women whose predicaments and complaints she might have recognised within her own social milieu. The speaker in ‘Epistle from Mrs. Y to Her Husband’ resembles an Ovidian love-complaint, yet the speaker is an eighteenth century wife who pays dearly for her husband’s infidelities. It is perhaps possible to discern echoes of Dido’s epistle to Aeneas in the poem’s indictment of societal hypocrisy.⁸⁶

Montagu’s early epistolary projects include several epistles from forsaken women patterned in the Ovidian mould, of which ‘Julia to Ovid’, written when the poet was just twelve years old, is perhaps the best example. In ‘Julia to Ovid’ love is cast in conflict with the cruel necessities of political power. But in her later epistles Montagu suggests that the conflict is between love and the structure of society itself: The wife in ‘Epistle from Mrs Y to Her Husband’ is denied

⁸⁴ Grundy (p.424).

⁸⁵ Dowling (p.27).

⁸⁶ Paul Murgatroyd, Bridget Reeves, Sarah Parker eds., *Ovid's Heroides: A New Translation and Critical Essays* (Taylor and Francis, 2017) pp.76-89. I also found Carole E. Newlands, ‘Women as Authors: Letter Writing and the Heroides’ *Ovid* (Bloomsbury, 2015) pp.47-70 extremely useful.

both love and freedom by her gender, and in 'Epistle from Arthur Gray to Mrs. Murray' it is class that forms the fatal barrier to happiness.⁸⁷

The 'Epistle from Arthur Gray to Mrs. Murray', published in 1721, deviates from the form typically favoured by Montagu by having as its speaker a working-class man. Arthur Gray is accused of raping his employer's sister, and faces death for his alleged crime. In making the speaker of her poem male within the confines of a form traditionally patterned as intimately and confessionally female by the society in which she moved, Montagu suggests that working-class men and women of *any* class endure a similar position of powerlessness, subservient to the caprices and hypocrisies of upper-class men, those 'Triflers that make Love a Trade...'

Montagu's conflation of women with servants – or indeed, as in 'Epistle from Mrs. Y to Her Husband', women with slaves – can most generously be read as a way of satirizing social hierarchies in relation to both gender and class. It is, however, a problematic manoeuvre for her modern readers. In drawing parallels between the shame and submission endured by a particular kind of aristocratic woman and that of other oppressed classes or races, Montagu fails to acknowledge that women are not oppressed as women alone; in suggesting that her position as a woman in English society affords her an affinity with servants or with slaves is, as Tricia Lootens writes, to 'rhetorically erase' the fact that women are also already poor, already servants, already slaves.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Oxford Scholarly Editions :

<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198124443.book.1/acrade-9780198124443-div1-17>

⁸⁸ Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres*

And yet the poem is also a plea for compassion in the face of such arbitrary social distinctions as class and sex:

Had I been of the world's large rule possess'd, --
That world had then been yours, and I been blest;
Think that my life was quite below my care,
Nor fear'd I any hell beyond despair. --
If these reflections, though they seize you late,
Give some compassion for your Arthur's fate:
Enough you give, nor ought I to complain:
You pay my pangs, nor have I died in vain.⁸⁹

It is very tempting to read in those first two lines a coded yet impassioned outpouring on behalf of the author in particular and women in general to her largely male readership, yet the extent to which it would have been understood as such within Montagu's own time and literary circles is debateable. As a prolific writer of letters, not merely as private correspondence, but as public, publishable texts intended to endure a long posterity, Montagu understood what was at stake in selecting the epistle form.⁹⁰ For Montagu, as a genteel woman, the letter was less a genre into which she was side-lined by her gender, than an

(Princeton University, 2016) p.60. Also see Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Doubleday, 1976).

⁸⁹ Oxford Scholarly Editions:

<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198124443.book.1/actrade-9780198124443-div1-35> (lines 100-107).

⁹⁰ Lowenthal (2010).

important avenue of infiltration into literary and social life. Steeped in the epistolary form, largely thanks to her aristocratic upbringing, and sanctioned in its use by wider society, the letter became a site and occasion for literary and intellectual participation. By placing the emphasis of her Ovidian epistles on female plight, Montagu works within the classical conventions of her literary cohort, yet in her hands these conventions perform different work from that of her male contemporaries. Specifically, as a woman writing about women, Montagu's epistles invite a conflation between author and speaker that, for obvious reasons, Pope's texts do not; because letter writing was such a popular and socially prescribed feminine practice, Montagu can layer and complicate classical and contemporary notions of the epistolary form, giving rise to an allusive textual ambivalence. The classical epistolary traditions in which Montagu participated lent literary legitimacy to her socially subversive inflections, while providing a 'safe' allegorical framework in which to offer her critiques.

For Montagu, then the epistolary poem was a space in which to hybridize contemporary and classical literary traditions, and to practice a complex textual politics. Her epistles were allusive, elusive sites of social negotiation, 'zones of indiscernibility' from and in which the author destabilizes the very conventions she deploys.

Of course epistolary potential for intervening in and affecting the world beyond the poem is not unique to the poets and poetries of the eighteenth century, yet it is in Pope and in Montagu we have perhaps our most apposite and influential examples of this intervention. Both were writing at a time when technological advances were radically and rapidly altering the dissemination of written materials.⁹¹ As public literacy increased, as print production

⁹¹ Both in terms of letters, through the development of the postal system, and in terms of the production of such written materials as the inexpensive broadside, ballad, or pamphlet. Please see

became ever more mechanised, and text began to be more widely available, the potential for and the varied types of human communication vastly expanded. It is worth asking, then, what affect did this have on the letter and on the letter form in poetry.

A common and misguided conceit is that with the advent of mass communication the use and influence of the letter, and letter-like forms of textual interaction dramatically declined. For example, writing in *To the Letter: A Journey Through a Vanishing World*, Simon Garfield states that 'letter writing may be about to come to an end'.⁹² I would argue, rather, that the letter and the letter form became – and continues to be – entangled in an ever more complex web of influence. Epistolary texts could still shape society, but their meanings and nuances had multiplied, viewed through an expanding array of theoretical, aesthetic and ideological lenses. Indeed, throughout the eighteenth century multiple genres of letter writing were in public play, deployed to achieve a variety of aims and literary effects.⁹³ Through its myriad manifestations the letter became central to the literary, social and political networks of the eighteenth century. Whether written and read within familial and social circles, in novels and poems, or as public letters and political exchanges, the letter was a vital and prominent cultural form.⁹⁴

Temma F. Berg, *The Lives and Letters of an Eighteenth-century Circle of Acquaintance* (Ashgate, 2006) p.13, and Christina Ionescu, *Book Illustration in the Long Eighteenth Century: Reconfiguring the Visual Periphery of the Text* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) pp.161-162 respectively.

⁹² Simon Garfield *To the Letter: A Journey Through a Vanishing World*, (2013, Canongate), from the author's own summary.

⁹³ For a more fulsome descriptions of these various genres, please see page 28.

⁹⁴ Brant (2006).

James Jasinski writes that as the letter became ‘an established cultural institution, it began to influence other modes of discourse’.⁹⁵ During the eighteenth century the epistolary novel became an increasingly popular literary mode. In the realm of politics and public affairs, the ‘popularity of letter writing helped generate a new hybrid discursive style.’⁹⁶ The eighteenth century fused the worlds of epistolary familiarity and literary romance with the world of political action through the form of the public letter in particular.⁹⁷ I contend that this process of fusing and hybridizing has been on-going. The letter’s inherent sociality means that its influence upon other modes of writing, and also upon society itself, is reciprocal: the social, political, economic and ontological anxieties of the wider world also infiltrate, complicate and redefine the epistle form.

The letter does not merely bridge geographical distances, it also fosters ‘imaginative communities’. Jennifer Orr, writing about the development and origins of Irish working-class poetry in eighteenth century Ulster suggests that the letter is a site where poetic identity is

⁹⁵ James Jasinski, *Sourcebook on Rhetoric* (Sage, 2001) p.470. Also see Rachael Scarborough King, *Writing to the World: Letters and the Origins of Modern Print Genres* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). King describes the letter as a ‘bridge genre’, which facilitates change in literary practice by transferring existing textual conventions to emerging modes of composition and circulation. King claims four crucial genres that emerged during the eighteenth century—the newspaper, the periodical, the novel, and the biography—were united by their reliance on letters to accustom readers to these new forms of print media. King explains that as these new genres began to circulate widely, much of their form and content was borrowed from letters, allowing for easier access to these unfamiliar modes of printing and reading texts.

⁹⁶ Jasinski (p.470).

⁹⁷ Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) p.7.

forged precisely because the form registers the real. It rises up from the routines and rhythms of working life, bearing with it the traces of bodily experience: the hand that holds the pen, the cuff that smudges the still-wet ink, the saliva that sticks the envelope down.⁹⁸ The literary letter is a textual object imaginatively rendered material in its literary setting. It connects writing to the social word, relating language to the conditions of the bodies that produce and consume it.

There is a persistent imaginative connection between the textual body and the living body that created it. The letter is both metonymic for and a fragment of the self that writes, and so it triangulates notions of intimacy, authenticity, and authority in a variety of persuasive ways.⁹⁹ This has implications for both epistolary poetry and, more broadly, for politics. As Denise Riley puts it, 'the materiality of words isn't the secondary but the primary stuff of the political'.¹⁰⁰ The material text – its shape and structure in ink and paper, and its sonic texture in transmission and performance – is the poem's primary point of contact with its readership or audience.

⁹⁸ Jennifer Orr, *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland* (Springer, 2016) p.29.

⁹⁹ King (p.74) notes that in news reports of the 1700s, 'proof' of veracity was claimed by reference to the existence of manuscript letters as the originals of the print version, as if the 'letters' reality were sufficient to prove the veracity of their claims'. King states that 'The materiality of the hand served as proof of the texts factual existence', more of its 'epistemological authority'.

¹⁰⁰ Denise Riley, *The World of Selves* (Stanford University Press, 2001) p. 112.

It is appropriate then, to talk about how modern and contemporary poets are using the epistolary form to stage their own symbolic interventions', and how mass communication culture allows society to make incursions into their epistolary texts.

*

As indicated in the previous section of indeterminacy/indiscernibility contemporary poets such as Sean Bonney, and, in the U.S, Rob Halpern, also utilize the epistolary form to construct and contour their poems' engagement with the social and political forces that govern our contingent moment.

Letters Against the Firmament is an insistently, emphatically, and almost obsessively political text: it contains multiple revisions, translations, or anti-translations of Rimbaud's 'Season In Hell', written at the time of the first Paris Commune, and with which Bonney associates present political crisis, contemporary protest, and its increasingly brutal repression by the state.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Bonney (p.140). Also see Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (University of Minnesota, 1988) p.102, 148. In his reading of Rimbaud Bonney draws upon the work of Kristin Ross in his understanding of Rimbaud's 'derangement of the senses' being the 'social senses', and in his attempts to connect various states of deliria to the consciousness of the revolutionary classes. For Bonney, 'I' becomes 'other' not in alienation of poetic subjectivity, but as a desire to destroy those bourgeois forces of social organization; this desire is manifested for Bonney in the context of the Paris Commune.

There exists a wealth of scholarly material on the Marxist revolutionary politics at work in Bonney's poetry, but little that specifically explores what is at stake for Bonney in mobilizing the epistolary form towards political ends. I argue that Bonney's use of this form is not incidental, nor wholly aesthetic, but that it does specific work and achieves particular affects.

To begin with, the liberal intellectual whom Bonney posits as the texts' recipient and interlocutor performs a similar function to the figure of Arbuthnot for Pope, creating the impression of ongoing dialogic exchange or argument. For Bonney this is not merely a rhetorical device, but one with deep ethical implications and political purpose: in a society where both the act of naming and the erasure of the name are allied to an exercise of corrupt state power, Bonney uses epistolary address to open the possibility of collective response while manifesting the subjective need for an expression of political outrage. It is only within the context of this charged address to another, or others, that this expression of outrage moves beyond individual catharsis, and becomes instead an acute moral imperative and a potential spur to praxis.

Bonney engages the epistolary form's inherent reciprocity/sociality in order to dismantle the lyric boundary between the private voice and its public appearance in favour of a porous and interpersonal text, implicated in and infiltrated by the wider world. For Bonney, epistolary moments are obviously 'of' the material world in a way conventional literary forms of poetry consciously or unconsciously disguise.

Through the use of epistolary address, Bonney explores the vexed potentials of naming, while putting pressure upon the collective implication for violence that is contained within all forms of pronominal address. Proper names invoke both the hidden human instruments

(Margaret Thatcher, Iain Duncan Smith), and the wilfully obscured victims (Mark Duggan, Ian Tomlinson), of state violence, while the ambiguities of categories such as 'we', 'they', 'us', and 'you' force disruption and doubt into late capitalism's compromised subjectivity. This in turn incites a reflexive questioning in the reader about the ways in which these categories construct [and erase, and destroy] and constitute living bodies within the apparatus of the state.

Because the letter is an innately dialogic form, both facilitating and demanding a polyvocal network of responses, it suggests a reciprocal or collaborative intellectual endeavour. This collaboration takes place between the poem's speaker and its multiplicity of readers, acknowledging those readers as active participants in the co-creation of a text's meaning. This collaboration also takes place within literature, between the text, its precursors and descendants, provoking a system of intertextual cross-reference and infiltration with and within the creative canon. Epistolarity provokes a condition of contingency, a condition in which a work is not 'finished', its position with respect to literature not 'fixed', but changing with each reading, each activation. For Bonney the epistle form signals that meaning does not inhere within a text, but may be created and redirected afresh with each encounter. This has far-reaching implications for my own practice, and has shaped my thinking about the epistolary form as a means by which an ethical lyric may be constructed and encountered.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Two strategies for this are at work in *narrowcasting* and in *halting sites*. In poems 1 and 17 of the 'for the dead' sequence, and in poem 2 of the 'gentle reader' sequence, the lyric form and its ethically compromised status are explicitly invoked and self-reflexively commented upon. In *halting sites*, the poems 'settle / shift' and 'nor home is' collide lyric and administrative registers to posit the letter as a space of fraught negotiation.

The epistle's dialogic nature is inflected with ambivalence for Bonney, for whom intimacy exists in relation to a culture of surveillance, occupation, and imposed order. The letter's status, therefore, as – potentially – an almost infinitely mediated space is fraught with anxieties about censorship, compromising publicity and compromised privacy. If the letter extends the possibility of collaboration, it is also a site of embodied struggle, a place where competing attempts to author, interpret, and ultimately wrest control of meaning and of collective memory occur. There are multiple references throughout *Letters to the Firmament* – particularly within the sequence from *Happiness* – to the notion of 'enemy language', and the epistle form dramatizes this idea of enmity, of language's parallel potentials as an infiltrated / infiltrating tool:

...a pretty little
enzyme dissolved our face's history, privatised
the place and the formula > consciousness
in exile, mass without number, insurrection
is value. Meanings excoriate the enemy language.¹⁰³

As previously stated, the epistle is a porous form. This porousness is important for Bonney specifically. It is a key component of his poetic practice, allowing his texts to register and to be riven by the political pressures of the wider world. As Bonney states:

A poem can't fight back, obviously. But then poems like mine – and also the poets who I feel close to in one way or another – also don't 'play dead' in that they are trying to talk about the current situation [...], about what it's doing to collective subjectivity,

¹⁰³ Bonney (p.123).

of how we even understand what 'fighting back' might mean, and how the language of our poetry can meet the language of conservatism. Because so far, it hasn't come close. [...] I find it really strange that the most common complaint about militant poetry is that it has no efficacy, and so there is no point writing it. I don't know of anyone who has written a poem and expected it by itself to change anything. The interesting point is not whether or not poetry can contribute to change, but what the experience of social/political intensity does to the poetry...¹⁰⁴

For Bonney, form is a method and a means of political engagement, and his choice of the epistle is deliberate and strategic. In *Letters Against the Firmament* the epistolary poem becomes a way of re-inscribing the lyric 'I' with a sense of responsibility and revolutionary agency. Bonney deploys the letter as both a space of commentary upon, an act of engagement with, and investigation into what Robert Sheppard has called 'complex contemporary realities.'¹⁰⁵ The poems function as rigorous interrogations of Marxist ethics and poetic responsibility in the presence of state violence. This investigative mode is, I contend, made possible and uniquely effective by Bonney's use of the epistolary form: the poems are not 'manifestos', whose political parameters are predetermined, but part of an intersubjective exchange, incited by and responding to the continuously evolving pressures of the present. In this way Bonney's epistolary dynamics inscribe and enact contemporary precarity and struggle while allowing for the possibility of hope – that is intervention, change, praxis.

¹⁰⁴ Sean Bonney in an interview with Paal Bjelke Andersen, *Audiatur*:

<http://www.audiatur.no/festival/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2-Sean-Bonney.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry*, ed. Robert Sheppard (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p.1.

Rob Halpern also deploys the epistolary form for its porousness, its status as a mediated/mediating, infiltrated/infiltrating tool. For Halpern the letter's condition of 'vulnerable openness' contains within it the always immanent possibility of catastrophe, a peril that implicates each of its speakers collectively in 'a disaster common to all'¹⁰⁶

For Halpern, present experience and the present moment are fractured by memorial or prospective absence. This problematizes the text's relationship to narrative history and linear time.¹⁰⁷ It is this disruption that the letter form traffics in, and of which Halpern makes use. This is most evident in *Common Place*, where a lyric sensibility is compromised, infiltrated and entangled by official, clinical and legislative speech. These disruptions serve as textual interventions by an oppressive state apparatus into the most intimate of human communications. Halpern's textual bodies stand for the living human bodies that are variously fetishized, debased, erased, and destroyed by the military and economic systems that govern their/our society. Halpern generates this intimate friction, this 'mood of vulnerable openness' through the language of a radically repurposed erotic violence. This friction is at work not only between writer and subject, but writer and reader, reader and

¹⁰⁶ Rob Halpern in an interview for *The Disinhibitor* (April 2011):

<http://disinhibitor.blogspot.com/2011/04/>

¹⁰⁷ The letter form bears the most intimate tangible traces of the human body, is, in fact, metonymic of that body, in all its tactile perishability. Thus, I would contend, that while the letter crosses temporal gulfs, it also registers the impossibility of ever truly surmounting them. The threat of separation being always implicit in the letter's connective function, the possibility of death is anticipated through an encounter with this disembodied voice, this body beyond reach. Separated from the living face and its readability, this voice – the line – becomes the voice of the dead. In both *Common Place* and *Music for Porn* Halpern's poetic epistles seems to channel the dead in this way, summoning a haunting and resistive commons.

subject, reader and state, intersecting in the letter with its direct yet ambiguous address to another.

My own poetic practice draws on Halpern's conception of 'vulnerable openness' and its related notions of 'immanence' and 'patience', using language in such a way as to become both porous and suspended, to create a sense of precarity, of being otherwise, of contingency.

As Halpern puts it:

...a situation of suspended agency that is more than mere passivity, more than impotent privacy. Patience relies not on mastery but rather assumes the risks of failure. Patience's mood is one of vulnerable openness: to piercing, to touch. Its grammatical mode is subjunctive – expressing contingency and desire: a perennial state of as-if-ness. This “as-if-ness” creates an affective space of expectancy within the act of desiring to know, while registering conditionality – the hypothetical – wherein one allows what one doesn't know to orient one's attention as one approaches windows as if to see what really was going on.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Rob Halpern, 'Becoming a Patient of History' transcript. 'The Patient Poetry of Poetics of Rob Halpern' *World Picture* 8, 12 (Summer, 2013) p.26. In a recent essay Siobhan Phillips alludes to a similar condition at play in the epistolary poems of James Schuyler. Describing Schuyler's work as a seat of 'epistolary possibility', Phillips proposes that Schuyler uses the letter form to resist 'privacy's heteronormative implications without rejecting its potential altogether.' That is, by deploying the epistolary form, Schuyler reseeds and 'replenishes' the very notion of the private. Siobhan Phillips, 'Intimacy, Epistolarity, and the Work of Queer Mourning in James Schuyler's Poetry' *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 42, Issue 3 (Spring, 2019) p.55

For Bonney and for Halpern the epistolary form is a uniquely susceptible one, which registers and exposes the political crises of our contemporary moment. Epistolary poetics troubles the idea of frictionless reciprocity: it both incites and silences; it can extend an invitation to speak and deny the right to reply. Epistolary poetics may force the reader into an uncomfortable identification with a named and implicated other, or create a space in which a capacious and ambiguous 'you' allows for an unpredictable network of conflicting or collaborative responses; it disrupts both the hierarchical relationship between writer and reader, and tests readerly assumptions about responsibility and choice. The very act of being addressed, and the spectre of implied response invoked by address, may charge the act of reading with fresh ethical impact and urgency; it may further expose the hidden hierarchies embedded within our mundane daily language encounters, and force us to look at how epistolary rhetoric is mobilized to compel the individual and command the public; to coerce cooperation and engineer consent. A significant idea that emerges from this understanding of the epistolary form is that of contingency, and it is this idea I will now discuss as the fifth key critical component of epistolary poetics.

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The work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis is exemplary of contemporary poetic responses to the ambiguities and challenges posed by epistolary contingency, its interplay between the inciting and silencing of speech; its problematic openness. In her major work of epistolary poetics, *Drafts* – written over a period of 26 years, beginning in 1986 and completed in 2012 with the publication of *Surge: Drafts 96-114* – DuPlessis mobilizes the epistle form to create an 'open text'.¹⁰⁹ In DuPlessis' own words, *Drafts* is founded on 'the logic of the provisional

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Drafts 96-114* (Salt Publishing, 2013).

and the contingent.¹¹⁰ *Drafts* itself is provisional, investigatory, exploratory. As Thomas Devaney writes in his essay 'Inverting the middle: Turning points in *Drafts*' the text is a kind of 'continuous work site', one in which poetry persistently provokes and evolves a dialogue or argument between poetry and itself.¹¹¹ For example in this section of 'Draft 58: In Situ':

Since all words dismember into invention.

For in (or by) the act of starting (staring, stating)

something else takes shape.¹¹²

It is this quality, this 'logic of the provisional and the contingent' that the epistolary form uniquely speaks to. A letter might be part of a continually evolving conversation; it allows for the possibility of distortion, of communication gone astray or awry, sabotaged, intercepted, censored, misheard or erased. It embeds the potential for mistranslation and misappropriation; it is sensitised to the process of historical dissonance, a loss or shift of meaning over time. It sensitises the act of reading with awareness of this dissonance and mobilizes that awareness for the purpose of ethical interrogation.

DuPlessis' work, for example, deploys these features as deliberate poetic strategies to destabilize the relationship of her texts to the political and intellectual projects they allude to. DuPlessis' texts also function as an investigation into the letter form's unique relationship to

¹¹⁰ Patrick Pritchette, 'Drafting beyond the ending: On Rachel Blau Duplessis' *Jacket2* (2011):

<https://jacket2.org/feature/drafting-beyond-ending>

¹¹¹ Thomas Devaney, 'Inverting the middle: Turning points in *Drafts*' *Jacket2* (2011):

<https://jacket2.org/article/inverting-middle>

¹¹² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Draft 58: In Situ' *Torques: Drafts 58-76* (Salt Modern Poets, 2007) p.1.

time: the contingent moment and the historical continuum, and the ways in which pressing global events intersect with personal memory, initiating complex processes of recollection, misremembering and wilful forgetting. 'Draft 85: Hard Copy', for example, begins: '17 May 1986 Or whenever "now" is.' This statement acknowledges the recursive nature of the present moment, and is alive to the possibilities for doubling and dissonance in the space where the readerly and writerly 'now' collide.¹¹³

For DuPlessis the epistolary poem acts as a kind of amplified extension of the present: a reiterative looping of the contingent moment, one in which each repeated return provokes a renewal of awareness and a shift of perspective. Duplessis herself describes her epistolary project as a reaching towards 'something that can never really be completed, never fully be found, never totally be articulated', yet through continual approach and constant reencounter with all that can't be resolved or known, reader and writer alike are spurred towards an ethical reinvestment of attention.¹¹⁴

In 'Draft 27: Athwart', *Toll*, DuPlessis writes:

Narrow market-casting
is meant to prevent

¹¹³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Draft 85: Hard Copy', *Pitch: Drafts 77-95*, (Salt Publishing, 2010), p.42. It is also interesting to note that Jonathon Culler defines the displacement of narrative time as characteristic of apostrophic address, a key feature of epistolary poetics. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard University Press, 2015) p.226.

¹¹⁴ Catherine Taylor 'Take your time: The ethics of the event in *Drafts' Jacket2* (2011):

<https://jacket2.org/article/take-your-time-ethics-event-drafts>

feeling much, even any, of this.

It sutures us to things

we will buy

whatever, straight thru time

and never look at shame.¹¹⁵

This 'straight thru time' represents, not only our surrender to late capitalism's 'malignant rapidity', but also to its self-conscious amnesia, to the parcelling up of events and experiences, consigning them to the homogenous and undifferentiated 'past' or to discreet and boundaried portions of 'history'. For DuPlessis epistolary space offers a suspension from and an infiltration into the cruelty of the present moment, which allows for a deeply serious work of imagination to take place, one in which an ethical future may be conceived and enacted.

Thinking about poetic uses of the letter through the lens of DuPlessis' long epistolary project it is evident that much is at stake, ethically and politically, in choosing the epistolary form. Notions of identity and memory are complicated through a collision of contexts: personal, political, historical and cultural. The epistolary form functions for DuPlessis as a mediating space in which fragments of history and subjective memory intermingle. As these fragments merge, the moral difficulty inherent in their categorization as literature is exposed. It is not possible to understand DuPlessis' texts as predicated upon the ideally universal address of literary language.

¹¹⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Draft 27: Athwart' *Toll* (Wesleyan University Press, 2001) p.172.

In choosing the epistolary form, DuPlessis attempts to inscribe or instantiate the daily lived experience of individuals and communities through text; she evokes the letter as a species of ephemera, that is, as a 'transient document', one not intended to survive 'the topicality of its message or the event to which it relates'.¹¹⁶ The 'ephemeral' speaks to subjectivity. It is, by its very nature, miscellaneous and unsystematic, always in situ, intervening affectively and viscerally into the present. For DuPlessis the letter form offers a strategy through which personal testimony might weave itself into the fabric of collective cultural memory; through which the random, unruly stuff of human experience might be enfolded within and speak to history.

This notion of the letter as a species of ephemera is something I return to within the creative and reflective portion of my thesis. My interest in DuPlessis was initially sparked by what I perceived to be our mutual concern with ephemeral forms and modes, and the ways in which these forms might allow for an act of ethical witnessing to trauma. My own work is deeply concerned with how traumatised bodies and traumatised subjects, might be transposed onto the page. Duplessis' work in *Drafts* is similarly attentive to the problem of traumatic experience – its definition, appropriation and ultimate expressibility through the structures and strictures of literary language. In 'Draft 52: Midrash', Duplessis writes:

Every mourner as a black Letter unwritten
every body, stick, or piece of body ash
a silent blanked out sentence inside of a syntax of systematic
revulsion...¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Chris Makepeace, *Ephemera: A Book on its Collection, Conservation and Use* (Gower, 1985) p.178.

¹¹⁷ Rachel Blau DuPlessis 'Draft 52: Midrash' *Drafts 39-57, Pledge* (Salt, 2004) pp.141-157.

The poem seems to suggest that in any attempt to accommodate the bodies of the dead or the suffering of their mourners upon the page transforms language itself into a potential gravesite; recapitulates the interment and erasure of the grieved-for subject. The aims of ethics and of representation appear destined to be at odds, and yet, through the use of the epistle form the poem signals its participation in a wider world, and acknowledges its intervention within that world through language. By placing the ephemeral and contingent at the heart of her poetic practice DuPlessis' *Drafts* resist the notion of the poem as a static and definitive memorial site. Rather, grief emerges as communal, inter-subjective, and endlessly reverberating. The poet might speak to but can never know or own the horrors perpetrated during the Shoah. Rather, the contingent nature of the text keeps these horrors radically in situ, and the act of grieving them necessarily unfinished.

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This introduction has so far traced critical historical moments of epistolary use and change across the poetic landscape and in doing so has abstracted the following key features of an epistolary poetics: 1) Doubleness: The epistle form in poetry is constituted from and negotiates the letter's parallel conventions of intimacy and declaration. 2) Indeterminacy / Indiscernibility: The epistle form in poetry uses its status as a 'minor rhetoric' or 'minor literature' to 'toggle inconclusively' between rhetorics of deference and dissent, obedience and opposition; to destabilize and reshape hierarchies and economies of power, while working covertly to secure their author's survival within that system. 3) Reciprocity / Sociality: The epistle form in poetry acknowledges the letter's intersubjective nature in order to dismantle the lyric boundary between the private voice and its public appearance, in

favour of a porous and interpersonal text, implicated in and riven by the wider world. Epistolary moments are obviously 'of' the material world in a way conventional literary forms of poetry consciously or unconsciously disguise. 4) Division: The epistolary form in poetry uses referential specificity to make a tacit claim for the authenticity and experiential authority of its texts, texts which function simultaneously as both literature and testimony. 5) Contingency: The epistle form in poetry creates a mediating space which offers a suspension from and an infiltration into the contingent moment, and this in turn allows for an ethical work of imagination to take place. In identifying these key critical features I have attended to the underexplored notion of the epistolary form as genre, and demonstrated the persistence and continuing relevance of the epistolary form to contemporary poetic practice. In mapping key moments of epistolary eruption during times of great social upheaval or political precarity, I have made explicit the relationship between the letter form and various kinds of pressure or crisis.¹¹⁸

It is now necessary to track, through a close reading of significant epistolary texts, the form's unique relationship to the poetics of crisis, trauma and the unconsolated experience. The first chapter will therefore focus on the epistolary form's tradition of 'intimacy', and how this tradition came to dominate throughout modernity, exemplified by the poets of the confessional movement. I will go on to explore how the projects of the confessional

¹¹⁸ For poets such as Rob Halpern, Sean Bonney, and Racheal Blau DuPlessis, 'crisis' must be understood as inseparable from our experience of late-stage capitalism. For these poets, capitalism both produces crisis and *is* crisis. DuPlessis uses the epistolary form's recursive, open-ended apparatus to map the dynamics of daily life in 'the context of global relations'. She manipulates the letter form's innate deferral against what she calls capitalism's 'malignant rapidity, a speeding up of time that robs us of agency 'outside of moments of crisis'. See Taylor (2011).

movement were complicated and extended by contemporary poetic cohorts engaging with lived experiences of therapy, deploying the letter as a discursive space of investigation into modes, aims and outcomes of therapeutic practice. In hybridizing therapeutic and poetic strategies these poets interrogate the ways in which literary production and therapeutic treatment intersect and interact within the letter. Within the letter's mediating space poetry becomes not merely a tool pressed into service by various therapeutic projects, but an active critical and investigative tool, borrowing from, commenting upon, and using therapeutic technique to enrich its practice, and to question contemporary models of treatment. In focussing, not on successful narratives of healing, but on the slippages and frictions between poetry and therapy, these poets attempt to embody an ethical poetics, one that resists a normative performance of healing, and the implied moral imperative to heal, questioning culturally embedded assumptions about the ethics and the efficacy of poetry *as* therapy, and applying timely pressure to both sets of encounter.

CHAPTER ONE
EPISTOLARITY, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CONFESSION

Ben Howard connects the re-emergence of the epistolary form within poetry during the late nineteen fifties to the rising popularity of 'confessional' or self-disclosure narratives during that same period.¹¹⁹ In support of this argument Howard writes of the letter's parallel conventions of 'intimacy' and 'declaration', and the modern epistolary poem's fruitful exploitation of the tension between its public and private traditions. In this contention Howard is substantially correct, yet in his assertion that the chief appeal of the form to confessional poets lay in its offer of a legitimating occasion for self-disclosure, he overlooks the letter's relationship, both formal and informal, to psychoanalytic practice.¹²⁰ An examination of the intimate link between poetic and psychotherapeutic practice for the poets of the confessional movement is necessary, therefore, in order to understand the ways in which contemporary poets are using the epistolary form to engage with various aspects of unconsoled experience.

Both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath developed, throughout their lives, extensive epistolary practices, practices intimately related to their body of published work, and rooted in their direct experiences of psychoanalysis, and of various forms of psychotherapy.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Howard (p.3)

¹²⁰ Howard (p.17).

¹²¹ Dr.Tanu Gupta and Anju Bala Sharma, 'Confessional Poetry In The Light Of Psychoanalytic Theory with Special Reference to Sylvia Plath' *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies: Volume 2, Issue 11* (2014) p.112.

Sexton credits her mental breakdown at twenty-nine with her 'rebirth' and emergence as a writer. In 1955 she was hospitalised following a suicide attempt, and it was the psychiatrist who treated her, Dr. Martin Orne, who suggested she 'should write' as a therapeutic strategy.¹²² Orne's intervention became the creative catalyst for Sexton's first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, a seminal text in terms of the confessional movement, and one that contains the important epistolary poem, 'You, Dr. Martin'.¹²³

'You, Dr. Martin' was provoked by Sexton's direct experience of therapy, and constitutes a named unambiguous address to her therapist, mobilizing the therapeutic convention of correspondence between doctor and patient.¹²⁴ The poem emerged alongside a developing epistolary exchange between Sexton and Orne, and contains many of the themes and preoccupations that characterise their formal therapeutic communications, both written and spoken.¹²⁵ Clearly the letter form is not incidental, nor merely aesthetic for Sexton, rather it exists in a very specific creative relationship to her developing poetic practice. To write at all, and for her self-described 'rebirth' to take place, Sexton makes use of a medium that both facilitates and demands particular kinds of charged disclosure, disclosures which may have proved resistant to traditional verse or narrative forms.

¹²² Diane Wood Middlebrook, 'Method in the Madness: Anne Sexton and the Literary Uses of Psychotherapy' *Times Literary Supplement* (18 October, 1991) pp.13-14, and Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Vintage Books, 1992).

¹²³ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999) p.3.

¹²⁴ Richard J. Riordan, 'Scriptotherapy: Therapeutic writing as a counselling adjunct' *Journal of Counselling and Development* (Jan 1996) p.263.

¹²⁵ Dr. Dawn Skorczewski, *An Accident of Hope: The Therapy Tapes of Anne Sexton* (Routledge, 2012) pp.1-12.

In 'You, Dr. Martin' Sexton's named addressee is inflected with ambivalence. His omniscient presence is described as being 'an oracular eye in our nest', with his 'third eye' moving among and lighting up 'the separate boxes' where Sexton and her fellow patients 'sleep or cry'.¹²⁶ Orne is also variously described as a 'God' and a 'prince', in contrast to Sexton and her fellow patients who are birds or bees, 'foxes', 'children', and later, 'foxy children' hybrids.¹²⁷ This conception of Orne is complex, suggesting both paternalistic and sinister dimensions. The figure of the doctor is detached and all-seeing, and his scrutiny may be benevolent, like a loving God, or autocratic and capricious like an absolute monarch. Sexton and her fellow 'foxes' are both vulnerable beings that require the love and protection of this kindly father, and feral creatures who pit their cunning against his in an animal resistance to being tamed.

Throughout the poem Sexton oscillates from suspicion and potentially murderous hostility to idolization and dependence. In the third stanza, for example, she states casually, almost coyly, that in the asylum there are 'no knives / for cutting your throat', while in the fourth she begins with the bold declaration 'Of course, I love you'.¹²⁸

'You, Dr. Martin' is a nuanced, disturbing and important confessional poem, exemplifying many of the characteristics most commonly associated with the genre: that which M.L. Rosenthal identifies as the 'poetry of suffering'. Doctor, self, and text move in an interplay of charged disclosure; an intimate witnessing to psychiatric disturbance or private, personal

¹²⁶ Sexton (p.3, line 32).

¹²⁷ Sexton (p.3, lines 27, 38, 7, 27, 34 and line 40 respectively).

¹²⁸ Sexton (p.3 lines 18-19, and line 25 respectively).

pain.¹²⁹ But need 'You, Dr. Martin' have been an *epistolary* poem? Why might Sexton have chosen or been impelled towards this form, and what does this choice tell us about the letter's relationship to confessional poetry?

On a purely practical level, Sexton was a patient enrolled in psychotherapy, specifically, the emerging practice of art therapy, and this involved epistolary exchanges between herself and Orne.¹³⁰ In other words, Sexton's therapeutic epistles and her confessional poetry share a generative spur in therapeutic practice. A close reading of the text supports this, as the poem echoes the ideas, images and themes that emerge from Sexton's formal psychotherapeutic exchanges with Orne, and because the ambivalence evoked within the poem is a staple – almost to the point of cliché – of the therapist-patient relationship.¹³¹

Further, the letter form embodies the contention of trauma studies scholars such as Wendy Cheung, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub that 'testimonies are not monologues'. The work of 'witnessing' to traumatic experience cannot take place in solitude without a present and implicated other to read or to listen.¹³² And Sexton's confessional poem is a work of

¹²⁹ M.L. Rosenthal, 'Poetry as Confession' *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews*, (Persea Books, 1999) pp.109-112.

¹³⁰ Middlebrook (1992), and Middlebrook (2004), also Skorczewski (pp.1-12).

¹³¹ For examples, see Jan Wiener, *The Therapeutic Relationship: Transference, Countertransference, and the Making of Meaning* (Texas A&M University Press, 2009) pp.9-25, Melissa L. Button, Henny A. Westra, Kimberley M. Hara & Adi Aviram, 'Disentangling the Impact of Resistance and Ambivalence on Therapy Outcomes in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Generalized Anxiety Disorder' *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* 44:1 (2015) pp.44-53.

¹³² Felman, Dori Laub (p.70).

'witnessing', specifically to her experience of mental illness and to her survival within the psychiatric institutions that attempted to treat her.

It can hardly be coincidence that many of the major confessional poets made significant epistolary contributions to the development of the genre, or that these significant poems emerged during moments of acute psychological distress. Robert Lowell's early confessional salvo, 'Waking in the Blue', was edited for publication in *Life Studies* (1959), but its first iteration, written in 1958, was tellingly entitled 'To Ann Adden (Written during the first week of my voluntary stay at McLean's Mental Hospital).'¹³³ Adden was a psychiatric fieldworker, whom Lowell met while a patient at the Boston Psychopathic Hospital. During a period of psychosis Lowell became convinced he was in love with her, an episode he revisits in the poem 'Mania: 1958', published in *Notebook 1967-68*.¹³⁴ Lowell's epistolary poem, then, like Sexton's, erupts from inside the psychiatric system and the therapeutic process; borrows its formal conventions, and works through the difficult act of witnessing in direct address to another. As with 'You, Dr. Martin', Lowell's poem also serves to embody and expose the web of complex emotions that exist between patient and therapist, other and self, writer and reader. Adden may be the intended recipient of Lowell's letter, the 'you' for whom he sets down his experiences, but she is forever excluded from Lowell's fraternity of the 'ossified young', a phrase that invokes both retardation and inaccessibility, as well as a sense of temporal dislocation. Lowell belongs to the sea of 'indigenous faces' he conjures, as if the psychiatric institution, or indeed, psychosis itself, were a nation state, an ethnicity, a rarefied atmosphere in which only certain specially adapted creatures can survive.

¹³³ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (Faber & Faber, 2011) p.15.

¹³⁴ Robert Lowell, *Notebook 1967-68* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) p.89.

The letter is a moment of disclosure that nevertheless embeds an awareness of its limits and its failures either to disclose or to console. The poem's 'you' is continually addressed and gestured towards, but remains, somehow, unreachable. For Sexton, Orne will forever remain as distant and mysterious as God, and for Lowell, mental illness is a metaphorical 'sea' in which he swims or sails, isolated by his own strangeness. The epistolary poem is a Janus-faced form, seeking not only to communicate an experience or emotion, but to manifest the myriad difficulties inherent in doing so. This doubleness of intent, we might usefully compare to Cathy Caruth's notion of 'impossible saying', the idea that trauma creates in those who experience it an imperative necessity to 'witness' or to 'tell' which exists in continuous conflict to the impossibility of meaningfully doing so.¹³⁵

To return to Lowell's text, the poem draws on classical epistolary themes of exile, and the related notions of absence and distance provoked by the form.¹³⁶ Images of seafaring abound in 'Waking in the Blue' from the 'agonised blue' of the window onwards. There are 'harpoons', 'swashbuckling', 'Mayflower screwballs', and the 'French sailor's jersey' in which the speaker 'struts'.¹³⁷ Taken together these images conjure a picture of McLean's Mental Hospital as a latter day 'ship of fools', but they also recall Lowell's epistolary ancestors, most especially the classical Greek poet Ovid, and his letter-poems of banishment and exile written in the first century A.D.¹³⁸ If the classical verse letter has its roots in exile, absence and longing, then the

¹³⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p.10.

¹³⁶ For example, Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹³⁷ Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 2007) p.183, lines 6, 9, 32, 41 and 46 respectively.

¹³⁸ In this Lowell is in good company, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, many poets of the Enlightenment incorporated classical themes into their epistolary imitations of Greek and Roman authors.

epistolary poems of the confessional movement develop this tradition to the exiles and isolations of the soul.

Liz Stanley writes that the letter is a text defined less by its formal conventions than by its 'epistolary intent' or 'letterness'. For Stanley, this intent has its origin and purpose in situations of absence, where people who are separated want to communicate with each other. This absence, traditionally geographical and or temporal, might be fruitfully expanded to encompass other forms of vexed separation, such as emotional estrangement, cultural and social exclusion, or death. In Stanley's 2004 article 'The Epistolarium: On theorizing letters and correspondences', she states that the letter's key irreducible feature is 'its intent to communicate, in writing or a cognate representational medium' with another person somehow removed from the writer.¹³⁹ For the purposes of this enquiry I am considering this 'removal' in its broadest possible sense: psychological, emotional, cultural and social, as well as the purely physical. In 'You, Dr. Martin', Sexton uses direct address both to interrogate and attempt to surmount the distance she experiences between herself and her therapist. In Lowell's 'Waking in the Blue', the speaker is physically 'removed', behind the walls of the mental institution, but is more importantly 'at sea', adrift inside himself. For Sylvia Plath in 'Daddy', the encoded absence is the unequivocal absence of death.¹⁴⁰

These are very different kinds of absence or separation, but all speak to Janet Gurkin Altman's notion of the bridge/ barrier divide inherent to the epistolary form. For Altman, and

¹³⁹ Stanley (p.201-235), and in Liz Stanley, 'The Death of the Letter? Epistolary Intent, Letterness and the Many Ends of Letter-Writing' *Cultural Sociology* Vol 9, Issue 2 (March, 2015) pp.20-255.

¹⁴⁰ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 2002) p.222.

I find this notion persuasive, the threat of separation is ever present by the letter's connective function.¹⁴¹ Indeed, in the articulation and negotiation of various kinds of absence, the poetic projects of Sexton, Lowell, and Plath all engage the letter form's unusual ghostliness. In *Letters to Minela*, Franz Kafka writes that 'writing letters in an intercourse with ghosts', and by no means exclusively the ghost of the addressee.¹⁴² Altman expands upon this notion, positing the scene of the letter writing itself as one of uncanniness; the spectral letter being a kind of wandering wraith, suspended between worlds of meaning as it crosses between writer and reader, its original context and intention only ever imperfectly or obliquely recuperated.¹⁴³ Plath's later letter-poem 'Daddy' exists at the extreme of such spectralness, writing into the posthumous bodily impossibility of a reciprocating addressee.

Jahan Ramazani has described Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy' as a poem of 'parricidal mourning', inextricable from a 'melancholic violence against herself'.¹⁴⁴ Ramazani locates Plath's poem within elegiac tradition, and there will be more to say about its angry and subversive grieving in subsequent chapters, but at this junction it is curious only to note that Ramazani makes no mention of the poem's epistolary intent.¹⁴⁵ For Plath, perhaps even more than for

¹⁴¹ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Ohio State University Press, 1982) p.189.

¹⁴² Franz Kafka, *Letters to Minela* (Vintage Classics, 1992) p.82.

¹⁴³ Altman (p.2). Also see Anthony O' Brien, 'Traffic with Ghosts: Bessie Head's Letters to Women Writers of the Diaspora' *Atlantic Cross-currents: Transatlantiques* Susan Z. Andrade ed. (Africa World Press, 2001) pp.49-66. O' Brien fruitfully expands this notion to encompass the unique uncanniness of the postal system itself.

¹⁴⁴ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (University of Chicago Press, 1994) p.265.

¹⁴⁵ Ramazani (pp.262-292).

Sexton and Lowell, the use of the letter form is not incidental, and it is here worth briefly outlining what qualifies 'Daddy' as an epistolary poem.

Most obviously, 'Daddy' is a poem of direct address to a named and repeatedly invoked poetic 'you'. Further, the poem mobilizes the genuinely private in order to resist lyric-reading expectations of understanding; deploying a referential specificity that cannot be fully decoded by the reader. For example, the lines 'one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal' is only explicable to those familiar with the story of Otto Plath's diabetes, gangrene, foot amputation, and early death. This would apply to very few of Plath's first readers, but serves to signal a relationship and shared network of inferences, from which the reader is ultimately excluded. This strategy of exclusion works to heighten the sense of intimacy between speaker and addressee, but also to prevent the poem from being understood purely as a literary artefact.¹⁴⁶

In 'Daddy' Plath summons a shared past, but also situates herself within time. Duration is repeatedly referenced, creating a sense of the poem not as its own closed system, but

¹⁴⁶ In her essay 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', Barbara Johnson develops Jonathon Culler's notion of 'apostrophe' within lyric poetry, relating it specifically to commemorative address.

Apostrophe, according to Johnson, is an address to an 'absent dead, or inanimate entity' made 'present and animate' through that very act of direct address. Johnson's notion of apostrophe is therefore singularly useful in thinking about referential specificity in Plath's Daddy. Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion' *Diacritics* Spring Vol. 16, No. 1 (1986) p.31. Also see Jonathan Culler, 'Apostrophe', *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Cornell University Press, 1981) pp. 135-54. I also found Lesley Wheeler, 'Heralding the Clear Obscure: Gwendolyn Brooks and Apostrophe' *Callaloo* Winter Vol. 24, No. 1 (2001) pp. 227-235 particularly helpful.

emerging from the unique pressures of the speaker's present moment, and enmeshed in ongoing events external to the poem, partaking of the letter form's inherent sociality.

In *Representing Sylvia Plath*, Jonathan Ellis describes the interconnectedness of Plath's epistolary and poetic projects, stating that 'letters were an important form of dress rehearsal for Plath, a place to test out various roles and voices'.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, Plath had studied letter writing as a student, under the august tutelage of Elizabeth Bishop, so would have understood very early in her career the letter's many complex potentials. Ellis suggests that Plath's epistolary output be read accordingly, not as biographical fragments, but rather as sites and occasions in which identity is created, constructed and mediated through the lens of another. Through her epistolary exchanges, then, Plath is engaged in both discovering and displaying varied versions of her 'self', keenly aware of the letter as a space of mediation and performance. This view is eminently sensible. As Hermione Lee writes, letters may be considered useful supporting evidence in considering the biography of a writer, but only if one bears in mind that a letter is not 'a solitary, independent, free-standing document', but rather 'a mix of fact and fiction, self and other'¹⁴⁸ Or, as Bakhtin states, any utterance is 'half someone else's', and this applies perhaps to letters more than to any other literary genre. After all, quite apart from the presence of the intended recipient, this very public form is also

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Ellis, "'Mailed into space": on Sylvia Plath's letters' *Representing Sylvia Plath* ed. Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain (Cambridge University Press, 2011) p.28.

¹⁴⁸ Hermione Lee, 'Dangerous Letters: A Biographer's Perspective' *Letter Writing Among Poets* ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p.1.

haunted by the traffic of many hands: the postal service, the censor, its potential editors (in the case of literary letters at least), and finally, its unpredictable network of future readers.¹⁴⁹

Plath was doubtless aware of these dimensions, the best evidence for which is her own long-standing practice of collecting, retrieving, editing and archiving her own correspondence, one eye on posterity.¹⁵⁰ But alongside her nuanced understanding of the letter as a literary genre, we must also account for her awareness, and experience of its psychotherapeutic uses.

'Plath's journal letters', write Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, 'show the influence of modernist prose and psychoanalytic thinking.'¹⁵¹ This is certainly true, but more than aesthetic influence, therapeutic experience and therapeutic practice is evident throughout Plath's work, both public (published), and ostensibly private.

Hospitalised numerous times following her first attempted suicide in 1953, Plath spent her life in and out of treatment, receiving both electro-convulsive therapy and psychoanalysis.¹⁵² Initially, she seemed to respond well to this combined approach, returning to college to

¹⁴⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1987) pp.293-294, and David Ellis, *Letter Writing Among Poets*, ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh University Press, 2015) Introduction.

¹⁵⁰ Ellis (p.29), also Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volumes 1-2* (Faber & Faber, 2017), and Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* (Faber & Faber, 2011).

¹⁵¹ Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, 'Introduction', *Representing Sylvia Plath* ed. Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain (Cambridge University Press, 2011) pp.1-10.

¹⁵² Connie Ann Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, (Greenwood Publishing, 2004), p.53, 80.

complete her degree in the spring of 1955, following an extended stay at McLean's Mental Hospital.¹⁵³

Many of Plath's journal entries from around this period bare the influence of psychoanalytic ideas and the psychotherapeutic strategies learnt while undergoing the 'talking cure'.¹⁵⁴ These entries present Plath as strikingly self-aware, nowhere more so than in her 'Letter to a Demon', written in October, 1957:

Last night I felt the sensation I have been reading about to no avail in James: The sick, soul-annihilating flux of fear in my blood switching its current to defiant fight. I could not sleep, although tired, and lay feeling my nerves shaved to pain & the groaning inner voice: Oh, you can't teach, can't do anything. Can't write, can't think.¹⁵⁵

The 'letter' is significant, not only for its arresting articulacy on the subject of depression, but also for its merging of poetic and epistolary craft. Through the tight internal rhyming of 'annihilate', 'defiant', 'flight' and 'write', Plath plays clipped precision against the rhapsodic surge of her long, over-spilling sentences: 'I could not sleep, although tired, and lay feeling my nerves shaved to pain & the groaning inner voice: Oh, you can't teach, can't do anything.' The effect is of painful restraint, a masterful, though laboured reigning-in of almost overwhelming chaos. Characteristic phrases such as the alliterative 'flux of fear', the

¹⁵³ Kirk (p.47).

¹⁵⁴ Jeanine M. Vivona, 'From Developmental Metaphor to Developmental Model: The Shrinking Role of Language in the Talking Cure' *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* Vol. 54 (2006).

¹⁵⁵ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (Knopf Doubleday, 2013) p.175

disturbing 'shaved to pain' foreshadow the fruition of Plath's most profound poetic achievement, the creation of her distinctive 'Ariel Voice'.¹⁵⁶ 'Letter to a demon' is also important in that it links Plath's epistolary output to her therapeutic experience, embodying the staple psychotherapeutic strategy of writing to, or addressing, one's illness as an external invading force, separate from one's self.¹⁵⁷

We can further trace Plath's indebtedness to psychoanalytic practice and reading on page 447 of her journals, where she references reading Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia', and relates it specifically to her own writing:

...the "vampire" metaphor Freud uses, "draining the ego": that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: mother's clutch.¹⁵⁸

In a recent essay, Laure De Nervaux acknowledges the importance of psychoanalytic 'refashioning' of the addressee in the poems of late sixties confessional poets, with particular reference to Plath. De Nervaux states:

The literary origin of psychoanalytical concepts endows them with a fundamental instability which Plath fully exploits, artfully moving from the scientific side to the theatrical one [of psychoanalysis]. This is why the "you" of Plath's poem ['Daddy'] is a

¹⁵⁶ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, (Faber & Faber, 2010), and Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals' *Grand Street* Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1982) pp.86-99.

¹⁵⁷ Riordan, Richard J, 'Scriptotherapy: Therapeutic writing as a counselling adjunct' *Journal of Counselling and Development* (Jan, 1996).

¹⁵⁸ Plath (2013) p.447.

highly unstable entity. The speaker recreates herself and the persons she addresses, turning them into mythological or theatrical characters at the very moment she claims to be deciphering, exposing their true nature. The Freudian family romance offers the script for a fantasmic rewriting of the poet's biography, turning the "I" and its addressees into allegorical figures.¹⁵⁹

From the above examples we see the epistolary form is central to Plath's poetics, and has a profound relationship to her experience and articulation of crisis, pressure, and pain. As critic George Steiner writes of 'Daddy', it 'achieves the classic art of generalisation, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all.'¹⁶⁰ This skilful navigation between public and private images or utterances, is something that Plath is able to manipulate adroitly through use of the letter form.

A wealth of scholarship has long existed exploring the psychoanalytic dimensions of 'Daddy'. For example, writing in *Concerning Poetry* in 1978 Guinevara A. Nance and Judith P. Jones state that Plath's poem represents a 'dramatization of the process of psychic purgation in the

¹⁵⁹ Laure De Nervaux, "The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Medusa" *E-rea* 5.1 (2007): <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/186> This enquiry delves deeper into the question of personal mythology in subsequent chapters, thus Nervaux's reading of Plath is a particularly relevant one. Also see Lynda K. Buntzen, 'Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths' *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* ed. Professor Jo Gill (Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp.36-51

¹⁶⁰ George Steiner, 'Dying is an Art' *The Art of Sylvia Plath: a symposium* ed. Charles Newman (Faber & Faber, 1970) pp.211-212.

speaker', explaining that 'Both psychoanalysis and the religious rite of exorcism have regarded this process of confrontation with the "trauma" or the "demon" as potentially curative [...] from whichever perspective Plath viewed the process, she has her persona confront – in a way almost relive – her childhood terror [of her father]'.¹⁶¹ In her essay "'O the tangles of that old bed": fantasies of incest and the "Daddy" narrative in Ariel', Lynda K. Bundtzen describes the piece as symbolizing 'the end of his [Plath's father's] tyranny over her creative life. A figurative amputation (a castration?) of paternal influence.'¹⁶² Plath herself, when introducing the poem for BBC radio in 1962 described it as an explicitly psychoanalytic story, 'spoken by a girl with an Elektra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God'.¹⁶³ It is important to note here, however, that Plath does not conflate herself or her father with the speaker or the subject of the poem.

The scope and limits of a purely biographical reading of Plath's work is something I will return to in subsequent chapters. What is important for an understanding of 'Daddy' as a significant epistolary contribution to confessional poetry is Plath's deep and sustained engagement with the letter form, in both its literary and therapeutic incarnations, throughout her writing life. To write a letter to an estranged, deceased or abusive parent is a recognised psychotherapeutic technique, and it is reasonable to assume that Plath would have been aware of this.¹⁶⁴ Clinical literature states that the letter form is particularly useful

¹⁶¹ Guinevara A. Nance and Judith P. Jones, 'Doing Away with Daddy: Exorcism and Sympathetic Magic in Plath's Poetry' *Concerning Poetry* XI, I (1978) pp.75-81.

¹⁶² Lynda K. Bundtzen, "'O the tangles of that old bed": Fantasies of incest and the "Daddy" narrative in Ariel' *Representing Sylvia Plath* ed. Sally Bayley, Tracy Brain (Cambridge University Press, 2011) p.54.

¹⁶³ Eileen M. Aird, *Sylvia Plath: her Life and Work* (Harper & Row, 1975), p.73.

¹⁶⁴ Kirk (2004).

for accessing experiences and emotions otherwise 'resistant to disclosure'.¹⁶⁵

Psychotherapists cite the letter's perceived privacy, however artificially constructed, as the mechanism by which 'permission' to speak is granted, and disclosure is achieved.

Plath's Journal entries detail much of her psychoanalytic work with her therapist Dr. Beuscher, and reading these it is certainly possible to find affinities between the themes and concerns that emerge during her formal therapy sessions and the dark, Elektra-like contents of 'Daddy':

Got into some dark things with Beuscher: facing dark and terrible things [...] If I really think I killed and castrated my father may all my dreams of deformed and tortured people be my guilty visions of him and fears of punishment for me?¹⁶⁶

The letter seems to afford Plath an opportunity to speak, to address her father at her most furious and hurt in a way her more controlled, more conventional *Ariel* pieces do not; the epistolary form appears to open up a space of privileged disclosure similar to that of the

¹⁶⁵ David Read Johnson Ph.D and Hadar Lubin, *Principles and Techniques of Trauma-Centered Psychotherapy* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2015) p.274, and Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p.9. For examples contemporaneous with Plath, and illustrative of the way these ideas were circulating, see also: T. Landsman, 'The therapeutic use of written materials' *American Psychologist* 5 (1951) p.347. Also A. Ellis, 'Some use of printed, written, and recorded words in psychotherapy' *The use of written communications in psychotherapy* ed. L. Pearson (Springfield, 1965) pp. 21-29.

¹⁶⁶ Plath (2013), p.301.

psychotherapeutic encounter. The daughter in 'Daddy' could 'hardly speak', but the space of the letter grants her both the permission and the confidence to do so.¹⁶⁷

The direct address towards the person of Otto Plath as 'Daddy' encodes familial intimacy, but also speaks to the unequal power-relationship between father and daughter. Through her use of the childish register, Plath appears vulnerable, infantilised, and shrunken, trapped in the amber of her childhood, her father's shadow, or, as she puts it, in the:

...black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo...¹⁶⁸

While her father, on the other hand, swells to enormous mytho-poetic proportions. The language of 'Daddy' is an odd mixture of childish fear and grownup venom. Plath's registers and rhythms slip; her cadences oscillate between nursery-rhyme crooning and avenging adult fury, accentuating her speaker's reliving or regression into childhood by using the baby-talk of 'Achoo' 'chuffing', and 'gobbledygoo', her 'pretty red heart' bitten in two. These are juxtaposed with images of torture, war, mass death and gothic horror: 'Dachau', towns rolled flat by Panzer tanks, the swastika, the fascist 'boot in the face', the stake through the heart. In this blurring of adult and childish language, adult and childish perspectives, Plath's 'Daddy' embodies psychoanalytic notions of 'trauma time', that is that psychological trauma is the disruption to or breaking of the unifying thread of temporality, or, as Walter Benjamin

¹⁶⁷ Plath 'Daddy' (p.49, line 24).

¹⁶⁸ Plath 'Daddy' (p.49, lines 2-5).

would have it, the 'homogenous structure of experience'.¹⁶⁹ Trauma manifests, according to Freud, through its traces, that is, by its aftermath, its effects of repetition and deferral.¹⁷⁰ As Plath's trauma resurfaces through psychoanalysis, her childhood intrudes into the present, dislocating her in time. These themes of dislocation and delay are key to thinking about 'Daddy' as an epistolary text with a specific relationship to psychological stress or trauma, because delayed temporality is also a significant feature of epistolary contact. As previously noted, epistolary time embeds delay, and encompasses the subtle slippages of meaning that occur between a letter's being sent and its being received, filtered, interpreted and complicated by intervening events.¹⁷¹ Epistolary time is deviant, disruptive and plural, and the implied context is often lost, skewed or rendered irrecoverable. The epistolary form, then, may be considered uniquely suitable for articulating trauma.

'The Confessional poem is the autobiography of crisis' writes Steven Gould Axelrod in 1976.¹⁷² It is my contention that moments of epistolary eruption in poetry are also explicitly connected to the experience and expression of crisis. I have taken the epistolary contributions of three canonical confessional poets as evidence for this, but one may equally consider epistolarity as the organizing conceit in a large number of American post-war poetry collections, such as *A Street in Bronzeville* by Gwendolyn Brooks (1945), *Losses* by

¹⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969) pp.155-200.

¹⁷⁰ Gregory Bistoën, Stijn Vanheule, and Stef Craps, 'Nachträglichkeit: A Freudian perspective on delayed traumatic reactions' in *Theory & Psychology* Vol 24, Issue 5 (April, 2014) pp. 668-687.

¹⁷¹ Altman (1982).

¹⁷² Steven Gould Axelrod, 'Plath's and Lowell's Last Words', in *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 11 (Oct, 1976), p.5.

Randall Jarrell (1945), and *A Cold Spring* by Elizabeth Bishop (1955).¹⁷³ Not usually collected under the umbrella of ‘confessionalism’, it is nevertheless telling that so many epistolary projects emerged at such a pivotal and fraught moment in American social history, between the end of Second World War and the paranoid flux of the Cold War. These poems can be seen in light of Adorno’s injunction that modern poetry be the ‘philosophical sundial of history’, inscribing and displaying the special intersection of ideological and social pressures that rendered traditional forms of verse inadequate.¹⁷⁴ What was needed, according to Bishop herself, was an ‘original act of pretence’, a poetry peculiarly susceptible to registering the anxieties, insults and shocks of a climate dominated by nationalistic triumphalism on the one hand, and endemic suspicion on the other.¹⁷⁵ These epistolary projects may be read as ways of resisting these nationalistic scripts; of registering the presence, and reasserting the voices of those neglected, erased or subsumed by the dominant cultural discourse.¹⁷⁶

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¹⁷³ Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street in Bronzeville* (Harper, 1945), Randall Jarrell, *Losses* (Harcourt, Brace, 1948), Elizabeth Bishop, *A Cold Spring* (Houghton Mifflin, 1955) respectively.

¹⁷⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘On Lyric Poetry and Society’ *Notes to Literature, European Perspectives* vol. 1 ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, 1991) p.37-54.

¹⁷⁵ Heather Treseler, ‘Lyric Letters: Elizabeth Bishop’s Epistolary Poems,’ Ph.D diss. thesis (University of Notre Dame, 2010) p.116.

¹⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that recent critical treatment Brooks, Jarrell and Bishop has focussed on the presence of apostrophe in their work, with Siobhan Phillips linking this specifically to Bishop’s epistolary intent. See Siobhan Phillips, ‘Elizabeth Bishop and the Ethics of Correspondence’ *Modernism/modernity* Volume 19, Number 2 (April 2012) p.345, Wheeler (2001), and Johnson (p.218).

Altman, echoing Kafka, defines letter writing as ‘truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee, but also with one’s own phantom, which evolves under one’s own hand in the very letter one is writing’¹⁷⁷ Letter writing is an uncanny art, one in which the hauntological presence of others, or otherness, is intimately inscribed.¹⁷⁸ It is precisely this ‘communication with spectres’ that has led to the letter becoming a scriptotherapeutic staple, and an ideal tool for the delicate archaeology of psychological trauma. It is also what makes the form so suggestive and potentially subversive, something that I will return to in subsequent chapters on the poetics of post-colonial grieving, and the epistolary poem’s counter-narrative potential.¹⁷⁹

Using the epistolary contributions of major confessional poets, I have demonstrated the epistle’s complex relationship to the poetics of pressure, crisis, trauma and pain. However, to fully understand the letter’s special significance to the contemporary poetics of the unconsolated experience, and to investigate the epistle’s place and role within my own creative practice, it is necessary to examine how contemporary poets are mobilising the epistolary form as spaces of discursive investigation into their own lived experiences of therapy, and in doing so, shifting the focus of epistolary disclosure from confession and towards testimony.

¹⁷⁷ Altman (p.2).

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (Routledge, 2006) pp.10, 51, 161. Derrida coins the term to describe the persistence of the idea of utopian revolution despite its actual eradication from politics and history, so Marxist ideas will continue to ‘haunt’ Western consciousness even after their ‘death’. In a similar way, the presence of an implied other haunts the letter form.

¹⁷⁹ The term ‘scriptotherapy’ was first defined by Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) preface, xii.

In Melissa Lee-Houghton's acclaimed *Sunshine*, for example, and in Sam Sax's award-winning debut collection *Madness*, contemporary poets echo the preoccupations of the confessional movement by positioning the poet as a person in therapy, as one who suffers and articulates trauma.¹⁸⁰ The literary criticism that attends this kind of writing echoes that which attached to the confessional poets of the fifties and sixties, citing a poetic voice that borrows its authority from trauma as the genre's defining weaknesses.¹⁸¹ Trauma-critical discourses, both popular and scholarly, argue for these projects as complicit in exemplifying the mass transmission of emotional pain, engendering a damaging psychological compunction to 'share', and in the rise to cultural ascendancy of the traumatic victim. In this trauma-critical reading of literature, trauma itself becomes a politically respectable and universally applicable signifier of identity; more dangerous yet, it becomes an unassailable moral category.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Melissa Lee-Houghton, *Sunshine* (Pinned in the Margins, 2017), Sam Sax, *Madness* (Penguin, 2017).

¹⁸¹ '[in confessional poetry] Introversion seems to have triumphed over experiment. The poet gazes with obsessive narcissism at his own reflection in the mirror of art.' Edward Lucie-Smith writing in *The Critical Quarterly*, 1964 and quoted in Jo Gill, 'Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry' *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol. 50, No.1 (2004). See also Brian Henry, 'Louise Gluck's Monumental Narcissism' *Contemporary Poetry Review* (2003) and Janette Ayadhi 'Writers and Narcissism': <https://poetryschool.com/essays/writers-and-narcissism/>

¹⁸² Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (Psychology Press, 2004) pp.40, p.68. Also, Michael Fitzpatrick, *The Tyranny of Health: Doctors and the Regulation of Lifestyle* (Routledge, 2001) p.73. Also, Stephanie Bird, *Comedy and Trauma in Germany and Austria After 1945: The Inner Side of Mourning* (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2018), and Didier Fassin, Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry Into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

I argue that this interaction with therapeutic discourses and strategies is not narcissistic, nor does it implicate the poets in a pathologised reading of experience. Rather, I see this body of work as representing a complex dynamic relationship to trauma: these poems are not a substitute for or an offshoot of therapy, but a space of discursive investigation into therapy's modes, methods, trajectories and outcomes; an opportunity for the poet to engage and debate their experience of therapy and the people who administer it.

In Melissa Lee-Houghton's *Sunshine*, for example, the two poems 'Letter to Dr. Ali Concerning Our Suicide Pact' and 'Letter to Dr. Moosa Regarding My Inconstant Heart' both utilize and subvert the established therapeutic practice of written correspondence between therapist and patient.¹⁸³ Existing as they do within the context of a published poetry collection, the letters triumphantly resist a diagnostic ascription of meaning whilst destabilizing the entrenched hierarchy that exists between doctor and patient. 'I wonder if you read poetry' Lee-Houghton muses, 'if you / know who I am, if you've Googled me', suggesting that something essential of the self remains undisclosed and undiscovered by the processes of therapy; suggesting that in her ability to withhold this self the patient wields a secret and subversive power.¹⁸⁴ Lee-Houghton's letters manifest and dramatize the uneasy relationship between herself and her therapists, incorporating ambivalence or antagonism to the practice of reading as a clinical and diagnostic exercise. The poems work to sift notions about where textual meaning is located; how it is constructed and received, and by whom. From inside the framework of her therapeutic program the poems debate and refuse a clinical interpretation

¹⁸³ David Read Johnson Ph.D and Hadar Lubin, *Principles and Techniques of Trauma-Centered Psychotherapy* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2015) p.226.

¹⁸⁴ Lee-Houghton (p.31).

or ascription of meaning. They dispute and interrogate therapeutic language and ideas, continually juxtaposing lyric and clinical descriptions of events and feelings, often undermining the doctor's flat, textureless litany of observable symptoms with rhapsodic recitals of inner states, or pre-empting and appropriating the reductive language of diagnosis:

Who do you see when I sit in your beige Bauhaus armchair –
weight loss, weight gain,
irrationality, irritability –¹⁸⁵

By using the bloodless, 'neutral' language of the DSM handbook Lee-Houghton tells her reader that Moosa recognises her as a set of symptoms, not as a name or as a person. By conflating the human 'who' with a depersonalised 'what', Lee-Houghton shows how clinical encounter and the clinical eye can reduce human sympathy and erode identity.¹⁸⁶ Lee-Houghton's own poetic description of her condition stands in embodied contrast to that attributed to her doctor, and argues for a way of relating to and understanding 'madness' that accounts for the female body as inseparable from the mind:

...my diagnosis

¹⁸⁵ Lee-Houghton (p.31).

¹⁸⁶ By 'clinical encounter', I am talking about the contemporary process of receiving therapy, a process Lee-Houghton conceptualises as routinized and remote, heavily reliant on pre-existing tick-box categories. By 'clinical gaze' I reference Michelle Foucault's, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973) p.64. Foucault writes about the way the clinician's eye is invested with expert power to the extent that the subjective feelings and experiences of patients are often ignored or erased.

catches all the running breast-milk,
running blood, dripping arteries, the sweat
from the withdrawals you eagerly denounce,
the come I inversely suck
into all my holy parts...¹⁸⁷

Although Lee-Houghton's work is embedded and emerges from therapeutic practice, her poetry is not an uncritical embrace of therapeutic language, themes and forms. This ambivalence is something I communicate throughout my own poetry, particularly in the 'gentle reader' section of *narrowcasting*, which references or addresses 'jenny the therapy' directly.¹⁸⁸ These poems are aware of the formal relationship between poetry and therapy, and the ways in which poetry has been used by therapists as a diagnostic tool for identifying a range of mental health conditions. This is a feature that unites the work of many contemporary poets writing around themes of mental illness and trauma. In identifying this tendency within contemporary poetry I am able to situate my own practice as part of an emerging cross-continental cohort of writers who remain collectively unidentified by existing research. For Melissa Lee-Houghton, and also for American performance poet Sam Sax, lyric language intersects with and complicates clinical discourses of health, and symptomatic

¹⁸⁷ Lee-Houghton (lines 59-64, p.33).

¹⁸⁸ 'jenny' is referenced in poems 2, 4, 7, 8, 16 and 21 of the 'for the dead' sequence of *narrowcasting*, and is directly addressed as an interlocutor in poems 4 and 31 of the 'gentle reader' sequence, appearing again in poem's 33 and 34, in which the speaker takes an antagonistic position to her therapeutic pronouncements, and enlists her reader in a pact against her advice. The figure of 'jenny' functions as both a real named addressee (my therapist), and as a figure for psychotherapeutic practice and ideas in general.

readings of experience. Both poets, working in very different traditions, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, appropriate and repurpose clinical rhetoric towards poetic ends. In the next chapter I will discuss how I manifest this approach within my own poetic practice, but it is first worthwhile to look briefly at Sax's 2017 collection *Madness*, so as to map the relationships between this work and other poetic explorations of trauma whose affinities have yet to be explored.

In *Madness* Sax uses Appendix C from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* to set off each of the book's four sections. The poetry that follows becomes a way of reading against this text, of augmenting and problematizing its embedded perceptions. Most of the poems in *Madness* are titled from scientific names for mental illnesses, or after psychiatric treatment techniques. In 'On Conversion Therapy' Sax turns his attention to the historical complicity of therapeutic practice in compounding and initiating socially sanctioned trauma perpetrated against LGBTQ people:

hypnosis : group talk : cocaine : bladder washing : electroconvulsive shock therapy :
strychnine : chemical & nonchemical castration [...] ¹⁸⁹

In 'Satyriasis' the poem is used to (re)generate imaginative agency and authorship of experience, contrasting the clinicians' 'morbid' or 'abnormal' interpretation of states and behaviours with a poetic evocation of unbridled desire for life. In his opening lines, Sax evokes Whitman's expansive transcendental 'I', but constrains this sprawling vision of self within a clinical, pathologizing scene:

¹⁸⁹ Sam Sax, *Madness* (Penguin, 2017) p.57.

... i am large
i contain mitochondria clubbed
into cells, i contain blue
cellophane shoved in my mouth,
i contain unnatural lubricants,
the smell of latex & fennel o
doctor, what a white coat you
have. o father what sweet rope...
o government how absurd
to believe desire requires
governance. keep giving lust
an ugly name, i'll keep making it
sing...¹⁹⁰

In this approach Sax's work echoes both Lee-Houghton, and his U.S contemporary Rob Halpern, as erotic longing and institutional violence intersect in the individual colonized both by discourse, and the systems that produce that discourse. For Lee-Houghton, the discourse

¹⁹⁰ 'I am large, I contain multitudes' begins Whitman's *Song of Myself*. See Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary* ed. Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill (University of Iowa Press, 2016) p.180. Sam Sax (p.30). It is interesting to note that Both Sax and Halpern engage with Whitman's work. The essay 'The Erotic Wounds of War' by Paisley Rekdal is particularly useful in understanding Halpern's critical engagement with Whitman and with American military discourse. Rekdal writes 'For Halpern, it is Whitman's use of affective language when applied to soldiers' bodies that becomes an insidious classic model for various modes of sentimental militarism.' Paisley Rekdal, 'The Erotic Wounds of War' *New England Review* Vol. 39, Iss. 4 (2018) p.189.

in question is patriarchal and clinical; for Halpern it is that of the military-industrial complex: as the body of Halpern's detainee is physically penetrated and incarcerated by military violence, so that penetration finds its analogue in language, the ultimate expression of which is the autopsy report. For Sax, it is the discourse of psychiatry itself that is interrogated. In reading these various poetic projects through their use of clinical discourses, it is possible to perceive connections between poets whose modes and projects are generally considered mutually exclusive because of a critical focus on form.

For contemporary poets concerned with the articulation of trauma and the unconsolidated experience, the letter form is mobilized, not to elicit an autobiographical reading of experience, but to create a discursive space of investigation into both the failures and affordances of therapeutic practice; its modes, methods and outcomes. By continually constructing then breaching the terms of its own intimacy, offering and then refusing disclosure through various paratactical strategies, the poems create a unique, unstable territory in which multiple kinds of intimacy and authority – bodily, textual, temporal – intersect with each other.

A desire to identify and situate my own creative practice within a wider poetic cohort drives my reading across a broad range of contemporary poets engaging directly and critically with their experience of therapeutic encounter. These poets share a use of the letter form as a space in which to complicate the notion of catharsis, and the moral imperative to 'heal' embedded in so much public discourse surrounding art and writing therapy. Language emerges from these pieces not as a therapeutic 'tool', but as a signpost to its own curative deficiencies; to the sites and situations that are devoid of resolution.¹⁹¹ In this way the texts

¹⁹¹ By 'curative deficiencies' I mean to counter the notion that the articulate transfer of emotion is

advocate for a radical model of witnessing, one that rejects conventional narrative demands imposed either socially or clinically. In doing so the poems apply pressure to practice, both therapeutic and poetic; in hybridizing forms and blurring the boundaries between discourses the texts test their embedded assumptions, and call for a reawakening to the radical potentials of language and language encounters.

The poems of the unconsolated experience posit epistolary space as a site of social protest, in which an urgent address to an implicated world takes place. As therapeutic techniques and themes infiltrate literary spaces and cohorts it is possible to understand the texts not as testaments to personal pain alone, but as a lively and critical discourse on the aims and outcomes of therapeutic practice in our particular contemporary world.

The notion that trauma can be employed as a means of political protest, or as an active engagement with the wider social world is not new. Contemporary poetic cohorts expand upon ideas established by the previous generation of predominantly feminist poets and scholars.¹⁹² Adrienne Rich, in particular, noted the development from ‘confession’ to

inevitably curative or healing. A major contention of this thesis is that there are sites and occasions where language cannot adequately accommodate or express traumatic experience. I also wish to push back against embedded cultural assumptions about the beneficial power of eloquence. Language acts also have the capacity to devastate, to oppress, to coerce, to compound and prop up the originary trauma. How can language hope to provide a ‘cure’ when discourse itself is implicated in producing the wound?

¹⁹² Mary Kate Azcuy, ‘Persona, Trauma and Survival in Louise Glück’s Postmodern, Mythic, Twenty-First-Century “October”’ *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry* ed. Anne Karhio and Seán Crosson (Springer, 2010) p.33. See also Louise Glück, ‘The idea of Courage’ *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Ecco,

'testimony' within her own work, seeking in the latter to bear witness to traumatic experiences that held meaning far beyond the self. This important distinction lends weight to the idea that rather than making a fetish out of individual misery a poetics of trauma can offer a challenge to the present moment and the institutions and perceptions that govern it.

This chapter has explored how the epistolary form's emergence within confessional and contemporary poetic cohorts constitutes not only a response to traumatic experience, but a direct engagement with therapeutic practice, emerging from inside the pressured spaces of psychoanalytic encounter. For the poets of the unconsolated experience, the direct address of the letter is used to interrogate diverse experiences of therapy, and to inflect the hierarchical relationship between therapist and patient with overt ambivalence; to introduce dissonance into clinical discourses. In the next chapter I will continue to explore the intersections between poetry and therapy, but with particular emphasis on the notion of performance. It is my contention that poetic and therapeutic practices are mutually indebted in ways that are often overlooked by the existing literature.

Through the lens of my own creative practice, the next chapter will examine the affinities shared by poetry and by therapy across models of listening, reading and performing uniquely attuned to the cadences and rhythms of traumatic experience.

1994) p.23, and Adrienne Rich, 'Online Essays and Letters' *Modern American Poetry*:

www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/onlineessays.htm.

CHAPTER TWO

PERFORMANCE, POETRY AND THERAPY: SHARED MODELS OF LISTENING

That there is an interaction between the historical practice of lament and certain coteries within contemporary performance poetry is abundantly clear, and in the subsequent chapter I will focus upon the work of feminist poets Joelle Taylor and Alana O' Kelly to render this relationship explicit.¹⁹³ One could also consider the work of Amiri Baraka in this context.¹⁹⁴ Baraka's layered sonic spaces interrogate alongside the literal, systemic violence of colonialism, a colonial tendency towards the privileging of written text in literary studies, and his radically 'situated' verbal art emerges from a specific, and highly pressurised, political and cultural context.¹⁹⁵ All three poets echo the traditional lament in their establishment – through performative strategy – of a shared discursive space where 'memory, mourning and protest' are 'inextricably located.'¹⁹⁶

This chapter will first consider how a poetics of unconsoled experience might speak to performance in other, less readily apparent ways. This portion of my research is particularly

¹⁹³ Joelle Taylor, *Songs My Enemy Taught Me* (Out-Spoken Press, 2017). See also, Kate Antosik-Parsons, "'Caoineadhnamairbh": Vocalising Memory and Otherness in the Early Performances of Alanna O'Kelly' *Nordic Irish Studies* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Dalarna University Centre for Irish Studies, 2014).

¹⁹⁴ Amiri Baraka in *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* ed. William Harris (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2009). Although Baraka is a poet in whose work I have long been interested, Taylor and O' Kelly are more germane to a consideration of my own practice, which is indebted to a very particular U.K feminist performance culture.

¹⁹⁵ John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Indiana University Press, 1995) p.28.

¹⁹⁶ Angela Bourke, 'More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry' *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* ed. Joan Newlon Radner (University of Illinois Press, 1993) p.55.

stimulated by my own creative practice, which serves as the intersection between various discourses of performance, and models of listening. It is through practice that I first expose the affinities between the modes and projects typically ascribed to American Language poetry, and those of psychoanalysis. This chapter contends that there are significant and telling parallels between Language poetry's model of listening, and the model of listening espoused by therapeutic and psychoanalytic discourses.

Although much research has been done to establish the link between psychotherapy and performance through the lens of theatre and the dramatic arts – an especially useful example being the work of Lisa Baraitser and Simon Bayly – and although the shared territories of poetry and psychoanalysis have been extensively explored through the discourses of psychoanalytic feminism in particular, the close relationship between the *performance of* poetry and psychotherapy remains under-investigated.¹⁹⁷ Provoked by the work of Julia Kristeva in both *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, and by Lyotard's notion of the 'disreal space' to support close readings from a variety of poetic projects, this chapter demonstrates the affinities that exist between poetic and psychotherapeutic practices, with a specific focus on their shared models of listening.¹⁹⁸ This is an area largely unexplored by existing research and constitutes an original intervention into knowledge.

¹⁹⁷ Lisa Baraitser Simon and Bayly, 'Now and Then: Psychotherapy and the rehearsal process' *Psychoanalysis and Performance* ed. Adrian Kear and Patrick Campbell (Routledge 2001).

¹⁹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution in Poetic Language* (Columbia University Press, 1984), and *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Columbia University Press, 1984). I am influenced in particular by Kristeva's notion that poetry and poetic language represent a shattering of signification, and that this shattering is the key to estranging perception and thus thought. This

At this stage it is useful to ask what relevance does such research into models of listening have for an enquiry into text-based epistolary practice. It is my contention that the epistolary form in poetry creates a space in which these intimate and attentive models of 'listening' also become models of reading; with its connection to the material world the letter form conjures the tangible traces of bodily inscription more legibly than other literary forms: the saliva that sticks the envelope down, the hand that holds the pen, the hand that bares the letter to the post box. The letter form thus invokes the embodied presence of the speaker, and the scene of speaking, more than other poetic genres.

Through the use of direct, yet ambiguous address, reader participation is signalled to a greater degree than in any other forms of poetry; in epistolary space the reader becomes auditor, confessor, analyst and/or witness. It is not a passive model of reading, but one that requires participation and attentiveness to the textures and cadences of the epistolary voice. This epistolary voice is necessarily mediated through printed text, but is more convincingly and deliberately evoked because the epistolary form is at once both literary and private. In the intimate, confessional space of the letter the reader becomes part of a complex dialogue, sensitised to the nuances and long chains of associative meanings that thread through the text, and ultimately are jointly responsible for the co-creation of its meaning.

transformational process is, for Kristeva, at the heart of both poetic writing and psychoanalysis. My understanding, of both the poem and of the epistolary space as 'disreal' is further shaped by my understanding of Lyotard. In my reflective journals I spend some time considering whether the letter can be truly 'disreal', if we consider all the material traces of the world a letter carries. I also pause to wonder what is served in translating everything into fantasy, ignoring the 'external world'? Deleuze calls this 'botching the real'. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (Continuum, 2004) p.168.

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All poetry shares with psychoanalysis a concern for the patterns, textures and cadences of saying; an emphasis upon the physicality of speech. However, it is Language poetry that has perhaps most explicitly applied sustained critical attention to poetry as 'stuff' and as sound. Crucially, Charles Bernstein argues for an understanding of poetry that is predicated on what he refers to as 'aurality', as opposed to lyric poetry's preoccupation with 'orality'. We might usefully define 'aurality' as a privileging of attention to the *actual* sounds that are produced, and not to projects of 'voice' as they concern and invoke the personality or presence of the individual poet.¹⁹⁹

The psychoanalytic framework both enables and provokes a similar focus of attention, with the analyst seeking insight through 'inferential listening' to the sonic substance of the patient's words as much as from the narrative/s the patient constructs from the stuff of their raw experience.²⁰⁰ Indeed, analytic listening, like the 'close listening' advocated by Bernstein, places particular emphasis on 'the words the patient actually uses and the ways the sentences are constructed', fruitfully attuned to the moments of slippage between what is *said* and what is *meant*.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998) p.13.

²⁰⁰ Merle Brown, 'Poetic Listening' *New Literary History* Vol. 10, No. 1 *Literary Hermeneutics* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) p.129. Also Salman Akhtar, *Psychoanalytic Listening: Methods, Limits, and Innovations* (Karnac Books, 2012) p.19.

²⁰¹ Akhtar (p.18).

As Susie Orbach writes:

Speech is a physical and mental production and the tone, rhythms and forms in which words are spoken in the analytic session are of great interest. Do the words come tumbling out and then stop abruptly? Are they slow to come? Are they staccato or interrogative [...] Are they halting or sparse? Like music's tempo, melody, chords and notes, words in an analytic session – how they are used and the way they are said as well as the spaces between – form a structure.²⁰²

This has been a pressing and vital concern for Language poetry also. Brion Gysin describes the shape and substance of language thus: 'Language is an abominable misunderstanding which makes up a part of matter. The painters and the physicists have treated matter pretty well. The poets have hardly touched it...'²⁰³ Gysin considers language as *stuff*, and believes that attendance to its material nature is generative and somehow revelatory. Gysin subjected his own texts to the compositional logic of permutation in order to shift our / his own awareness towards language as shape, as sound, as 'matter'. His texts aren't referential, proscriptive or productive of meaning, but reproductive, repetitious, almost limitlessly connotative, as in his early sound poem 'I Am That I Am' (1959), a cyclical, seemingly infinite randomisation of the three words contained within that phrase.²⁰⁴ To create 'I AM THAT I AM' Gysin divested himself of lyric poetry's presumed authorial privilege, producing his

²⁰² Susie Orbach, *In Therapy*, (Wellcome Books, 2016) p.20.

²⁰³ Brion Gysin, 'Cut-Ups: A Project For Disastrous Success' *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader* (Wesleyan University Press, 2015) p.130.

²⁰⁴ A recording of 'I AM THAT I AM': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hw9dmLCdgyI>

permutations by algorithm.²⁰⁵ In doing so Gysin both ironises the declarative statements of self traditionally contained within lyric poetry, and retunes poetic attention toward language as sound and substance, quite separate from its accepted, habituated signification.²⁰⁶

Gysin's strategies have influenced the evolution of my own practise. *caoin*, for example, opens with a potentially interminable permutation of the lines from Tennyson's 'The Lotos-Eaters', 'All things are taken from us, and become / Portions and parcels of the dreadful past':

all things become dreadful	all things
all things dread	become full
all things come	
are full	taken
become dreadful portions	all things
become dreadful parcels	all things
are taken	all things & the past
becomes	and the past becomes

²⁰⁵ Gysin's life-long creative collaborator, Ian Sommerville programmed the software which generated the permutations of 'I AM THAT I AM'. See Gysin (p.73).

²⁰⁶ It is interesting to note that 'I am that I am' is the English translation of God's revelation to Moses in Exodus 3:14. As the permutations cycle, the omnipotence of God-as-maker (and his counterpart in literature, the omniscient lyric maker-as-God) is thrown into question. No longer a declarative statement, the phrase becomes a question, an evasion; the algorithm that produces the text turning poetic creation into a process more akin to the remorseless, motiveless, permutative mechanism of evolution.

us

(repeat)²⁰⁷

In Tennyson's poem the lotos-eaters renounce struggle and self in a last deliberate act of abdication. Present crisis becomes past event, consigned to discrete 'parcels' of passive memory. Tennyson's lyric mode aligns the act of forgetting with aesthetic pleasure, rendering the reader complicit in the mariners' symbolic resignation from the world, from the war, and from its suffering. By subjecting the original lyric lines to permutation and distortional stress the poem argues the futility of this kind of forgetting, asserting instead that memory – and traumatic memory in particular – operates as a species of iterative glitch, repeating and insisting in unconscious, unintended fragments long after a coherent narrative sense of events has lapsed. With its white spaces and riven lines the poem resists readerly efforts to break down the text into meaningful sense or syntactic units, instead forcing multiple constructions of the poem along several different axis. This short section of *caoin* aims to retune the reader's attention to the encompassing and ominous banality of the phrase 'all things'. The text itself exists in crude portions, like the parts of a butchered animal, from which it is impossible to reconstruct a meaningful, living whole.

In my approach to the Tennyson 'riff', I am influenced by Gysin, but also inspired by surrealist Michel Leiris, who, writing in 1926, describes the process of 'dissecting the words we love, without concern for etymology or accepted signification' in order that 'we discover their most hidden virtues as well as their secret sounds, shapes and ideas.'²⁰⁸ In *caoin* the refrain 'become dreadful', which places significant stress on the beginning of both words, is a

²⁰⁷ Alfred Tennyson, 'The Lotos-eaters': <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45364/the-lotos-eaters> (lines 91-92).

²⁰⁸ Seán Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p.19.

percussive, punctuating pulse throughout the poem; this characteristic rhythm develops across the work as a whole, enacting what I have chosen to define as the 'drumming of becoming'.

The *caoin* sequence abounds with transmutations; there are twenty-one specific instances of 'becoming' in the text as a whole, moments marked by a crescendo of accretive meanings or stacked and staggering similes, forcing sudden transformations in the speaker, her object, or her environment. An anorexic girl becomes a 'hair serpent' modern Medusa, a boy becomes a border, a dead baby becomes a slogan; speaker and silent subject bleed into one another. Throughout the text 'becoming' bears the mark of sectarian syncopation, an insistent beat that infiltrates the very rhythms of the writing. The thud of the Orange Order's lambeleg drum runs through it, Bogside bin lids, rifle fire. The three percussive stresses of *be-com-ing* are just one of a series of sonic motifs that serve to structure *caoin* and to differentiate its three speaking subjects. Elsewhere in the poem, 'memory' – identified as the 'third voice' – links complex constellations of words and ideas through alliterative assonance, for example, the 'corrective lens of television', and later "hate mail awaited daily". The 'memory' sequences of *caoin* use the sonic properties of words to generate associative pairs or chains, or to emphasise the relationship between words across lines, suggesting that memory and the act of remembering is produced and contoured by language, and is not an uncomplicated, 'truthful', or linear expression of experience.

Some of the sonically linked pairs invite interpretation in ways that are conventionally meaningful – 'maundering ordinary', 'eyelid pried', 'victorian' and 'corseted' – while others are strange and associative, requiring long correlative leaps of logic to decode – 'amateur savant, spatial waste', 'velvet reflex' 'luddite buttonholes', 'spectral parenthesis'. Such linkages

alert the reader to the artifice, and the unreliability of lyric voice, as well as to the subjective and fallible nature of human recall. That sounds recur and repeat across lines further signals the cyclical, reiterative character of memory, traumatic memory in particular.

Towards the end of *caoin* the 'first voice' becomes stuck between one remembered place and another, the relative safety of her childhood 'rooms' and the space of indefinite threat invoked by a popular Loyalist chant which runs: 'if guns are made for shooting, then skulls are made to crack / I never saw a better taig, than one with a bullet in his back.' The single stanza obsessively, almost tediously focusses on the line 'if guns'; 'if' suspends its speaker in a state of irreconcilable precarity. The guns act as a mnemonic device, creating a condition of continuous recall, trapping the speaker within the memory, but never allowing for completion, return and reconciliation. Because of the guns she cannot return home. Because of the guns she can never leave. The guns are not present, but immanent; 'if' implies a situation in which the guns do not exist, yet the poem's subject remains paralysed by their malignant potential in a state of stuttering, agoraphobic panic:

in rooms / if guns / in rooms / if guns /
in rooms / if guns / in rooms / if guns /
in rooms / if guns / in rooms / if guns /
if guns / if guns / if guns / if guns / if guns //

The text is boring: fastidiously and deliberately anti-lyrical. The repetition of the words, isolated from the rest of the chant, generate their own sense of dark absurdity, and by forcing focus on the clipped staccato of each sonic unit the poem performs the bullet, breaking in on

thought, time, flesh and sense. By recalling, but in its refusal to reproduce, the chant as a coherent lyric body, the text questions the dubious uses that the lyric and its plausible musicality is put to.

Although the predominant mode of my creative practice is lyric, the work is indebted to Language poetry and its anti-lyric tendencies; its mistrust of a lyric 'I' compromised by and implicated in all the ominous projects of modernity.²⁰⁹ My practice has not sought to banish the lyric 'I' but to have that 'I' acknowledge and embody its own implicatedness.

The espoused suspicion – seemingly frequently hostility – of Language poetry toward the linear, narrative habits of lyric poetry, with its privileging of an exemplary confessional 'self' bears such a striking resemblance to that which is voiced in trauma studies scholarship in its search for and attempt to define a literature of trauma, that this connection is worth exploring in some detail. Caruth's notion of 'impossible saying' is key here. As discussed in the previous chapter, Caruth argues that trauma creates in those who experience it an imperative necessity to 'witness' or to "tell" which exists in continuous conflict with the impossibility of meaningfully doing so.²¹⁰ Trauma studies discourse makes the case for a

²⁰⁹ By 'ominous projects of modernity' is meant a criticism less of the lyric itself than the way it has been hijacked by the kinds of 'sentimental militarism' identified by Rekdal in 'The Erotic Wounds of War' (Rekdal, p.189) and by its nationalist and sectarian offshoots, offshoots that are currently experiencing a resurgence in England, the U.S, and most relevant to my own practice, in Northern Ireland. Also, more broadly, I refer to the way certain strands of contemporary lyric poetry seem to align with and further the aims of late-capitalist identity politics, which I consider to be divisive and toxic to all forms of affective solidarity.

²¹⁰ Caruth (p.10).

literature of trauma that communicates in indirect and unexpected ways; that resists, in response to the intense pressure put upon language by trauma, orderly, linear forms of narrative.²¹¹

Tellingly, Language poet Lyn Hejinian describes the operation of language in this way:

Language generates its own characteristics in the human psychological and spiritual conditions. Indeed, it nearly *is* our psychological condition. This psychology is generated by the struggle between language and that which it claims to depict or express, by our overwhelming experience of the vastness and uncertainty of the world, and by what often seems to be the inadequacy of the imagination that longs to know it – and, furthermore, for the poet, the even greater inadequacy of the language that appears to describe, discuss or disclose it.²¹²

Hejinian extends trauma studies' claims of a crisis of representation across *all* language encounters, and defines the manifestation and interrogation of this crisis as being the central preoccupation of Language poetry.

In its 'interruptive mode', with its conscious and unconscious blurring of symptomatic and performative language, Language poetry articulates a concern to communicate 'ethically', that is, without 'totalising structures', but in fragments and fissures; not a poetry of static identities, essences or wholes, but one of holes, disruption and distortion, one in which realist

²¹¹ Laub, Felman and Chung (pp.29, 57, 94).

²¹² Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2000) p.49.

representation and cohesive subjectivity are abandoned or broken down into ‘affective intensities’.²¹³

In Language poetry’s emphasis on metonymy, synecdoche, and in its use of extreme paratactical structures, often requiring non-trivial effort to decode or understand, the poems replicate some of the performative aspects of traumatised speech, and incorporate elements of oral transmission. Indeed, as Charles Bernstein writes in *Close Listening*, one of Language poetry’s chief projects is to extend the performative and material dimension ‘of the literary text into visual space’, to understand the poem as a ‘performative event’, not merely as a textual entity.²¹⁴ Bernstein wishes to ‘overthrow’ the idea of the poem as a ‘fixed, stable, finite linguistic object’.²¹⁵ My own creative practice incorporates this notion of the ‘plural event’ of poetry, and in its multiple iterations, renditions or *versions* across various mediums of performance, works to destabilize a cohesive and coherent reading of experience or identity.²¹⁶

For example, the long poem ‘if not of memory (a sonic investigation)’ enacts a species of sonic archaeology, working to uncover multiple linguistic valences by breaking words and phrases down into small, disjointed sonic units, insinuating space within the seamless fabric

²¹³ Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 200) pp.200-201. Woods employs the phrase ‘affective intensities’, first coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.441 to differentiate between ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’.

²¹⁴ Bernstein (p.9).

²¹⁵ Bernstein (p.9).

²¹⁶ Bernstein (p.9).

of the text. The speaker begins: 'my testament. to testify. to test – if i –'. What starts as a declarative statement issued by a stable speaking subject quickly undermines itself, becomes infiltrated by ambiguity as the line stutters at the level of both sound and sense. By retuning attention to the sonic structure of the words, the opening of the poem forces us to consider the degrees of difference between 'testament', traditionally defined as the sign or evidence of a specified fact, and 'testimony' as it is commonly understood, specifically testimony that originates within the traumatised speaker, recounting her experiences inside of uniquely pressured legal frameworks, sites where her 'performance' of trauma is subjected to rigorous scrutiny.

The poem draws, in particular, upon my own ancestral history, as well as my experience as an activist, to consider Refugee Status Determination (RSD). RSD is often rendered problematic due to a lack of available documentary evidence to either support or contradict refugee testimony. U.K Home Office guidelines on the refugee 'credibility assessment' state that 'The burden of substantiating a claim lies with the claimant, who must establish to the relatively low standard of proof required that they qualify for international protection.'²¹⁷

This 'relatively low standard of proof' weighs asylum seekers' testimony according to the following criteria: the testimony is of sufficient detail and specificity, the testimony is internally consistent and coherent, the testimony is consistent with specific and general information held on the speaker's country of origin; that it is consistent with other evidence, and that it is 'plausible'.²¹⁸ According to a 2014 study by Douglas McDonald, refugee

²¹⁷ *Asylum Policy Instruction Assessing credibility and refugee status Version 9.0*, (6 January 2015) p.8: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/397778/ASSESSING_CREDIBILITY_AND_REFUGEE_STATUS_V9_0.pdf

²¹⁸ *Asylum Policy Instruction Assessing credibility and refugee status Version 9.0*, (6 January 2015) p.13.

testimony is frequently impugned on grounds of internal inconsistencies, the applicant's demeanour and presentation, and the apparent implausibility of the applicant's story.²¹⁹ In other words, RSD takes insufficient account of the effect of trauma on testimony, something the poem returns to almost obsessively at strategic points:

a migrant sun slides like an obol over my inward eye.

a cataract. a tract. contracted and contagious. blind, abbreviated, trapped. to serve as a sign. to *sign here please...*

and they say: *you did not tell your story the same way twice, your story isn't true.*

access denied! your claim is denied!— idiots:

the conditions that produce the story are the same conditions that tangle its telling.

now this is not a story it's a spell against the self i am compelled to say over and over and over –

In subjecting the idea of refugee credibility assessment to lyric stress, the poem executes an inversion: what is being tested is no longer the speaker's reliability; what is being

'investigated' is no longer the veracity of her claims, rather, the administrative rhetorics of 'proof' are being interrogated, along with the ideologies and systems that produce them.

As Donna McCormack writes in *Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing*, all testimony is inherently performative because the speech act makes possible the process of

²¹⁹ Douglas McDonald, 'Credibility Assessment in Refugee Status Determination' *26 National Law School of India Review*, (2014) p.115.

narrative production, but trauma testimonies are performative in specific ways, in their compulsive, repetitive witness to events or experiences that cannot be encompassed or accommodated by the narrative form.²²⁰ 'if not of memory' enacts a performance of traumatised speech, with its characteristic stutters, silences, and repetitions; its compulsive agrammatic rambling, its 'interruptive mode'. The poem demands a species of listening in which we encounter and accept this performative and sonic logic as meaningful quite separately from its accepted signification. The way in which the testimony is given, the sounds that are actually produced are their own species of evidence. What tells us that trauma has taken place is not a forensic accounting of the traumatic event, but the symptomatic performance of the speaker's testimony, turning the coercive criteria of assessment on its head.

In my decision to consciously incorporate the interplay between orality and literacy, I situate my work within both performance and experimental cohorts. My work shares affinities with poets as diverse as Joelle Taylor and Harryette Mullen. Speaking to Elisabeth A. Frost for *Contemporary Literature* Mullen states that she writes 'for the eye and the ear at once'.²²¹ She is always experimenting, striving to create in her poems a space that is 'neither completely spoken nor completely something that exists on the page.'²²²

²²⁰ Donna McCormack, *Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) p.20.

²²¹ As quoted in an Interview with Elisabeth A. Frost, *Contemporary Literature* Poetry Foundation website: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/harryette-mullen>. See also Elisabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2005) pp.136-155.

²²² Frost: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/harryette-mullen>.

As Bernstein and other scholars of American Language poetry remind us, poems cannot be entirely understood as either rhetoric nor semiosis. Rather, they call for a distinctly attentive form of listening, one that, to quote Merle Brown, engages the poem's 'objective, serial texture as under the shaping stress of the poem's mediating act'.²²³ That is, a form of 'inferential listening' attuned to the patterns, textures and cadences of poetic saying. To listen in this way is to stretch our understanding of the poem to encompass its multiple rehearsed reiterations, its many imperfect manifestations across various mediums of performance.

When Mullen engages 'aurality' it is necessarily mediated through language, through printed text, and reaches the reader as a kind of multi-voiced ecstatic vernacular performance that interrogates the hybrid nature of identity, and plays with 'the conventions of orthography, pronunciation, and socially determined meaning'.²²⁴ This is best exemplified in the 'hip hyperbole' of 'Trimblings', collected as part of her 2006 collection *Recyclopedia*.²²⁵

²²³ Merle Brown, 'Poetic Listening' *New Literary History* Vol. 10, No. 1 *Literary Hermeneutics* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) p.128. See also, Charles Bernstein, 'Making Audio Visible: The Lessons of Visual Language for the Textualization of Sound' *Text* Vol. 16 (Indiana University Press, 2006) and Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998).

²²⁴ Quoted in "'The Eye and the Ear at Once": Collapsing the Speakerly/ Writerly Divide' *Generic Pronoun*: <https://genericpronoun.com/2014/02/18/the-eye-and-the-ear-at-once/>

²²⁵ Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia: Trimblings, S*PeRM**K*T, and Muse & Drudge* (Graywolf Press, 2006).

Dress shields, armed guard at breastwork, a hard mail covering. Brazen privates, testing their mettle. Bolder soldiers make advances, breasting hills. Whose armor is brassier.²²⁶

Here Mullen plays two sets of meaning against each other. One is suggestive of sexual seduction, and the hidden defensive potential of women's clothes, specifically the sharp metal underpinnings of underwired bras. The other, playfully but with purpose, addresses the military's co-optation of the body – specifically the working-class body – only 'bolder soldiers' are able to advance, and power dynamics are evoked through her use of 'brassier', a play on 'brassiere', but also brass as in money, and brass as in 'the top brass'. It is impossible to decide which reading is intended as primary, thus the poem eludes any effort on the part of the reader to identify a fixed tenor or vehicle. By engaging 'aurality', and retuning attention toward sound, Mullen guides her readers toward a model of 'close' or 'inferential' listening, exposing the parallel meanings and hidden valences of words: 'a hard mail' is aurally indistinguishable from a 'hard male', for example, 'mettle' from 'metal', and 'armor' from 'amour'.

Mullen's work emphasises the ephemeral and impermanent nature of the aural while using her text to enact and critique language's relationship to authority and coercion in both its written and spoken forms. For Mullen, authority is inscribed across multiple linguistic registers, and language is in a constant state of fraught negotiation inside of competing and conflicting systems: 'speak this way or you will not be employable ... you can't hang with us if

²²⁶ Mullen (p.24).

you talk too proper.'²²⁷ For Mullen, language is implicated in a series of power relationships; it exerts a violence and a pressure with which her texts flirt, debate, and then ultimately resist.

Mullen rejects the privileging of written text, and the subordinate position in which traditional literary studies have held oral transmission; the tendency of its scholars to use literature unreflectively as a model for language, to construct grammatical rules on the basis of written texts alone, and to study the meaning of words exclusively through print media.²²⁸ However, she is also consciously engaged in demonstrating that 'the codes of oppressed people also have their aesthetic basis', and that their discourses are every bit as 'rich', 'aestheticized' and 'metaphorical' as those of white western literary canons.²²⁹ This

²²⁷ Quoted in *Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetics*, ed. Deborah Brown, Annie Finch, and Maxine Kumin (University of Arkansas Press, 2005) p283.

²²⁸ Mullen shares these concerns with the Language poetry cohort with which she identifies herself. Bernstein (p.9). Also see David R. Olson, 'On the Language and Authority of Textbooks' *Language, Authority, and Criticism: Readings on the School Textbook* Suzanne De Castell, Allan Luke, and Carmen Luke eds (Taylor & Francis, 1989) p.233.

²²⁹ Farah Griffin and Michael Magee, 'A Conversation with Harryette Mullen' *Combo 1* (1998) p.45. Also see Daniel Kane, 'Harryette Mullen' *What Is Poetry: Conversations with the American Avant-Garde* (Teachers & Writers, 2003). Also Barbara Henning, *Looking Up Harryette Mullen: Interviews on Sleeping with the Dictionary and Other Works* (Belladonna Books, 2011). As an interesting aside, the interviews in *Looking Up Harryette Mullen* were conducted via a postcard correspondence, which is surely relevant to any enquiry exploring the relationship between the epistolary form and poetry. Mullen states in the blurb for the book that she was interested in the way the postcard format allowed for 'a very small space to respond', and of the cards 'flying through the mail and overlapping'. I will

recognition disrupts the easy and commonly held perception of an 'authentic' black culture defined by orality, and an 'authentic' black vernacular voice.²³⁰

This is the political basis for Mullen's dual appeal to eye and ear. Because aural / oral, and written authority are encoded in different ways, Mullen's work traverses their points of divergence and intersection, with particular emphasis on both the language of advertising, and that of the 'traditional' (predominantly white, male, middle-class) lyric canon. These canonical works derive their special status from *being* written: they preserve and enshrine a fixed point in the history of literature, as part of a long continuum, and they speak with the weight of that history behind them. In *Muse and Drudge* Mullen plays the conventions and conceits of this canonical literature against the ephemeral forms of improvised blues, patois, slang, and infomercial.²³¹ The collision of these multiple discourses, and the corresponding sets of material conditions these discourses reveal, critique what Mullen refers to as the

visit these themes of incursion and deferral as provoked by the epistolary form in subsequent chapters.

²³⁰ For an important account of innovative poetic practice disrupting and challenging racialised assumptions about the use of language, also see Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2011). Shockley describes not a 'Black Aesthetic' but a 'black aesthctics, plural: a multiferous, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing.' To 'race' we may also usefully add 'class' and 'gender' and the multiple conflicts provoked at their intersection. Innovation, In Shockley's analysis, is driven by these conflicts. (p.10).

²³¹ Mullen (2006).

'language of power', and the ways in which the speech 'of African Americans reflects our historic separation from mainstream [and literary] culture.'²³²

My own practice necessarily approaches the complex relationships of language to authority from a slightly differently perspective: although my poetry is equally interested in the ways written language draws its authority from appeals to tradition, professions of objectivity, and the rhetoric of expertise, I am also concerned with the idea of written language as a possible scene of escape from the embodied signifiers of race, class and gender that accompany spoken utterance.

In my encounters with 'jenny the therapy' and various other mental health professionals, I exist in an unequal power relationship. In the clinician's office professional authority is contoured by the paraphernalia of expertise: the desk behind which the therapist sits, the framed doctorate on the wall behind her head, her filing cabinet full of patient notes. Authority also manifests through language: my anxious, stuttering vernacular slippages in stark contrast to her calm, considered, Received Pronunciation. My accent and my gestures, our relative positions in the space, all contribute to a mounting sense of powerlessness. Although 'jenny' in part derives her power from written language, and her ability to interpret and to archive my perceptions, states and symptoms, poetry offers a scene of saying in which the written word might offer relief from the anxiety of embodied encounter, as well as a way of witnessing to pain, a counter archive to read against clinical ascriptions of meaning. My poetry is much concerned with rendering these contradictions visible. This is something I will return to in subsequent chapters.

²³² Henning (2011).

In seeking ground between speakerly and writerly convention, and using an intertextual multivalence to perform, and in performing refuse, various kinds of cohesive or 'authentic' identity, my work occupies similar territory to that of Harryette Mullen. Among Mullen's chief concerns are the critique and disruption to any notion of a homogenous and selectively edited black identity; my own work takes ideas of Otherness, Irishness and Travellerness and subjects them to a series of self-scrutinising, self-interrogating 'performances', as in this excerpt taken from poem 17 from the 'for the dead' section of *narrowcasting*:

...i want to run away from words. artilleries, militias, whispers. days when even sickness is a slogan in the blood, and i can't hear myself think over the sound of my falling apart. this is real. i do not believe a book can be *brave*. if gàidhlig isn't spoken. if gàidhlig becomes a textbook redhead drenched in freckles, gàidhlig dies. as in: hashtag: aisling pagan toss. as in hashtag: bride of chucky. i have no answer to this. only and not even english, which talks and talks a razor's well-bred elocution. i think about suicide often. i think about *nation, rise!* yes, rise, up on your hind legs, banging a malformed fist on the table. ireland. death's green theatre. and i can't stop thinking. living here, approaching my future with caution, quite prepared to dwindle my shape down corridors to plagiary and bludgeon, inadequate muster. *fear of a gyp planet!* you said, *academia will eat you alive, and no, poetry won't save you...*

The text is a mash-up of stereotypes, slogans, asinine hashtags, pop-cultural and sectarian allusions. It encodes a high degree of cultural and ethnic specificity. For example, 'bride of chucky' is only meaningful if the reader is cognisant of the Irish language phrase, 'tiocfaidh ár lá' – rendered phonetically as 'chucky ar lá' – which translates as 'our day will come'. The phrase is the unofficial slogan of the Irish Republican Army, and refers to the

coming of a united and free Ireland. In Belfast, during the Troubles, members of the Irish Republican Army and its various splinter groups were colloquially referred to as 'chuckies'. *Bride of Chucky* is a late nineties horror comedy, and the fourth instalment of the *Child's Play* franchise, a series of films about a murderously malevolent doll, 'Chucky'. Chucky himself is a cherubic, freckle-faced redhead, and a merciless psychopathic killer. Because Chucky's physical appearance embodies racist Irish stereotypes, the poem links Irishness to murderousness; in conflating the real violence of Northern Ireland to the cartoon violence of the slasher franchise the text foregrounds the unreality, and the limited, racially-inscribed understanding of such violence for most people outside of Ireland. To be a 'bride of chucky' is further to be wedded, inseparably to this violence, to be both subaltern to, yet implicated in its worst excesses.

in 'if not of memory', the text once again treats of identity, resisting the notion of accent, or even language, as a stable signifier of self, using words, phrases and poetic fragments omnivorously, from a variety of sources, in Irish, Romani ćhib, and in Shelta, together with a wide range of literary, historical and pop-cultural references, a palimpsest of image and information. The performance of the poem requires multiple shifts across the speaker's accent in order to correctly pronounce and to adequately accommodate the long, often unpunctuated lines within a single breath:

what is sound? an ecstasy, an act. not a language but a tactic. not a tactic but a fact.
someone says *assumption*, which is prejudice ascension a rising to light. tell me
computer:

*british other irish traveller british other white other white other traveller other
irish other gypsy*

i sat on a panel and pulled apart these words. each word was a struck match bent in the striking.

graaltcha mary, tawn a noos...anois, agus ar uair ár mbáis...

The poem, then, is not merely a performance of a single identity destabilised by trauma, but a questioning and a criticism of *any* fixed identity. The soundscape created in 'if not of memory' abandons the notion of a stable lyric speaker in favour of a multi-voiced performance that is hybrid and opaque. 'Opacity' is both a theme and a strategy throughout *narrowcasting*; my concept of opacity is heavily influence by the work of Édouard Glissant for whom it represents a species of unquantifiable alterity; a diversity that exceeds any attempt from the outside to impose categories of identifiable difference, and so resists the hierarchies such absolute othering implies.²³³

Opacity exposes the limits of representation, and thus the failures of any cohesive and totalising claims of identity as a lens through which to understand the myriad perspectives of the world, its political processes, or its peoples.

It is easy to see how Glissant's notion of opacity, which arose as a form of resistance to the otherizing gaze of the colonizer, is of particular relevance to the work of Mullen, or to Shockley, and to an entire cross-generational cohort of writers concerned with creating and expanding a 'plural: a multiferous, contingent, non-delimited' 'black aesthetics'.²³⁴ The

²³³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) p.194.

²³⁴ Shockley (2011). Also see Robin Tremblay-McGaw, 'Enclosure and Run: The Fugitive Recyclopedia of Harryette Mullen's Writing' *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 35, no. 2 (2010) pp.71-94.

resistive urgency of these projects reinvigorate and sensitises critique of the lyric 'self', proving that such critique is not merely an aesthetic or intellectual concern, but that it is driven by and responds to pressured political and historical contexts.

This idea has special relevance to *narrowcasting*, and to 'if not of memory' in particular, because it evokes the operation of Shelta, a 'gypsy cant', frequently described in pejorative terms as being less a language than a tactic.²³⁵ The poem incorporates and enacts this notion of Shelta as something supremely tactical, but also radical, imaginative, and controlled. The piece relishes and replicates (within the contested territories of the English language) Shelta's varied linguistic parries and evasions. Shelta makes use of reversal, metathesis, affixing, and substitution. It transposes consonant clusters, prefixes or suffixes groups of sounds with Irish words. Shelta incorporates Romani, Polari, and slang. It is also spoken fast, has its own clipped and cantering rhythm, its own terse, t-stopped, compressive poetry. As Sharon Gmelch points out, Shelta's special function is in 'concealing meaning from outsiders, especially during business transactions and in the presence of police. Most utterances are terse and spoken so quickly that a non-Traveller might conclude the words merely had been garbled.'²³⁶

Also, Jahan Ramazani, 'Poetry and Race: An Introduction' *New Literary History* Volume 50, Number (Autumn 2019) p.xx.

²³⁵ For discussions surrounding the ways in which Shelta was historically perceived, see Tom McArthur, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (Oxford University Press, 1992). Also Sharon Gmelch, 'Irish Travellers' *Encyclopaedia of World Cultures* (1996).

²³⁶ Sharon Gmelch, *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman* (Souvenir Press, 1986), p. 234. Also see Christine Walsh, *Postcolonial Borderlands: Orality and Irish Traveller Writing* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

In 'if not of memory' opacity is actively deployed as a critical and generative tool. The poem performs Shelta's varied escapes and feints by making a mode and a commentary of evasion. The poem does not use many words or phrases in Shelta, but does seek to replicate its characteristic compressive spoken rhythms. Within the space the poem creates, the survival strategies of historic Traveller communities are thus reconfigured as tools for destabilising and reinventing poetic method.

In an interview with Cynthia Hogue, Mullen describes a similar approach to her own poetic and performative practice:

I wanted the poem to have that quality of quick movement from one thing to another, from one subject or thought to another, from one mood or emotion to another. Partly because I wanted things to be in flux, a state of flux, a state of change. If you stand still too long, they will put chains on you, so you want to keep moving...²³⁷

Mullen's work is provoked by and draws upon the history of the United States, and of the global slave trade, often focussing on the moments where racial violence and gender inequality intersect in the policing of black women's bodies and desires. For Mullen the structure of her poetry is intimately associated with the 'flight of the fugitive slave' and 'connects these moments of fugivity with freedom.'²³⁸ Her poems translate into discursive space strategies for evading containment and capture, so that even in 'Trimblings', where

²³⁷ Interview with Cynthia Hogue, *Postmodern Culture* 9.2 (1999) p.72.

²³⁸ Tremblay-McGaw (pp.71-94)

women are 'Chaste, apprehended, collared and cuffed' there is a species of radical play at work.²³⁹ This play, Mullen states, is intended to:

allow, or suggest, to open up, or insinuate possible meanings, even in those places where the poem drifts between intentional utterance and improvisational wordplay, between comprehensible statements and the pleasures of sound itself.²⁴⁰

'Trimblings' is associative rather than logical in structure; it communicates in fragments, is full of syntactical anomalies, forcing language out of linear interpretation. 'Trimblings' conjures notions of both frippery and waste: a dress is "trimmed" with ribbons and flounces; "trimblings" are the discards of hair, material or meat. Mullen's use of 'Trimblings' as a title argues for a recognition of black women's speech as unfairly excised from literary canons and scholarly consideration. By foregrounding fragmentation and game play, Mullen demonstrates how these techniques form a vital and deeply serious contribution to language and to literature.

As Elizabeth Frost notes, Mullen plays with words to release the reader's own associative powers; 'there is, indeed, great pleasure for the reader in the process'.²⁴¹ By attending to the pleasure of sound Mullen also enlists her readers in activating its subversive potentials. Even in this short fragment from 'Trimblings', the centrality of spoken sound is evident:

²³⁹ Mullen (p.54).

²⁴⁰ Barbara Henning, 'An Interview with Harryette Mullen' *Poetry Project Newsletter* 162, no. 9 (1996).

²⁴¹ Elisabeth Frost, 'Signifyin(g) on Stein: The Revisionist Poetics of Harryette Mullen and Leslie Scalapino' *Postmodern Culture* 5.3 (1995).

Chaste, apprehended, collared and cuffed. Kept under wraps,
as bridal veils visually haze precious, easily torn, gauzy ro-
mantic tissues.²⁴²

Are the female figures passively and classically 'chaste' or are they actively pursued, 'chased'? Are they 'apprehended' in the sense of caught, or in the sense of seen, witnessed? Does 'collared and cuffed' bespeak a modest mode of dress, or arrest and detention? Within this last phrase we can also detect echoes of the euphemistic question 'do her collar and cuffs match?' in allusion to a woman's pubic hair. Further, 'collared', which is so suggestive of slavery, shares a sonic affinity with the pejorative 'coloured'. The women in 'Trimnings' are 'Kept under wraps.' Are they literally bandaged? The subject of dirty secrets? Are they serving prison terms, having 'taken the rap'? Are they 'kept' women? Housewives wearing 'wraps' or stoles? The way the poem is punctuated also asks us to consider whether it is the women or the bridal veils that are 'easily torn, gauzy ro- / mantic tissues'. The break in the word 'romantic' disrupts any attempt on the reader's part to decode the line as a happy-ever-after, instead leaving us with the sense unit 'mantic tissues', reminiscent of the far less pleasant masturbatory Kleenex. In writing for the eye and ear at once, Mullen layers and conflates these meanings. It is a poetics that involves, through its performance, an insistence upon opacity, ambiguity and difference. Mullen encodes cultural and racial specificity into her word games, along with multiple allusions to both black history, and life in contemporary America.²⁴³

²⁴² Mullen (p.54).

²⁴³ Mullen's emphasis on orality/ auralty recalls Homi Bhabha's assertion that literacy is one of the key 'homogenizing impulses' in any modern nation state. By embracing fugitive or ephemeral cultural forms Mullen offers a practical method by which the homogenization may be evaded or countered.

My own work, in particular 'if not of memory', translates into textual encounter Travellers' embattled spatial negotiation with the sedentary world:

testament. test –

money talks. but silence is golden, not gold.

what is told, what is tolled.

there's a price and a cost, and a fee they

extract like a tooth

at the root of a word.

The above extract plays with the subtle, often maddening distinctions between outwardly similar English words, and their fine gradations of meaning. In this section, the hidden multiplicity of basic English words becomes either labyrinth or minefield; English is presented as potentially treacherous, with language encounters a series of traps or tricks, snares for the unwary. Here 'testimony' is riven and warped into 'test' and 'money', recalling the way in which a credible performance of trauma is demanded in order to secure both asylum within a county's borders, and any kind of financial support inside of that system. The poem then puts pressure upon the English idiom 'silence is golden', to suggest that the systems continually demanding refugee testimony want the speakers of those testimonies to shut up and go away. That 'golden' is invested with qualities of spiritual and moral worth becomes a way of engineering acceptable, compliant behaviour: silence. And yet 'golden' isn't 'gold', it's a counterfeit, a shabby substitute, just as moral approbation is a poor substitute for financial assistance. By placing 'told' in the context of material wealth, and linking both 'told' and 'gold' through their internal rhymes, the poem connects testimony to a scene of

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994) p.142

economic pressure. And because what is being 'told' is subject to a 'test' the poem asks us to consider the various meanings and uses of the word 'tell': to tell is to give an order, to divulge a secret; to count or to number. A tell is also a characteristic tic or movement by which a person's true feelings or motivations may be betrayed. By repeating the phrase the poem conflates 'told' with 'tolled', which simultaneously evokes adverse effect, a charge or tax, and the slow and uniform succession of strokes with which a funeral bell is sounded. Close attention to the poem's sonic affinities reveals the way in which refugee testimony is connected to economic anxiety, hostile administrative scrutiny, and ultimately – because of stakes involved in obtaining refugee status – to death.

This short section clearly demonstrates the way in which my practice incorporates oral / aural elements in its performance and transmission, particularly in its treatment of Traveller identity. However, *narrowcasting* is also informed by therapeutic encounter, and elsewhere in the collection my therapeutic and poetic performances complicate, mirror, and borrow from each other in very direct ways. My creative practice – that is, the act of writing and performing my poetry – suggests parallels between both sets of encounter, and this drives my research into the shared modes and projects of poetry and therapy. I first began to think about therapy's relationship to performativity following a session in which 'jenny' brought to my attention that the more anxiety I felt during therapy, the more my accent became prone to Irish inflection, my speech to the rapid-fire cadence and vernacular of my youth. The poetry written in the wake of this session consciously incorporates this observation, and further explores ideas about the fallibility of accent as a signifier for identity. Accent, which is tied to a set of social assumptions about race, ethnicity and class, is not an immutable or stable category, but is fluid, slippery and deceptive. This is something that is enacted and

communicated both consciously and unconsciously across various iterations of the poems' verbal performance, and is best exemplified by the 'gentle reader' section of *narrowcasting*.

*

Although the 'gentle reader' project emerged from my own experience of therapeutic letter writing, it was also sparked by a reading Marjorie Perloff's *Radical Artifice*, and her deep attention to the way in which new media and its tide of discourses impact the syntactic and structural *stuff* of poetry.²⁴⁴ Perloff acknowledges the 'made' or material nature of poetry, the way in which it infiltrates and is infiltrated by new forms of media; how media works on poetry as surely as on consciousness, how poetry attends to its own being worked on, accounts for and incorporates this fact. Perloff draws upon work by Fredrich Kittler on the conflation of man and machine, the confusion between subject and object, media and user.²⁴⁵ Reading Perloff initiated in me a profound reflection upon the ways in which my type-written and hand-drawn texts bear the scars of stored bodily experience; the way they speak to and preserve the intimate, tactile relationship I have with my materials, and their daily entanglement in my writing and thinking processes.

My use of the Olympia typewriter to produce the 'gentle reader' letters serves to foreground the material nature of my work, and allows me to explore the ways in which media determine

²⁴⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the age of Media* (Chicago University Press, 1994) p.175.

²⁴⁵ Fredrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford University Press, 1999), p,210.

and constitute our 'intellectual operations'.²⁴⁶ A focus on the material dimensions of the text generates a vigilance to the sonics of their use: the sounds of my fingers on the keys, the minute degrees and variations of pressure required to coax or stimulate the thing into cooperation. Through practice I began to think about my letter-poems as performance space, an act of private communication that carries the tangible traces of grief: the times I would hammer the keys, typing, mistyping, overtyping blind because I was tired, unable to sleep; the way the ribbon wears out, the keys bunch and snarl, producing clots and knots and holes. Impediment, obstruction, the challenge to articulation that is violent loss. In this way the physical act of typing became itself a form of lament practice, a performance.

I began to think about the act of typing as species of 'gesture', for which psychoanalysis, once again, provides a useful conceptual framework. Analysts listen not only to the patient's voice, but are attentive to the ways non-verbal sounds and gestures limit and shape the narrative that patient is telling.²⁴⁷ Gesture, after all, is both language and a failure of or substitute *for* language: an embodied act that constructs both subjectivity and social identity; an act arising from bodily impulse.²⁴⁸

For Joelle Taylor, gesture is an integral part of the poem's performance and production, and its use on stage can embody both communication and resistance to disclosure. In 'choreopoems' such as *(w)horror stories* and *Naming Taylor* rejects conventions of narrative and

²⁴⁶ Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, 'Translator's Introduction', *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford University Press, 1999) p. xx.

²⁴⁷ Akhtar (p.7). Also see Siegfried Bernfeld, 'The facts of observation in psychoanalysis' *The Journal of Psychology* (1941) reprinted in *The International Review of Psychoanalysis* (1985) pp.341-351.

²⁴⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 2003) p.150.

dramatic realism to make meaning from the rhythms and sonic texture of verbal language as much as from semantic signification.²⁴⁹ As with Ntozake Shange's work before her, Taylor's pieces combine spoken, sung and chanted language, with pre-verbal and non-verbal sounds, body-language and silence to form a whole, or 'total' performance.²⁵⁰ Taylor's work is not merely about rendering difficult or occluded female bodies visible. Drawing on the theories of Peggy Phelan and Judith Butler Taylor works to problematize and ask questions about that very visibility and its complex interaction with voice.²⁵¹

Taylor's published poetry also seeks to combine aspects of corporeal and verbal articulation. During the performance of 'Everything You Have Ever Lost' from her 2017 collection *Songs My Enemy Taught Me*, the poet embodies her reading with a succession of mimes or

²⁴⁹ A form pioneered by Ntozake Shange in her acclaimed *For colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, a 'choreo-poem' or 'choreopoem' is a series of poetic monologues accompanied by music and dance movement. Both pieces are choreo-poem performed with the Spin/Stir Women's Physical Theatre Collective (1994, 1995). For a short montage video about Spin/Stir and featuring stills from Taylor's highly physical performance of *(w)horror stories* see also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PV2cnH5TVY>

²⁵⁰ Ntozake Shange, *For Coloured girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (Prentice Hall & IBD, Reprint edition 1997).

²⁵¹ Peggy Phelan, 'Dance and the History of Hysteria' *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture and Power* ed. Susan Leigh Foster (1996) pp.92-106. Also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990) pp.101-186, and Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, 1993) pp.27-57. Phelan and Butler share the notion that women have been historically erased by being visible (embodied) but voiceless, so that any attempt in practice to resist this must begin with understanding the connection between body and voice.

gestures.²⁵² In a video of Taylor's performance she is seen to inhabit the stage with a restless manic energy, rocking backwards and forwards, in and out of sync with the changing tempo of her recitation.²⁵³ Throughout the reading, Taylor emphasises moments of acute emotional stress with a series of signs or movements. For instance, the line 'how some boys cry with their fists' is accompanied by a raised fist, punching air, and during the line 'how some boys hang themselves from the edges of their smiles' Taylor hoists an invisible noose around her own neck. When Taylor reaches the section of the poem addressing the gentrification of black working-class spaces, she leans back from the microphone, raising her hands, palms outward, in a gesture of warding off or pushing back. These are not formally choreographed or scripted movements, but arise organically from the pressure of performance. Across multiple filmed iterations of the work, the gestures accompanying each line differ, evoking Bernstein's notion of the 'plural event' of poetry.²⁵⁴ For example, during the poem's coda, where Taylor repeats the refrain 'everything you have ever lost/ is in here', she variously gestures outwards, toward the audience with both hands in an effusive manner, thumps her own chest with her closed fist; crosses both hands across her chest.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Joelle Taylor, *Songs My Enemy Taught Me*, (Out-Spoken Press, 2017), p.131.

²⁵³ For the official Out-Spoken Press video of Taylor's reading please see:

<https://www.facebook.com/outspokenldn/videos/1359169117460076/>

²⁵⁴ Charles Bernstein (p.9).

²⁵⁵ From three separate recordings of Taylor's work:

<https://www.facebook.com/outspokenldn/videos/1359169117460076/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuaPf5rtpnI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmpGFHzgE7U>

These myriad acts of embodiment suggest that the trauma contained within a line might be such as to exceed the bounds of narrative language. Taylor's work demonstrates a key contention of both trauma studies scholarship and Language poetry, that some experiences cannot be accommodated within the structural limits and methodologies of either printed text or verbal articulation. 'Everything You Have Ever Lost' demands a model of listening, and a model of reading that regards the poem as neither discarnate idea nor stable artefact. Rather it is a deeply material, serially embodied, improvised event.²⁵⁶

I draw upon this notion of combined corporeal and verbal articulation to interrogate notions of class, culture, sexuality and mental health. For example, poem 35, or the 'giallo' section of my 'gentle reader' sequence calls for a high degree of physical presence and gendered performativity. 'giallo' lists the elements of its speaker's costume: 'a red dress', 'hair pinned back and gross with roses', 'nylon stockings', 'pearls as big as babies' heads', borrowing the highly sexualised aesthetic conventions of Giallo cinema to construct and enact a version of the female self as masochistic and sexually available. However, the poem's sonic texture – the short, clipped lines, hissing assonance, ironically twisted phrases uttered in snide sotto voce (rendered textually in italics) – illustrate the ways in which what is seen / shown / signified can be undermined and complicated by what is *heard*.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ According to Bernstein a poem should not properly be considered a 'converging system of coherent signs' but as 'a diverging environment of incommensurable sites and sounds, a dimension of mind.' Charles Bernstein, 'Making Audio Visible: The Lessons of Visual Language for the Textualization of Sound' in *Text* Vol. 16 (Indiana University Press, 2006) p.285.

²⁵⁷ Meiling Cheng, 'Renaming Untitled Flesh: Marking the Politics of Marginality' *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (Routledge, 1999) pp.199-122, and Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 2003) pp.92-10.

Language and gesture may contradict or lend layers of complexity to each other; to discern meaning or intention it is not enough to ascribe primacy merely to what is printed on the page, or to place absolute trust in the poem's speaking subject. Through a rapid-fire series of lies, disclosures and unmaskings, the poem's speaker reveals herself to be unreliable, using the performance and verbal transmission of the piece to resist what Lyn Hejinian, in her landmark essay, 'The Rejection of Closure', refers to as the lyric's 'coercive, epiphanic mode', and its 'smug pretention to universality'. For Hejinian, the lyric's signal failure lies in its refusal to acknowledge either its involvement in the wider social world, or its own object status.²⁵⁸ Rather, the lyric poem is an artificer of order; it directs its readers towards a single monolithic interpretation, which it precedes to proclaim as a universal truth. In the lyric realm, Hejinian claims, authority resides with and within the poem's speaker, originating insights from a position of individual exceptionalism and privileged interiority, speaking down to and simultaneously *on behalf of* a reader whose participation in the creation of meaning it refuses to account for.²⁵⁹

I do not necessarily accept Hejinian's wholesale denouncement of the lyric form, although I tend to agree that the lyric 'I', as it has been traditionally aligned to a stable speaking subject, is not sufficiently sensitised to the ethical complexities of identity, authenticity, and voice in poetry. Hejinian's notion of the lyric as inseparably identified with the 'voice' of the poet is

²⁵⁸ Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' *Onward: Contemporary Poetry & Poetics* ed. Peter Baker, (Peter Lang, 1996) p.27.

²⁵⁹ Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', in *Onward: Contemporary Poetry & Poetics*, ed. Peter Baker, (Peter Lang, 1996). Also see Carla Harryman, *The Middle*, (GAZ, 1983).

taken up, in perhaps a more nuanced way, by Holly Pester in her 2019 essay 'The Politics of Delivery (Against Poet-Voice)'.²⁶⁰

Pester writes that when the act of poetic delivery is worked consciously into a coherent 'performance', conflating the poem-in-the-moment with the fixed identity or 'voice' of the poet, then this constitutes 'a kind of opting out' or a 'self-absolving move'. Pester describes this manoeuvre as dodging the 'ethical shrapnel in intonation'; she states that poetic delivery is also a question of civics, an opportunity to 'continually reassess the integration of one's self with speech', speech as an 'ongoing and provisional act'.²⁶¹

Both Pester and Hejinian reject the lyric mode in its Romantic 19th century incarnation, summed up by Ruskin as 'the expression by the poet of his own feelings'.²⁶² In this formulation the poet is – as Percy Shelley, that exemplar of English lyric poetry puts it – 'a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds'.²⁶³ It seems sensible to question *this* restrictive and rather florid conception of the lyric. However, it is worth remembering that the lyric mode also has its roots in music; that lyric work is outward-reaching work, engaged in close attention to the formalities and structures of song.

²⁶⁰ Holly Pester, 'The Politics of Delivery (Against Poet-Voice)' *The Poetry Review* 109:2 (Summer 2019).

²⁶¹ Pester (Summer 2019).

²⁶² Olma C. Levi, 'Ruskin's Thoughts on Poetry' *The Sewanee Review* Vol. 31, No. 4 (October, 1923) p.430: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27533697.pdf>

²⁶³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' *The Major Works* ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford World's Classics, 2009) p.647.

With this in mind we might ask if it is sensible to describe the lyric as a genre of poetry at all, rather than a poetic technique, designed to invoke the musicality of song?

Song, singing, is often a collective, civic activity. To use Peter Riley's memorable phrase, a song 'is sent out into the world in search of auditors and to form or confirm a body of felt mutuality'²⁶⁴. It is a social instrument, appealing past the text toward intuitive, collective response; it performs, in fact, the exact kind of work that poetry's experimental avant-garde are deeply concerned with.

My own work resists the lyric as a totalising structure that privileges a stable speaking subject, yet embraces the lyric in all its social and performative dimensions. The poem 'giallo' in particular confronts its readers with a performing, unreliable and multiple self; the speaker's perceptions cannot be taken as an objective measure of truth, and the poem has no interest in convincing the reader that they can:

i was made for tantrum and for schnapps, for tenebrated nakedness, libidinous guignol. you might not think so, but it's true. pamper the hatchet, play for me those three black keys in a scorpion chord. i'll wear the reddest dress in recorded history. cut me from my stockings with teary-eyed and tomfool scissors...

Rather, the poem uses direct address to implicate its recipients in the implied erotic violence visited upon its speaker. This speaker insists at five strategic intervals that she was 'made for this'. Each iteration of 'making' or being made coincides with a slight shift in persona drawn

²⁶⁴ Peter Riley, 'Denise Riley and the "Awkward Lyric"' *The Fortnightly Review*:

<https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2016/10/denise-riley/>

from the female archetypes or tropes common to Giallo cinema. In quick succession the speaker is a sexually predatory vamp, a beautiful and unwitting victim, a furtive and frustrated zealot, a hysterical and monstrous crone, a suspicious, heathen Other. These disparate identities are united within the body of the text, merged within the poem's single block of undifferentiated prose to such an extent that only an act of non-trivial attention to the poem's performance can identify and distinguish each trope. Each iteration or performance of 'giallo' may foreground a different mask or character, further destabilising a coherent, confessional reading of identity.²⁶⁵

The poem argues that 'identity' is *not* an essential category, that it is, in fact, arbitrary and artificial. The act of being 'made' evokes this artificiality, directing the poem's recipients towards the material, constructed nature of the text itself; its highly contrived scene of saying. To 'make' is to fabricate, to combine, to alter, to compel, to imitate, or to pretend; it evokes cosmetic concealment, sexual advances, unscrupulous activity. To be 'made' is slang for being seen, caught out when you wish most to remain concealed. 'giallo' evokes and merges these various meanings in a highly stylised synthetic performance.

The poem performs the aesthetic conventions of Giallo, and by embodying those conventions, suggests an affinity between both forms of art. In this way assumptions about traditional lyric associations with profound emotional 'truth' are contested and refused.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ For two contrasting performances of this piece, please see the reflective materials that accompany the creative submission, at: <https://dog-sealion-43cn.squarespace.com/config/>

²⁶⁶ It is taken for granted (at least outside of the academy) that lyric poetry 'emphasises autobiography and confession – presents a multiplicity of voices, many of them at least implicitly claiming to sincerely register authentic feeling and experience and to tell the "truth."' Paul Hetherington, 'Poetic Self-

Instead, the poem – and by extension lyric poetry as genre – figures simultaneously as a scene of voyeurism, titillation and exploitation, and as a way of complicating and refusing those very exploitations. The poem is also aware that behind Giallo's sex and slaughter imagery lies an anxious conservatism surrounding the transgression of social and sexual norms.²⁶⁷ The women of Giallo cinema are masochists or monsters, complicit in their own fatal punishments. In conflating this most problematic cinematic genre with certain strands of contemporary lyric poetry, 'giallo' critiques that poetry's treatment of its own doomed heroines.²⁶⁸ Only in the final line, in death, is the speaker 'born', rather than 'made'. Thus the close of the poem represents a window of escape from art's endlessly reflecting funhouse mirrors, and from the obligation of maintaining a consistent performance of 'self'.

Thus far this chapter has considered some of the key ways in which contemporary poetic practice mobilizes performance to embody meanings and messages that disavow or complicate their printed texts. Scholars such as Peter Middleton have argued for a sustained analysis of oral performance and the way in which it 'contributes to the hypothesis that literary readings are a collective activity' of which the singular encounter 'with a printed text,

Inventions: Hoaxing, Misrepresentation and Creative License' *Poetry, New Writing* 10:1 (2013) pp.18-32.

²⁶⁷ The aesthetic disposition of Giallo cinema is merely incidental to this research as a whole, but for a detailed description of the stylistic conventions and tropes the poem deploys, see *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence*. ed. Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006). Also Seb Roberts, 'Strange Vices: Transgression and the Production of Difference in the Giallo' *Imaginations* vol.9, no.1 (2018) pp.115-127.

²⁶⁸ For example, the fetishizing of suicide in the case of both Plath and Sexton.

and a mind turned inward' is only a small part of a complex whole.²⁶⁹ However, I also wish to acknowledge the object status of *narrowcasting*, and *halting sites*, as both 'linked to and separate from the live performance of its language.'²⁷⁰ My creative practice takes as both mode and theme the poetic disposition of traumatic grief; as such it is worth spending a little time exploring how trauma and traumatised bodies are invoked and expressed through textual bodies.

Mary Russo, writing in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, states:

The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abjected from bodily canons of classical aesthetics. The classical body is transcendental and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek; it is identified with "high" or official culture... with the rationalism, individualism, and the normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Peter Middleton, 'How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem' *Oral Tradition* Volume 20, Number 1 (March 2005) p.7.

²⁷⁰ Carla Harryman, *SUE IN BERLIN* (Publications de l'Université de Rouen et du Havre, 2017), from the poet's own introduction.

²⁷¹ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994) p.8.

In *The Female Grotesque*, published in 1994 Russo may be considered a significant foremother to the Gurllesque movement in contemporary poetry.²⁷² The *Gurllesque* is a still-evolving cohort of female artists who stage burlesque or carnivalesque performances of femininity in kitschy, overtly mocking ways. Theirs is an assault on what they consider to be the sanitised aesthetic field of contemporary lyric poetry towards subversive ends, combining modes of rococo excess with flashes of extreme ‘unladylike’ violence. Gurllesque poetry deploys fragmentation, disjunction and asymmetry as its signal strategies, frequently using the textual substance of their work to stand for the human body, whose coherence and integrity is violated by different kinds of literary and corporeal disruption.

Gurllesque poetics represent the ‘amorphous body’ with no clearly defined boundaries.²⁷³ This body poses a challenge to classical aesthetics, and to notions of a stable speaking lyric subject. Ideals of symmetry, wholeness, moderation, stability, balance (modelled on the male body, long viewed as a closed, stable system), are mangled and mutilated within the precincts of the Gurllesque poem.²⁷⁴ For an example we might read this extract from Ariana Reines’ *The Cow*:

²⁷² ‘Gurllesque’, a portmanteaux of the words *girly* and *burlesque*, was inaugurated by poets Lara Glenum and Arielle Greenberg in the mid-2000s with the publication of their anthology of contemporary women’s writing: *Gurllesque* (Saturnalia Books, 2010).

²⁷³ Johannes Goransson, ‘Lady Gustav’ from his essay on the Gurllesque aesthetics of Lady Gaga: <http://montevidayo.com/2010/09/lady-gustav/>

²⁷⁴ A key concept for the Gurllesque, best exemplified in Claudia Cortese’s *Wasp Queen* (Black Lawrence Press, 2016).

Boys rinse their / arms in what falls from my carotid. My body is the opposite of my
body / when they hang me up by my hind legs.²⁷⁵

In *The Cow*, woman and animal speaker are conflated; textual body and brutalised animal body are merged. In the poem *ITEM*, the reader is told that the omasum (the third part of a cow's stomach) 'is also called "the book" owing to its many leaf-like folds'.²⁷⁶ Reins plays moments of high feminine lyric artifice against the clinical language and graphic descriptions of a livestock manual, grinding and shredding bodies made of both text and flesh:

The beauty makes me feel it really happened
The sky had stars in it they glittered like calories upon the world
Energy of the night I upbraided innards that were mine own
In order to become you.²⁷⁷

This process of mangling and merging is a significant feature of my own practice, particularly within *halting sites*, which gathers text from a plethora of disparate sources – government reports, articles in medical and social science journals, tabloid news stories – that in some way treat of the documentation and administration of Travellers in Northern Ireland. The poems use techniques of erasure, fissure and palimpsest to distort and disrupt the administrative processes of instrumentalization, and to re-inflect statistical accounts of social exclusion with personhood. Within the poem's space, registers collide, grammar is riven, stripped of sense; breaches appear between and within words, forcing difference and

²⁷⁵ Ariana Reines, *The Cow* (Fence Magazine, 2007) p.11.

²⁷⁶ Ariana Reines (p.95).

²⁷⁷ Ariana Reines (p.106).

doubt into the homogenous structure of the printed text. The poems mobilize missingness: transforming blanks or gaps into the empty stages upon which shattered subjectivities might be registered and felt. Individual voices, represented on the page by traumatised or lyric affect, infiltrate official and administrative rhetorics by the narrowest of margins, a textual analogue for the many precarious acts of infiltration performed by Traveller communities into settled society and its shared cultural spaces, as in this short extract from 'lost is not the same as missing':

emphasise. define
what it means to eat
your own
expectant dust.
morbidity still
births close-knit
equation of risk, debility,
discipline:
strict or permissive & you
danced your rare attendance
in a settled school
in plimsolls

'lost is not the same as missing' takes as its source the document 'Health care needs of Travellers', published through the Archive of Diseases in Childhood by the *British Medical*

Journal; it isolates and reconfigures its characteristic words and phrases.²⁷⁸ In subjecting this document to intense scrutiny, I identify a lexis that is at once both clinical and punitive. In taking key words and phrases out of context, the poem attempts to disclose the hidden character or motivating ethics behind the document, divorced from its neutral medical framework. Words such as 'discipline', 'strict' and 'permissive' suggest that Traveller health is seen by the sedentary medical community as something to govern or coerce; it suggests that the medical issues facing Travellers are the consequences or extensions of moral and social failings; that Traveller bodies should be subject to paternalistic control.

The text is loosely held together, proliferating multiple constructions of meaning across the poem's uneven syntax. Here the blank space figures for a lack of intimate knowledge: the two discourses, medical and personal, never quite connecting; experiencing the same reality at cross-purposes. The reader is likewise unable to connect or decode the poem's lyric intervention 'you/ danced your rare attendance/ in a settled school/ in plimsolls' within the scene of clinical scrutiny invoked. In this way the poem foregrounds the inability of language, either clinical or lyric, to absorb and express the complexities of traumatic experience.

In deploying up-cycled clinical literature, *halting sites* attempts to produce a poetics that writes outside of and through the 'sanctioned subjects and syntaxes of health', to suggest, as Bernstein states, that 'health is both a grammatical and psychic fallacy.'²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ 'Health care needs of Travellers', *British Medical Journal: Archive of Diseases in Childhood*:

<https://adc.bmj.com/content/archdischild/82/1/32.full.pdf>

²⁷⁹ Charles Bernstein, 'Writing Against the Body' in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Northwestern University Press, 2001) p.78.

My own creative practice partakes of Gurllesque aesthetics and strategies for the embodiment of trauma through text. However, I am most indebted to Gurllesque's signal radical claim, namely its rejection of catharsis. 'Gurllesque poets deny catharsis because they deny the aesthetics of the pure' writes Glenum.²⁸⁰ Catharsis comes from the Greek verb 'to purify', and formal elegy's coercive insistence upon a linear trajectory for loss and healing, constitutes a disavowal of those whose 'minds and bodies continue to disrupt the everyday demands to eat, work, and reproduce certain values and embodied forms.'²⁸¹ This is a theme I treat of extensively in subsequent chapters, but I would here like to briefly innumerate the ways in which traumatic grief and the rejection of catharsis are embodied through the structural *stuff* of Gurllesque texts.

To do so we must first consider that the elements of a traditional or canonical elegy mirror what are said to be the three stages of loss: first, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace.²⁸² There is symmetry here, the text reflecting human grief. Only the text *isn't* a mirror. Or if it is, it's a warped and distorted mirror. The way in which we use language is entangled in thought; it determines and it constitutes our intellectual operations; it can straight-jacket us, bind us to a normative performance of grieving we may feel excluded from, unable to live up to.

²⁸⁰ Lara Glenum, 'Welcome to the Gurllesque: The New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics' *Gurllesque* (Saturnalia Books, 2010) from the introduction.

²⁸¹ McCormack (p.19).

²⁸² Ramazani (1994).

This tendency is embedded in the structural symmetries of the elegy: in its orderly metrical structure for example, its controlled rhyme scheme.²⁸³ These features imply something definitive and manageable about the process of grieving. Gurlisque elegy must use language in different ways, must find other forms of patterning and structure. As in 'Shockwave' by Chelsey Minnis, from her 2001 collection *Zirconia*, in which the speaker moves through a surrealist landscape provoked by her mother's suicide:

.....struck by translucent lightning.....
.....or.....
.....kneeling in milk near frayed wire.....
.....an icing white force.....
.....bursts from your brow.....
.....splits and rustles.....
.....and tumbles down your face.....
.....and pours over.....
.....your right eye.....
.....and ripples down.....²⁸⁴

²⁸³ Although the elegiac form has a rich and varied history, Gurlisque poetry is responding to those works that have become the staple of the white western literary canon. I am conscious of the fact that this reading of elegy is incomplete, and does not account for the form's diversity or its many ambivalences. While indebted to many of Gurlisque's formal strategies, and to its rejection of peaceable catharsis, I am nevertheless mindful that its criticism of elegy is not especially nuanced. Diana Fuss offers perhaps a more complete reading of elegy in *Dying Modern* which I respond to in subsequent chapters. Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Duke, 2013).

²⁸⁴ Chelsey Minnis, *Zirconia* (Fence Books, 2001) p.19

The speaker is struck as she kneels in quasi-religious supplication, or perhaps in the first prostration of grief. She kneels in Mother's milk, but this milk doesn't nurture, it is a disembodied secretion, and it won't nourish; it is simultaneously dangerous ('near frayed wire') and fake ('an icing white force').

Minnis uses ellipses to manipulate poetic time along with her readers' expectations. Her poems are simultaneously long and short, compressed and stretched, which mimic – or rather invites us experience through text – the way sudden and traumatic loss damages our systems of perception, our ability to accurately process time.²⁸⁵ The ellipses signify long lines, but if they were removed, readers would encounter only terse, enigmatic phrases, suspended in the white space of the page. Reading without the ellipses, using Minnis' line breaks to structure sense, fragmented couplets appear, or single words hovering indecisively in mid-air. The ellipses attempt to recreate thought through language: to represent a relentless and fractured succession of unexpected and uncanny images. To make space for the chaos of grief and grieving, through the lopsided, maimed or asymmetric line.

*

²⁸⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p.224.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Language poetry's chief claims are to 'reinvent attention', to problematize and alter the way in which we 'attend to texts, poetic and otherwise'.²⁸⁶ This statement echoes the claims of psychoanalysis to reorient awareness, to shift and to sift our reading of experience. Both Language poetry and psychoanalysis are nonlinear dynamic systems, that is, systems which, at their most creative, emphasize attentiveness to pattern, complexity and ambiguity; systems that are attuned to the interplay of order and uncertainty, and that make space for non-linear, non-representational forms of understanding.²⁸⁷

Both psychoanalysis and poetry encourage a 'close', attentive and intimate listening, a space, perhaps, of *privileged* listening, one that implicates and involves the listener; demands non-trivial attention to the nuances and affordances of language. The therapeutic space is also a performative space, one in which the physicality of the speech act is emphasised in its relation to the mind through a symptomatic reading of experience.

In the next chapter I will discuss how traditional lament practices also emphasise the physicality of speech, relating language and textual bodies to real bodies, both grieved for and grieving. This is hardly surprising, arising historically as it does from women's tactile

²⁸⁶ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Drafts 1-38, Toll* (Wesleyan University Press, 2001) p.40, and Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998) p.6.

²⁸⁷ Stephen Seligman D.M.H, 'Dynamic Systems Theories as a Meta-framework for Psychoanalysis' *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives* Vol 15 (2005) p.285. See also *Psychoanalysis and Performance* (p.119).

and material relationship to the body of the deceased in its preparation for burial.²⁸⁸ The body is also incorporated as a site of grieving in myriad acts of non-verbal violence visited upon the self in demonstration of grief: hair tearing, cloth rending, breast beating, etc. These too are inseparable from the vocal performance.

But lament connects to Language poetry and therapeutic encounter in other ways: in its particular focus on 'acts of memory and remembering' and a 'compulsion to repeat – a process at the heart of both mimetic behaviour and staged performance.'²⁸⁹ Although all poetry is necessarily concerned with repetition and with memory, Language poetry in particular offers sustained critical attention to the poem as a species of situated sonic performance.

Therapeutic encounter, performance, and poetry intersect in trauma, when language is at its most fraught and pressured. Given that *psyche* has its etymological roots in both vocalic breath and human soul it is fruitful to consider more deeply the performative parallels concerning psychotherapeutic and poetic encounters. Much research has been done to establish the link between psychotherapy and performance through the lens of theatre and the dramatic arts, with special emphasis on rehearsal.

For example, in their 2001 essay 'Now and Then: psychoanalysis and the rehearsal process', Baraitser and Bayly explore the overlapping intimacies of psychotherapy and dramatic

²⁸⁸ Batya Weinbaum, 'Lament Ritual Transformed into Literature: Positing Women's Prayer as Cornerstone in Western Classical Literature' *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 114, No. 451 (Journal of American Folklore, University of Illinois Press, 2001) p.32.

²⁸⁹ Elizabeth Wright in *Psychoanalysis and Performance* (p.12).

rehearsal.²⁹⁰ They argue that both sets of practice constitute ‘probing encounters’ between individuals in small spaces, and crucially claim that rehearsal is not, as it has often been regarded, a mere vestige of performance, but a unique temporal and spatial environment in which emotional states are exposed and interrogated, much as they are within the parameters of psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic encounter.²⁹¹

Although the integral nature of rehearsal to theatrical performance is increasingly recognised and routinely reappraised, it remains a much overlooked aspect of poetic production.²⁹² It remains so despite the tantalising evidence from a variety of poets writing across a broad spectrum of generations and traditions that rehearsal – the speaking of their own poems aloud – occupies a unique and essential place within their practice.²⁹³

Sylvia Plath, for example, spoke of rehearsal’s centrality to her creative process, as well as its psychoanalytic overtones and opportunities. For Plath rehearsal was a space of – as Bernstein would put it – ‘retuned attention’, whereby the performative elements of her work were allowed to augment and surpass their ‘definitive’ textual versions. Interviewed in 1962 about the process of writing and editing *Ariel*, Plath said of her poems: ‘I’ve got to say them, I speak them to myself. Whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact I say them

²⁹⁰ Baraitser and Bayly (2001).

²⁹¹ Baraitser and Bayly (p.4-9).

²⁹² *Psychoanalysis and Performance* (2001). Also Joyce McDougall, *Theatres of the Mind: Illusion and Truth on the Psychoanalytic Stage* (Routledge, 1992), and Jean-Michel Vives, ‘Catharsis: Psychoanalysis and the theatre’ *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (September, 2010) Pp.1009–1027.

²⁹³ Christopher Grobe, ‘The Breath of the Poem: Confessional Print/ Performance circa 1959’ *PMLA* Vol. 127 (March 2012) pp.215-230.

aloud.²⁹⁴ As Christopher Grobe notes in his essay 'The Breath of the Poem: Confessional Print/Performance circa 1959', in her description of *Ariel's* orality Plath is [unconsciously?] using the repetitive rhythms of catechism, ritual and performance: 'I speak them, I say them, I say them, etc...'

Plath's emphasis on the importance of rehearsal is intriguing, as it echoes one of the key claims of trauma studies scholarship: that the work of 'witnessing' to traumatic experience cannot take place in solitude without the presence of an implicated and collaborating other.²⁹⁵ This is also the contention of psychoanalysis. Trauma testimonies demand articulation; it is through the repetition of this articulation in the presence of a closely-listening other (therapist) that subtext is sifted and insights emerge. The types of poetic encounter advocated by Bernstein (and by Language poetry more broadly), and those deployed by contemporary Gurlisque writers, both share with psychotherapeutic practice the performativity of experience; they also share psychotherapy's demands for an active listening, an infinitely implicated and participatory process of 'witnessing' to multiple kinds of symptomatic disclosure. Both sets of encounter ask more from their audience than a merely biographical reading of experience. Both sets of encounter ask their audience to consider that which is unconscious, accidental or implied, not only in the 'text' itself, but within each unique iteration of its performance and transmission. Close listening requires we attend to stutters, silences, slips of the tongue, to the texture and shape of the words apart from their intended meaning.

²⁹⁴ Grobe (p.220).

²⁹⁵ Felman and Laub M.D (p.70).

This chapter has demonstrated the need of – and fraught engagement with – such a model of active listening across poetics that exist outside of Language poetry’s experimental cohort uncovering levels of connection and indebtedness between those sets of poetic practice commonly regarded as ‘experimental’ or ‘avant-garde’ and those of contemporary lyric poetry and its performance culture.

If psychoanalysis is a *spurenwissenschaft*, a ‘science of traces’, in which language is symptomatically sifted for the unconscious traumas it might disclose, then the poetics of traumatic experience is also such a ‘science’ – or perhaps an ‘art’ – of traces, where the originating trauma communicates itself not in narrated past events, but in fragments and ghostings, articulated in a symptomatic and performative manner.²⁹⁶

For Melissa Lee-Houghton this performance comes in many shapes, but is perhaps best exemplified in her 2016 Forward Prize-nominated poem ‘i am very precious’. The text is a continuous, ‘ecstatic’ acceleration, replicating the speed and intensity of thought and speech during the manic phase in a cycle of psychotic depression.²⁹⁷ The poem has an interrogative urgency quite separate to the literal questions she asks of the poem’s implicated and accused ‘you’. Lee-Houghton interjects and interrupts herself, losing the distinction between speaker and addressee, creating a greater, ever more troubling complicity:

You want to ravage me, don’t you?

²⁹⁶ Siegfried Bernfeld, quoted in R. Horacio Etchegoyen, *The Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*, (Karnac Books, 2005) p.335.

²⁹⁷ Melissa Lee-Houghton in an interview with Michael Conley for *PracCrit*:

<http://www.praccrit.com/interviews/i-am-very-precious-interview-by-michael-conley/>

Don't you want to ravage me? You want to ravage me so much
you don't even know where to start, you haven't
figured that out, or maybe when you're alone and no one is there
the plan remains the same. Start from the top and work your way down.
This is no longer the poem I expected.²⁹⁸

My own creative practice traverses this same ecstatic territory: the 'letters' deploy what Brock-Broido describes as 'the epistle procession', a hybrid form of 'prose which lies on top of poetry'²⁹⁹ This form creates of the poems a project of urgent address, but it also reinscribes the rhythms, tempos, textures and cadences of dissociative and schizoaffective thought onto the text, as in this excerpt from poem 18, or the 'fuck life in the gall-bladder' section of 'for the dead':

...the nightly news and its scorpion protocols, men in suits parading their pinstripes;
hapless men, pin-stripped and pining for girls like thin pillows of meat, each caress a
chemical peel and grabbed by the pussy in parking garages. date-raped girls,
hindered by fingernails. nobody cares when they kill themselves...

As with some textual versions of Lee-Houghton's 'i am very precious', capitalisation is absent throughout *narrowcasting*, although other elements of punctuation remain. The lack of capitalisation, especially of proper nouns, disrupts the traditional hierarchical relationship between the poem's 'I' and the poem's 'you' in favour of a more complex and complicit

²⁹⁸ Melissa Lee-Houghton, 'i am very precious' *PracCrit*: <http://www.praccrit.com/interviews/i-am-very-precious-interview-by-michael-conley/> (lines 80-85).

²⁹⁹ Lucie Brock-Broido, *The Master Letters* (Knopf Publishing Group, 1997) preface viii.

dialogic mode. The removal of capitalisation also serves to problematize the relationship to time of both the speaker and the poem itself as a sample of locatable, archivable text. With the exception of the *caoin* section, I maintain all punctuation that preserves the intended spoken rhythm of the poem, but remove that which consigns the 'letters' along with the thoughts and phrases they contain to discrete, objective parcels of time. The poem's temporal status is further complicated by slippages in register from the detached and academic to the aggressive, the childlike; to patois or vernacular. The closing poem in the 'for the dead' sequence makes this point about time, that 'ghosts inhabit all time simultaneously', then slides from this somewhat intellectualised abstraction into dialect 'i don't like to think of childhood, though, how our dirty fingers done disservice to a decade.' In the poem's unstable relationship to temporality it enacts trauma's capacity to disrupt our continuous coherent experience of time:³⁰⁰

jenny raises a good point: the you to whom i write, he is sometimes a child and sometimes a man. he is chronologically unstuck. like doctor who or some such shit. which changes the i that writes. sometimes i am fran, who is thirty-odd with chronic back pain and a pit-bull terrier, and sometimes i am biddy, all lispig ego in a leather miniskirt. sometimes, younger still, snatching fivers with a silky fist. ghosts inhabit all time simultaneously. the letter is a means of travelling in time. i don't like to think of childhood, though, how our dirty fingers done disservice to a decade...

³⁰⁰ 'the experience of disaster [...] obliges us to disengage ourselves from time as irreversible', Maurice Blanchot, *Culture, Trauma, and Conflict: Cultural Studies Perspectives on War* ed. Nico Carpentier (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) p.260. See also Lawrence Langer *Holocaust testimonies: The ruins of memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) p.76. Langer introduces the concept the 'wounded time'.

By focussing on my own epistolary texts I am able to discern not only what psychoanalytic models of listening share with those of poetry, but *why* those models of listening matter to an enquiry into text-based epistolary practices. Epistolarity in poetry has a complicated relationship to embodiment. The letter form signals the embodied presence of the speaker to a high degree: its status as fixed, finite, literary artefact is rendered ambiguous as an inherent feature of the form. Through modes of intimate address evoking private and personal spheres of communication, the epistolary poem conjures the speaker's voice, and signals the reader's participation more completely than in other poetic genres.³⁰¹ However, the letter form traffics as much with silence as with speech. As previously noted, it may incite response yet deny the right to reply; it may also be written into the posthumous bodily impossibility of a reciprocating addressee. A model of reading is therefore required that sifts the poems for what they withhold as much as for what they disclose. Mladen Dolar describes silence in the analytic session as the 'negative of voice, its shadow, its reverse', significant because it 'can evoke the voice in its pure form'.³⁰² Listening and speaking imply their shadows and their opposites, and the analytic session offers a model of listening that is keenly attuned to the interplay of these opposites. I contend that within epistolary space models of listening become models of reading.

³⁰¹ It is also worth asking what disembodied textual epistolarity would look like, particularly given the ubiquity of instant online communication. In the digital archives of my research, I am exploring how technology might allow the epistolary speaker to resist an inscription of the gendered, racialized, aging or ailing body.

³⁰² Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006) p.152.

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In their 2014 Jerome I. Sashin Memorial Lecture, *Psychoanalysis as Poetry*, Doctors Litowitz, Rizzuto and Vivona spoke compellingly of the way in which both poetry and therapy attend not only to the potentials of language to evoke the sensations of lived experience, but to the personal and relational context in which language is learned, and without which 'neither poetry nor psychoanalysis could take place'.³⁰³ Dr Vivona's remarks in particular offer an intriguing echo of Bernstein's description of the 'layered' and 'serially textured' nature of poetic encounter, when she states that analysts listen to language as an 'orchestral arrangement in which multiple instruments play simultaneously.'³⁰⁴ Dr Rizzuto goes on to state that both psychotherapy and poetry 'mobilize the experiential, memorial, and relational potentials of words.'³⁰⁵

Dr Vivona's remarks again offer intriguing parallels to comments made by Charles Bernstein in 'Making Audio Visible: The Lessons of Visual Language for the Textualization of Sound'. Here Bernstein paraphrases remarks made by Jerome McGann, that a poem should not properly be considered a 'converging system of coherent signs' but as 'a diverging

³⁰³ Jeanine M. Vivona, Ph.D, *Psychoanalysis as Poetry* Jerome I. Sashin Memorial Lecture (November 1st, 2014):

http://www.pineanalysis.org/sites/default/files/psychoanalysis_as_poetry_edited_report.pdf

³⁰⁴ Vivona (2014)

³⁰⁵ Ana Maria Rizzuto, M.D recoded at the Jerome I. Sashin Memorial Lecture (November 1st, 2014):

http://www.pineanalysis.org/sites/default/files/psychoanalysis_as_poetry_edited_report.pdf

environment of incommensurable sites and sounds, a dimension of mind.³⁰⁶ In the text of the Jerome I. Sashin Memorial Lecture an answering sentiment emerges from clinical practice, when Dr Vivona suggests that analysts do not have 'cogent explanations for the therapeutic action of verbal processes', rather, any investigation into the language encounters of either psychoanalysis or poetry must focus upon 'the evocative and active potentials of words', a process that requires 'great subtlety' and particularity of attention.³⁰⁷

The poetry of the unconsoled experience both facilitates and forces a new model of listening / reading; it requires of those who encounter it a rejection, as Barthes puts it, 'of the old models of listening: those of the believer, the disciple and the patient.'³⁰⁸ It is a model of listening and reading that demands we account for the poem's performativity, and consider it as something other than a definitive, stable, textual artefact.

Language acquisition 'binds abstract thought with the bodily concreteness and power of life'.³⁰⁹ Both psychotherapeutic and poetic practices attend to the ways that body and language intersect in trauma. My creative practice together with my experience as a person undergoing at different times, various models of therapy, has shaped my understanding of poetic and psychoanalytic encounters not only as spheres of performance and enaction, but

³⁰⁶ Bernstein (p.285).

³⁰⁷ Jeanine M. Vivona, Ph.D, 'Psychoanalysis as Poetry' *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* Vol 61, Issue 6 (2003) pp.1109 – 1137.

³⁰⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms* (Hill and Wang, 1985) p.152.

³⁰⁹ Hans Loewald, quoted in Jeanine M. Vivona's 'From Developmental Metaphor to Developmental Model: The Shrinking Role of Language in the Talking Cure' *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* Vol. 54 (2006) p.887.

as sites of investigation into the collapses, fragmentations and failures wrought on our continuous 'homogenous structure of experience'.³¹⁰ The therapeutic encounter and the poem are spaces – textual and actual – in which trauma is 'performed', and in which the performance itself is a kind of research or investigation, an emotional and psychic archaeology, a 'science of traces'. The poetry of the unconsolated experience is an act of testimony, of dynamic and affective witnessing, an act in which the writing itself seems to stand for or constitute a psychic wound as opposed to the mere aesthetic expression of woundedness as is sometimes claimed by trauma critical discourses.

This chapter has explored the ways in which a poetics of unconsolated experience might speak to performance. I have used my own creative practice as an intersection between various discourses of performance, and models of listening, uncovering previously under-investigated affinities between the modes and projects of confessional poetry, American Language poetry, contemporary lyric practice, and those of psychoanalysis. In particular this chapter has demonstrated that there are significant and telling parallels between Language poetry's model of listening, and the model of listening espoused by therapeutic and psychoanalytic discourses.

Now that the complex network of relationships between contemporary poetry and psychoanalysis has been demonstrated, the next chapter will focus once more upon the epistolary form, highlighting the critical points of intersection between the use of letters in therapeutic practice and their mobilization by various cohorts within contemporary poetry, with a particular emphasis on epistolary space as a space of lament or grieving.

³¹⁰ Benjamin (pp.155-200).

CHAPTER THREE
EPISTOLARY GRIEVING

This chapter demonstrates the ways in which contemporary poets are utilizing the epistolary form in particular to develop a poetics of grief and of traumatic experience, highlighting the letter's use as a therapeutic tool, and the close affinity that exists between its scriptotherapeutic and poetic incarnations, developing, through the use of key contemporary examples the unique relationship between therapeutic and poetic epistolary craft.

In doing so, this chapter sets out to define a poetics of grieving as a mode of writing that is separate and distinct from a poetics of mourning. I will trace the historical and social development, the representation, and aesthetic disposition of both modes across oral and written practices that range from lament or keening to the formal elegy. Previous research into the poetics of loss have arrived at no crisp, coherent definition of either grieving or mourning, often treating both terms as synonymous. It is my contention that the poetics of mourning are those that translate into language and successfully situate the raw trauma of experience, and that the elegiac form serves to mediate grief for the individual, and also between the individual and the wider community in times of great emotional stress.

Drawing upon the discourses of trauma studies and psychoanalysis, this chapter argues that grief – a raw, recalcitrant and untranslatable loss – is not accommodated or expressed within the confines of elegiac tradition, and that for grief's often difficult poetics we need to seek elsewhere.

Cultural historian Philippe Ariès famously wrote of a post-enlightenment Europe: ‘when people started fearing death in earnest they stopped talking about it’.³¹¹ For Ariès our collective cultural anxiety surrounding death is such that it crosses ‘the threshold into the unspeakable, the inexpressible’³¹². In *The Hour of Our Death*, written in 1981, he defines the modern age as one in which our relation to mortality is sublimated, mediated, distanced and withdrawn into the myriad seclusions of science and technology. He writes of ‘invisible death’, of a socially coercive silence in which grief has no place, and the grieving no voice.³¹³

Ariès is far from the first to map the development of this tendency, this sinking into silence of death and of mourning.³¹⁴ In 1889 the Australian folklorist and social scientist Joseph Jacobs writes of the ‘practical disappearance’ of death as a ‘distinctive note of the modern spirit’, and for Geoffrey Gorer writing in *Death, Grief, and Mourning*, the ‘unspeakable’ nature of death is replete with moral censure, and the act of articulating grief is ‘stigmatized as morbid, unhealthy, demoralising.’³¹⁵ For Gorer, if death is inexpressible, then grieving is both repugnant *and* pathological, ‘a weakness, a self-indulgence, a reprehensible bad habit instead

³¹¹ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (Random House USA Inc, 1991) p.46. Also see Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Marion Boyars, 1972) p.91.

³¹² Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (p.405).

³¹³ Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (p.559).

³¹⁴ Earnest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (Souvenir Press Ltd, 2011) pp.11-24.

³¹⁵ Joseph Jacobs, ‘The Dying of Death’ *The Fortnightly Review* 66 (1898), cited in Ramazani (pp.11-12).

of a psychological necessity.³¹⁶ Gorer's analysis has some merit, but it is also incomplete, referring to one highly specific cultural model of grief.

Ariès' thesis is likewise superficially persuasive, yet it is founded on the assumption that the human response to death and to loss is always an unequivocal speechlessness. Grief, it is true, might disrupt our attempts at coherent speech, as indeed the large body of trauma studies scholarship indicates, but that is not to say it renders us silent. Rather, speech may become compulsive, garbled, repetitive or obsessive. It might oscillate wildly between the manic and the leaden, it might take refuge in pedantic precision, it might make sudden ecstatic flights; might howl or keen. I would argue that rather than rendering us silent, our anxieties about death, on both a personal and cultural level, generate a superfluity of discourse. As Tony Walter observed, writing in *Sociology* in 1991, there were some 1700 books on death and dying produced between 1979 and 1986, a great deal of publicity for a much-touted taboo.³¹⁷

Nonetheless, successive generations of poets have marked with a mixture of anxiety and regret the perceived erasure of death and the dead from public life. These poets incorporate into elegy a cry against enforced forgetting, so that Thomas Hardy, for example, writing towards the close of the nineteenth century, is found bitterly ventriloquising the representatives of modern society as they exhort the literal removal of the mourner from their midst:

³¹⁶ Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (Doubleday, 1965) pp.30-131.

³¹⁷ Tony Walter 'Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo' *Sociology* Vol. 25, No. 2 (Sage Publications Ltd, 1991) pp.293-10.

Get him up and be gone as one shaped awry; he disturbs the order here.³¹⁸

To take as our starting point the late eighteenth century it is possible to trace through a series of key critical moments the way in which poetry has sought to preserve not only the memory of our individual dead, but our consciousness of mortality itself. Poetry seeks to extend to us a fraught though privileged space in which the rites, rituals and 'psychological necessities' of mourning may be observed, before death and the dead are effaced altogether by the willed amnesia of economic and cultural life.

In *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy*, Diana Fuss makes a claim for the elegy in particular as a mechanism by which the social silencing of death was, and is, resisted. For Fuss, the modern elegy is defined less by inherited forms, and more by a shared preoccupation with the challenge of meaningful mourning in a social and historical context that seems to preclude that possibility. In elegy the dead are 'revived through the vitalising properties of speech', and death-bed speakers sit up, pronounce, and proliferate in defiance of various kinds of imposed silence: narcotic, social, and textual.³¹⁹ Fuss sees the elegy as populated by 'consoling fictions', but for Fuss these are 'necessary' fictions, fictions that work to 'offer ethical compensation for the deep Wounds and shocking banalities of death', and whose operation is the essential labour of mourning.³²⁰

³¹⁸ Thomas Hardy, 'In Tenebris II' *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (Wordsworth Editions, 1994) p.151, line 16.

³¹⁹ Fuss (p.47).

³²⁰ Fuss (p.4).

Fuss argues, then, for the elegy as a particular kind of discursive space in which the social work of mourning – reprobated or denied in other spheres – is permitted to take place. For Fuss, and other literary scholars such as Jahan Ramazani and Peter Sacks, elegies are a vital contemporary form, one that at once sustains and reinvigorates the genre’s traditional roles, modes, techniques and structures, while incorporating into itself the ambiguities, anxieties and scepticism of our contemporary moment.³²¹

This notion of reinvigoration is key to understanding how scholars such as Ramazani conceptualise and position the elegy in relation to the modern world. Ramazani draws on the work of critics such as Peter Sacks to support his contention that the canonical English elegy can only enact the so-called ‘normal mourning’ of Freud.³²² This is a strictly delineated process that comes to a decisive end when the bereaved subject severs the emotional attachment to their lost loved one and reinvests their free libido in a new object.³²³ In other words, the poems serve to translate loss into solace; sorrow is purged and affection displaced, from the dead to their immortal souls, to nature, and by implication, to the poem – that great conciliatory monument – itself.³²⁴

³²¹ Ramazani (pp.31, 361-365). Also Jahan Ramazani, ‘Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning’ *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* ed. Karen Weisman (OUP Oxford, 2010) pp.601-619.

³²² Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (John Hopkins University Press, 1987) p.275.

³²³ *On Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (Contemporary Freud: Turning Points & Critical Issues)* ed. Leticia Glócer Fiorini, Thierry Bokanowski, Sergio Lewkowicz (Karnac Books, 2009), pp.95, p.108. And Ramazani (p.28-30).

³²⁴ For example, Milton in *Lycidas* (lines 169-195), and Wordsworth in *Michael* (lines 450-453), respectively.

What differentiates the modern elegy is, according to Ramazani, its willingness to engage not only with 'normal mourning', but with melancholia, that irresolvable sense of loss which struggles to find either expression or accommodation in language.³²⁵ For Freud, this melancholia is an innately pathological state, and most emphatically a *state*, and not a *stage* the mourner moves through.³²⁶ It is a state, therefore, that inscribes its symptoms – ambivalence, incoherence, violence and rage – onto any text that attempts to contain it.³²⁷ For writers such as Ramazani, the elegists of the twentieth century actively create from these features shifting textual territories where mourning is encountered and enacted, but also mocked, attacked, ironized and resisted. Ramazani suggests that for this reason, for its willingness to engage with 'pathological' or unconsolated versions of loss, the elegy remains a critical site for the work of mourning; although no longer offering us the possibility of an uncomplicated 'refuge', it may provide instead a charged space in which to rethink and to dramatise 'the vexed experience of grief'.³²⁸

Paraphrasing Freud, Ramazani differentiates between 'normal' and 'melancholic' forms of mourning, and contests that in their engagement with the latter, modern elegists 'perpetuate and intensify the ancient literary dialogue with the dead'.³²⁹ Ramazani's thesis makes a bold

³²⁵ Ramazani (pp.262-292).

³²⁶ *On Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (Contemporary Freud: Turning Points & Critical Issues)* (p.154).

³²⁷ My reflective material discusses in some detail my own creative responses to the notion of melancholia with particular reference to the work of Julia Kristeva, particularly in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (Columbia University Press, 1989).

³²⁸ Ramazani (Preface ix).

³²⁹ Ramazani (p.1).

claim for the ability and the ethical appropriateness of the elegiac form to encompass and articulate the pain of loss, even at its most shocked, suffering and inconsolable. Ramazani is right to recognise the expanded range of the modern elegy, and to acknowledge its many exciting affordances, yet his analysis crucially fails to account for other kinds of colloquy, other poetic strategies for speaking of and to the dead, particularly those located beyond the borders of received scripted authority.

For the purposes of this enquiry I do not find the designations of 'normal' and 'melancholic' modes of mourning to be especially useful or satisfying. 'Normality' is a slippery word: it carries a value judgement, and does implied disservice to the diverse cultural conditions under which mourning takes place. I offer instead the distinction between a poetics of mourning and a poetics of grief, two terms often treated as synonymous. I suggest that the poetics of mourning are those that translate into language and successfully socially situate the raw trauma of experience. Indeed, it is possible to think of mourning as a socio-cultural set of processes by which meaning is made from 'unspeakable' loss. Accepting this, the elegy serves not merely to mediate grief for the individual, but also to mediate between the individual and the community in times of great emotional stress, when communication and the *ability* to communicate is at its most fraught and fractured. This is socially as well as psychologically vital, and I make no claim against the importance or the timeliness of the elegiac form in all its various guises. However, I do contend that there are feelings and experiences failed by the form; that grief – a raw, inarticulate, and unwieldy loss – is not accommodated or expressed within the confines of elegiac tradition, and that for grief's difficult poetics we need to venture beyond the accepted canon of literary forms. The poetics of grief do not serve to mediate the experience of that grief, but to signal the failure, the abject impossibility, of that very mediation. The poetics of grief are thus characterised

by impediment, rupture, and disorder. The experience of grief does not proceed in orderly stages through an inherited literary form. Instead it stutters, digresses, and repeats itself, signalling psychic pain structurally through the use of extreme enjambment, the asymmetric line, and the agrammatic phrase.

Feminist scholar Batya Weinbaum cites the spontaneous creation of laments by women as early as the eighth century of the first millennium B.C. She tellingly describes the material of lament as the 'sound of trauma', and it is to the lament that both my critical enquiry and my creative practice turn first to locate a poetics of grief.³³⁰

In defining the distinction between a poetics of grief and a poetics of mourning there may be a temptation to view mourning as a less authentic, or less severe activity than grieving. I make no such claim, but argue that the sonic texture and aesthetic disposition of grief is qualitatively different to that of mourning. If elegy is the medium through which the work of mourning flows, then lament, with its affinities to trauma and traumatised speech, might best embody grief. If we accept grief as a unique condition of traumatised loss, and trauma as characterized by rupture or disruption, then lament must surely be the locus of its poetics. Lament is poetry 'born out of a moment', with its roots in extemporised oral practice.³³¹ It is a porous form that suffers and seeps beyond the perceived enclosure of the printed page, and

³³⁰ Weinbaum (p.32). See also Margaret Alexiou, *The ritual lament in Greek tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

³³¹ Lauri Honko, 'Balto-Finnic Lament Poetry' *Studia Fennica* 17 (Helsinki Finnish Literature Society, 1974) pp.9-61. See also see Aili Nenola and Susan Sinisalo "The Units of Comparison in the Study of Baltic-Finnish Laments' *Journal of Folklore Research* Vol. 23, No. 2/3 (Indiana University Press 1986) pp.205-220.

its sonic substance is the cry, the gasp, the compulsive reiteration and the shocked silence. Elegy is an act of orientation, interpretation; it offers metaphor, message, it communicates fluently. Grief is discordant, compressive, and jarring.

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For Ramazani, and for Irish scholars such as Seán Ó Súilleabháin, the caoin and its close cousin the wake, survive only in 'an attenuated form'.³³² Further, they survive only in Ireland and a few 'scattered areas of Western Europe'.³³³ While it is true that between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries the caoin was actively condemned by the church, and legislation enacted to prohibit its practice as a heathen 'abuse', to describe it as effectively obliterated is to ignore its many resurgences and survivals.³³⁴

In the context of my own practice what makes the caoin so compelling to think about and to engage with is its dual identity: there is the version of the caoin that exists in popular consciousness, identified with feral pagan noisemaking. This misrepresentation was fostered by religious and occupying authorities in Ireland, who frequently demonised its practitioners as animalistic, immoral, or crazed. But there is also the caoin as a highly specific verse

³³² Irish for 'keen', the roots of the words encompass both the idea of musical singing and of disarticulate weeping. I am using the Irish word in this section to differentiate between Irish lament traditions and those of other cultures and communities, for although my research has encompassed a wide reading of transnational lament traditions it is specifically my own Irish and Pavee heritage that render the practice of keening central to my creative process.

³³³ Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Mercier Press, 1997) p.165.

³³⁴ Ó Súilleabháin (p.19).

tradition, one with its own rich set of tropes, its own particular aesthetic disposition.³³⁵ I am interested in creating a modern caoin that compresses and enfolds both of these identities; in speaking to the traditional form of the caoin, and to its persuasive cultural myths.

Historically, criticisms of the caoin performed a kind of Janus-faced manoeuvre in which the caoin was simultaneously despised for being heathen and wild, and distained as 'immoral', because it ritualized – and sometimes monetized – the process of grieving. The caoin was too unrestrained and artless to be quite proper, while at the same time too formalized to be authentic or sincere.³³⁶ Because the caoin is embodied to a high degree, condemnation of the form also attached to its practitioners. It wasn't simply that the tradition of the caoin was in some way disorderly or 'bad', but that these qualities were also moral attributes of the women that performed the caoin. In this manoeuvre, I discern a deep-seated misogyny, the echoes of which still run through some strands of criticism surrounding women's art and poetry more broadly. It is to these echoes, as well as to the traditions and cultural myths of the caoin that modern feminist laments or caoins often address themselves. It is both an attempt to reinvigorate or connect with a rich tradition, historically abjected or denied, but also to speak back to the discourses and hierarchies that produced that denial in the first place.

Elegists from Yeats to Heaney might 'pine for the ceremony', the rituals and rhythms of a ghostly Irish tradition, which they think of as erased, or from which they feel estranged.³³⁷ Indeed, for Yeats in particular, the caoin might hang as a hauntological presence over writing

³³⁵ John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint'. A Critical Anthology* (Clarendon Press, 1991).

³³⁶ Kerrigan (1991).

³³⁷ Seamus Heaney, from 'Funeral Rites II' (lines 3-4).

most assuredly shaped by English literary tradition.³³⁸ However, these poets do not actively engage lament, or attempt to revive it. Feminist scholars, performers and poets approach the caoin in a different way, thinking of it not as a dead or dying tradition allied to some suspect notion of a mythical Ireland and a tribal past, but as a parallel occulture, struggling to flourish in secret revolt against male religious power and written textual authority.³³⁹

For these feminist thinkers the caoin exists as part of a charged, politicised, collective iteration. As Angela Bourke writes of *The Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire*, the caoin belongs to a 'traditional, shared mnemonic of resistance in its collective performance and transmission', a form of uniquely pressured speech, the result of personal or community traumas that both demanded and facilitated oral composition of this particular kind.³⁴⁰

The lament's address is urgent, breaking into or out of the rhythms of ordinary life; the elegy affords a more meditative tone, offers reflective and reflexive space in which thinking about and processing loss is possible. It is the performance of shocked immediacy in lament that led me to embed some of its choral and performative elements within my creative practice. Lament speaks to crisis like no other poetic form, and with its moans and whimpers, its

³³⁸ 'I owe my soul ... to the English language in which I think, speak, and write ... everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate...' William Butler Yeats, in Derek Lundy, *Men That God Made Mad: A Journey through Truth, Myth and Terror in Northern Ireland* (Radom House, 2010) p.275.

³³⁹ Bourke (p.156). See also Sarah McKibben, 'Angry Laments and Grieving Postcoloniality' *New Voices in Irish Criticism* ed. P.J. Matthews (Four Courts Press, 2013) p.216.

³⁴⁰ Bourke (p.183).

various kinds of anti-language; with its stutters, silences, thick alliterations and obsessive repetitions, it embodies and enacts a traumatised reaction to sudden, violent loss.

In *caoin*, I move in and out of a plaintive recitative form.³⁴¹ This form resembles ancient Irish *rosc* in its reliance upon alliteration, chant, and the lack of consistent musical meter.³⁴² The poem gives play to various ‘voices’, singing or speaking long polysyllabic phrases, as solos, or joining together in choral cries or harsh exclamatory, accusatory refrains. In this way the poem engages with historical traditions of the Irish lament.³⁴³ Further, it shares the interruptive mode characteristic of literatures of trauma.³⁴⁴

Shoshana Felman describes as the ‘disintegration of narrative’ the collapse in linear understanding that occurs following traumatic experience.³⁴⁵ She argues, along with eminent Caruth, Laub, and Hartman, for a literature of trauma that ethically embodies the traumatised utterance; the challenge for such a literature being to represent trauma’s destruction of ‘self-

³⁴¹ Breandán Ó Madagáin, ‘Irish Vocal Music of Lament and Syllabic Verse’ *The Celtic Consciousness* ed. Robert O’Driscoll (Dolmen Press, 1981) p.310.

³⁴² Defined as an ancient form of unrhymed Old Irish verse. For a full description and discussion read Seán Ó Coileáin, ‘The Irish Lament: An Oral Genre’ *Studia Hibernica* No. 24 (Liverpool University Press 1988) pp.98- 117.

³⁴³ Angela Partridge, ‘Wild Men and Wailing Women’ *Éigse* 18 (1980) pp.25-37,193.

³⁴⁴ Geoffrey Hartman, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* ed. Cathy Caruth (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 223.

³⁴⁵ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub M.D, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 2002) p.171.

possessed control'.³⁴⁶ This is what makes the caoin so fascinating and vital: its myriad complex strategies for representing this destruction and disintegration.

As trauma studies scholarship readily acknowledges, representing this disintegration is a near impossible task: trauma exhausts our rhetorical resources. It is not necessarily that trauma 'silences' its sufferers, but that it initiates in them a compulsive and repetitive *need* to speak; to gab and garble, jibber and slur; to laugh and cry, to be discursive and sullen in turns, and yet to come to the end of their invention without ever reaching or naming the thing they are trying to describe. It is not the case that trauma is or must remain 'unspoken', rather that any attempts at *intelligent* representation fail at, or are failed by, the limits of language.³⁴⁷ The speaker arrives at the 'disrupted hiccupping form' that marks trauma's ineloquent centrality, and comes to a grinding halt.³⁴⁸ When words are not enough the caoin recruits the body, non-verbal sounds, movement, gesture. It does not deny, elide or try to surmount these features of grief, but incorporates them into a rich performative tradition.

Kristeva states that trauma does damage to 'our systems of perception and representation. As if overtaxed or destroyed by too powerful a breaker, our symbolic means find themselves hollowed out, nearly wiped out, paralyzed. On the edge of silence the word "nothing"

³⁴⁶ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) p.4, and Hartman (p.198).

³⁴⁷ My reading here is influenced both by Freud and Lacan, but mostly by Lauren Berlant, and her essay 'Trauma and Ineloquence' in *Cultural Values* 5 (2001) pp.41-48

³⁴⁸ Berlant (p.41).

emerges, a discreet defence in the face of so much disorder, both internal and external, incommensurable.’³⁴⁹

A literature of trauma, then, is tasked with representing the unrepresentable, registering the rupture to any stable or coherent sense of the ‘unity, integrity, or continuity’ of meaning.³⁵⁰ ‘How then, do we think about trauma’, asks Diana Taylor, when ‘its very nature “precludes its registration”’.³⁵¹

For all its capacities and exciting affordances the elegy does not provide this cognitive space, and many artists and poet-practitioners have found ways of articulating their frustrations and anxieties about the use of traditional lyric forms to mediate their grief. In her 2009 collection *Sunny Wednesday*, Noelle Kocot writes that ‘all poets and poetry elude me,/ especially myself and my own’. In these lines she displays a frustration with both the practice of poetry and the process of mourning, and a doubt as to the efficacy of either to console.³⁵²

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In a 2013 interview for the Poetry Foundation’s *Poetry off the Shelf* podcast series, poet and critic Joy Katz echoes Kocot in her description of the inability she experienced following the

³⁴⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (Columbia University Press, 1989) p.223.

³⁵⁰ Hartman (p.215).

³⁵¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003) p.19.

³⁵² Noelle Kocot, ‘If the Earth is a School’ *Sunny Wednesday* (Wave, 2009) p.73, lines 16-17.

death of her mother to connect with poetry as either a writer or a reader.³⁵³ Katz speaks about resisting or wanting to resist poetry's 'impulse to resolve'; how the sense of loss in the poems she turned to was 'out of proportion', the scale all wrong. Those poems were 'ineffectual', Katz explains, they made her deeply angry. She spoke of her desire to find and engage a poetics that moved beyond 'the artifice of elegy', for poems that made space for grief on grief's own terms.³⁵⁴

This same desire has been an animating factor in much of my research: my feeling, in the face of sudden and shocking loss, that the elegy's desire to cathartically resolve and translate traumatic experience into some ideal of emotional expressiveness finds its parallel in that coercive social pressure applied to traumatised minds and bodies to grieve only within certain formal limits, certain pre-determined and socially sanctioned spaces.

Unlike Katz, however, it is not the notion of 'artifice' per se that I feel compelled to reject, it is artifice towards one closed, definitive, and myopic end. This refusal of the poem as a closed system spurred my interest in the epistolary form: letters being transitory and ephemeral in nature as opposed to monolithic or memorialising. Letters invoke and invite the other, they extend the opportunity for intersubjective exchange, for collaboration and contingency. Letters also travel: release grieving from its sites and situations, geographical and textual. This is of great significance to my work, and to the *halting sites* material in particular. I visit

³⁵³ Poetry Off the Shelf, *Beyond The Artifice of Elegy* (November 6, 2013):

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/76744/beyond-the-artifice-of-elegy>

³⁵⁴ *Beyond The Artifice of Elegy* (November 6, 2013):

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/76744/beyond-the-artifice-of-elegy>

this topic extensively in my reflective writing, but here I will briefly outline its role in my practice.

Accepting that grief and the act of remembrance are experienced in and through physical spaces both public and private, it is worth asking what this means for those of us with a vexed relationship to such spaces?³⁵⁵ In particular the politically inflected emotional cartographies of Northern Ireland, excluding and devouring its dead by turns; folding into its own mythology the *right kind* of dead, and inscribing their presence onto civic space, while erasing the traces of those who do not fit the narrow arc of their nationally determined story. This is most starkly apparent when we consider the long traumatic histories of Traveller communities in Northern Ireland.

Within settled communities the legacy of sectarian violence is explicit and readily legible, inscribed upon public space through acts of myriad vandalism and memorialisation; the demolition of buildings, the securitisation of streets. For sedentary communities buildings capture the continuity of collective experience, staging and reemphasising a shared cultural heritage. In the North of Ireland, public artwork interacts with personal histories; mediates and facilitates the uncanny experience of memory between individuals and their wider communities; between these communities and the wider world.

Traveller communities, whose settlements are, by their very nature, transitory, leave no corresponding trace or wound on the physical landscape. If we think of public space as a

³⁵⁵ I found Avril Maddrell, 'Mapping grief. A conceptual framework for understanding the spatial dimensions of bereavement, mourning and remembrance' *Social & Cultural Geography* 17:2 (2016) pp.166-188, extremely useful in thinking around the spatial dimensions of grieving.

container for cultural heritage, then Traveller communities, their histories, and their memories, remain uninscribed, are excluded from the mapping of that heritage. How is trauma to be discovered or disclosed when trauma, by its very definition, precludes or renders problematic the possibility of either registration or representation? How is trauma to be told when, through contact with traumatic experience, individuals lose their ability to fully apprehend or integrate the memories of those experiences; when they are unable to give a coherent and consistent account of those experiences to others? How is grief to be rendered visible when the trauma of that grief is itself entangled in acts, official and unofficial, of forcible removal, denigration and erasure?

There is a species of exile that Edward Said calls the 'unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home'. The 'essential sadness' of that rift, writes Said, 'can never be surmounted'.³⁵⁶ There is also an exile of spatial dysphoria: a feeling of being bound to a native place, but of moving within it disregarded or misunderstood. This is another kind of rift, the wound of being Other to everyone. Following the death of my friend, I found it impossible to grieve spatially. Northern Ireland proved an inadequate container for my loss: the sites and settlements of our shared experience no longer existed, our past was not meaningfully registered upon public space, written over by an iconography of grieving from which I felt excluded. My own experience of loss was unaccommodated by Ireland's nationalistic, religious, and sectarian scripts; scripts in which poetry – through the highly politicised, highly selective editing of an Irish National Literature

³⁵⁶ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (Granta Books, 2001) p.173.

– was heavily implicated.³⁵⁷ In this context the epistolary form emerged as both a way of transgressing borders, and of insisting upon and preserving the particularity of my loss. Because the letter form evokes the embodied presence of the speaker to a greater degree than other poetic genres, and because of my own tactile relationship to the typed letters I was producing on the Olympia typewriter, I began to see the epistolary form as a site an occasion for lament, the writing of the letter as a potential lament practice.

Isolating the defining characteristics, and the aesthetic disposition of a poetics of grief became therefore of paramount importance to my creative practice, and informed my critical enquiry into the epistolary form in poetry. An exploration of the various poetic strategies for inscribing grief within the text disclosed suggestive parallels between the unique properties of the epistolary form, and what trauma studies scholars refer to as a literature of trauma; a literature that enacts a project of urgent address and carries out the work of witnessing before a present, attentive and implicated reader.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ There is a common misconception that the idea of a deeply politicised Irish National Literature lost any traction after the Celtic Twilight. However, literary movements in Ireland are still developed and disseminated along highly political lines. Two books I have found especially useful in shaping my understanding of this situation are Fionntán De Brún, *Revivalism and Modern Irish Literature: The Anxiety of Transmission and the Dynamics of Renewal* (Cork University Press, 2019), and Aaron Kelly, *Twentieth-Century Irish Literature* (Palgrave Macmillian, 2009).

³⁵⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) p.142.

It is necessary, therefore, to spend some time investigating poetic strategies for moving beyond the artifice of elegy, and unpacking the implications of these strategies for the epistolary form in poetry.

It is not only a sense of the elegy's inadequacy in the face of deep personal loss, but a more general species of moral unease that motivates poet-practitioners to move beyond the elegy in search of other poetics with which to engage their grief: a compelling need to resist collusion in a lyric project whose end is the aestheticization of trauma and traumatic grief.

This discomfort begins in Adorno's 'accusation', when he writes of poetry after the mechanised and wholesale destruction of human life at Auschwitz that its lyric modality and stylisation are rendered not only suspect, but 'barbaric', grievously unethical. For Adorno prevailing lyric modes served to 'transfigure the unthinkable fate' of Holocaust victims into a hedged semblance of meaning; this he considered a great 'injustice'.³⁵⁹ Although the 'unthinkable fate' in which my poetics are implicated is not one of world-historical catastrophe, the ethical ramifications of Adorno's critique hold true.

Poets from Charles Reznikoff to Rob Halpern respond to Adorno's implicit challenge by rejecting both the redemptive rhetoric of the lyric mode, and the meaning-making exercise of narrative. In Reznikoff's *Holocaust*, poetic sensibility is stripped and the lyric 'I' banished in favour of an unblinking and invisible witness.³⁶⁰ Reznikoff was a lawyer, and his text is composed entirely from the transcripts of testimony taken at Nuremberg during the trials of major Nazi war criminals, and at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. The result is a stark poetics

³⁵⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (Routledge, 1974) p.362.

³⁶⁰ Charles Reznikoff, *Holocaust* (Five Leaves Publications, 2009).

that does not merely 'fail' to console, but meets the ethical imperative for some experiences to remain beyond consolation:

The women begged for their lives:
they were young, they were ready to work.
They were ordered to rise and run
and the SS men drew their revolvers and shot all five;

and then kept pushing the bodies with their feet
to see if they were still alive
and to make sure they were dead
shot them again.³⁶¹

Halpern's work negotiates similar territory, and in both *Common Place* and *Music for Porn* tender lyric moments are compromised, brutally undercut or entangled by official, clinical and legislative language, these various authoritarian discourses merging with a radically repurposed erotic violence.³⁶² *Common Place* interrogates the relationship of the body to the military and economic systems that govern our contingent moment. For Halpern the crisis *is* capitalism, and through the autopsied body of a detainee at Guantanamo Bay he interrogates the debasement and destruction in which globalisation has rendered all of us complicit and compliant

³⁶¹ Reznikoff (p.7).

³⁶² Rob Halpern, *Common Place* (Ugly Duckling Press, 2015), Rob Halpern, *Music for Porn*, (Nightboat Books, 2012).

Life being the incorporation
Of yr remains this waste
My filthy residue the poem
Being matter

—*lacking yr substance*.³⁶³

Halpern's poetics does not embody a wholesale rejection of the lyric, but instantiates a lyric mode sensitized to its own implicatedness in the brutalities and barbarisms of contemporary American culture. In the above short fragment from *Common Place*, the lyric line itself endures a parallel fate to the living body it addresses, reduced to 'waste', 'remains', 'residue', 'matter'; to mere 'substance'. Throughout the text Halpern filters the depersonalising language of the autopsy through various lyric guises, most significantly Walt Whitman, whose transcendental lyric lines celebrate the body in all its sexualised expansiveness. Whitman's living bodies are exceptional, revelatory places. Halpern's dead bodies, by contrast, are rendered generic and debased. For Halpern then, 'barbarism' emerges not as something the lyric enacts, but something that is done *to* the lyric; military-industrial forces mangle modes of thought and expression as surely as flesh, producing a poetry that cannot be other than curbed, compressed, and maimed.³⁶⁴

Halpern's nuanced approach to the politics of the lyric initiate profound reflections upon my own creative practice, causing me to reconsider the stakes involved in creating a lyric space

³⁶³ Halpern (lines 7-11, p.120).

³⁶⁴ Dodie Bellamy, 'Adjustment Disorder: On Reading Rob Halpern's *Common Place*' *Fanzine*: <http://thefanzine.com/adjustment-disorder-on-reading-rob-halperns-common-place/> Also see Rob Halpern (2012) and Halpern (2015).

of commemoration and testimony: what do we lose in denying lyric poetry's capacity to speak to atrocity or trauma? I believe we lose the opportunity to attend to the ways in which various kinds of violence are visited upon language, and operate through discourse; if we renounce the lyric, we also ignore everything the lyric form is in conflict with and susceptible to on a sonic and structural level. Might lyric poetry not function as a space of investigation into its own limits and moments of fissure?

I am also moved to ponder: what would replace the lyric form? Reznikoff would substitute the lyric line with a bald rhetoric reminiscent of the legal trial or news bulletin. Yet, in evoking the strictures of a legal framework, we would fail to account for the diversity and strangeness of actual victim testimony; reducing the complex inner experiences of victims to a plain recitation of facts.³⁶⁵ Legal trials embed within themselves the notion of finality; they attach more value to material and documentary evidence than the subjective ephemera of seeing and saying.³⁶⁶ The legal framework demands 'proof', and have tended to diminish or to treat as secondary the experiences and testimonies of individuals, especially when those individuals belong to a marginalised or oppressed group. I believe that the openness of the lyric poem far outweighs the closure of the trial: it offers a scene of negotiation between the pain felt by an individual and the collective political engagement such an individual demands.

³⁶⁵ In shaping my understanding of the complexities of victim testimony Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (Yale University Press, 1991) has been invaluable.

³⁶⁶ Marie-Bénédicte Dembour and Emily Haslam, 'Silencing Hearings? Victim-Witnesses at War Crimes Trials' *European Journal of International Law* (2004): <http://www.ejil.org/pdfs/15/1/336.pdf>

It can become, in Jennifer Duque's memorable phrase, a scene of 'subaltern saying.'³⁶⁷ This is particularly true of the epistolary form.

For Rachel Blau DuPlessis the letter form allows for an argumentative dialogue at the borders of the critical and the lyrical. 'Draft 52: Midrash' is an intertextual conversation with Theodor Adorno's statements about the possibilities of poetry after the Shoah; as Naomi Shulman writes, it 'institutes itself as a communicative and memorial space over and against an imagined elaboration of Adorno's basis for an ethical interdiction of the poetic.'³⁶⁸

Why should anything be written or not

what is a "crisis"

what is an "event"

what is a "policy"

what is "normal"

what is "hegemony"³⁶⁹

'Draft 52: Midrash' uses the epistolary form to imagine the poem as a space of investigation and negotiation; a space inside of which thinking occurs about the tensions between poem as document and as aesthetic artefact; thinking about the definition and the meaning of

³⁶⁷ Jennifer Duque, 'Can the Queer Subaltern Speak?' *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 7 (2014): <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol7/iss1/11>

³⁶⁸ Naomi Shluman, 'At the critical/poetic boundary: Rachel Blau DuPlessis's arguments with Adorno' *Jacket2*: <https://jacket2.org/article/criticalpoetic-boundary>

³⁶⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Draft 52: Midrash' *Drafts: Drafts 39-57, Pledge, with Draft, Unnumbered: Précis* (Salt, 2004) pp.141-157.

words. 'Draft 52' demonstrates 'the conflict between needing to insist upon the reality of suffering and being unable to articulate it' in an unrelenting gesture towards an unnameable reality.³⁷⁰

Contemporary feminist poets such as Joelle Taylor and Alana O' Kelly have developed their own strategies for complicating the lyric mode; infiltrating documentary texts with performative elements of oral lament or keening. In her 2017 collection *Songs My Enemy Taught Me* Taylor uses a mixture of oral testimony, found text, and personal experience to bear witness to the trauma of her own sexual abuse, but also to confront the chronic and on-going sexual exploitation and abuse of women world-wide. As discussed in the previous chapter, the sonic substance of Taylor's poems can be characterised by rapid, rhythm-led lines and an urgent confessional cadence and tone. Taylor, with her background in theatre, describes herself as a 'performance poet', and her work is meant to be performed.³⁷¹

However, in the 'Songs of Survival' section, roughly midway through the collection, the text is suddenly intercut by two copies of the Department for Work and Pensions form *NCC1 4/17: Support for a child conceived without your consent*. On the left hand side an unmutated copy of the form, the stark, banal cruelty of which forces a sudden interruption in the reader's fluid interaction with the text. On the right, portions of the form are obscured or 'redacted' in a simultaneous inversion of and comment upon the institutional erasures of women's testimony. The copy reads:

Support... rape... through... this... mean... detailed... coercive... and controlling... form.³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Shluman: <https://jacket2.org/article/criticalpoetic-boundary>

³⁷¹ Biography appears on Taylor's official website: <http://joelletaylor.co.uk/joelle-taylor-biography>.

³⁷² Taylor (pp.92-93).

The insertion of this profoundly unmusical piece of state apparatus into a work of performance-led poetry functions as a critique upon both the narrative demands of witnessing imposed on the victims of rape by governments, societies and systems, and of the lyric's – and by extension, language's – inability to encompass, console or adequately express the trauma of rape.

At this juncture it is worth considering how 'Songs of Survival' makes use of the epistolary convention of redaction, invoking and subverting the aesthetics of censorship. This aspect of Taylor's work warrants consideration not least because it places this U.K.-based performance poet in conversation with her American avant-garde colleagues, specifically, with Rob Halpern and Rachel DuPlessis. These three poets conjure in common the presence of an oppressive administering apparatus in order to ask questions about the ethics and the limits of language.

For Rob Halpern, in both *Music for Porn* and *Common Place*, the black bar of the redaction functions as a textual counterpart to the bodily wounds of the poems' grieved for subject.³⁷³ For Halpern, the wound is 'the ultimate figure of eroticized presence', an irrevocable absence within the body into which it is an interruption.³⁷⁴ The redaction, for Halpern, is therefore radically reincarnated as a scene of desire, subverting its intended use as an instrument of military or government coercion. As Halpern writes in 'To burn with love (a suite)', 'If the ban

³⁷³ Halpern (2012), and Halpern (2015).

³⁷⁴ Sam Ladkin, 'The Onanism of Poetry' *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 20:4 (2015) pp.131-156: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0969725X.2015.1096638>

is a form of devotion / What might it mean to burn'.³⁷⁵ The black bar is transformed: a disruption, rather than a limit; it compromises the integrity of the text, signalling not only a desire for, but the possibility of, relation at the very point of relation's prohibition.

In section 12 of 'Draft 52: Midrash' by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, the black bar of the redaction seems to signal both the 'the eradication of words and the impossibility of vision'.³⁷⁶ The poem's appeal to 'Eye only' appears to interrogate the impulse towards empathy as mediated through shared language, asking what the ethical limitations of putting one's self in another's place might be. For DuPlessis, the black bar is a place of critical questioning: how to preserve the human presence in the face of an atrocity that reduces humans to nameless, arbitrary 'mounds'? When the name is rendered moot by the sheer scale of the trauma, can anyone be truly said to 'own' or possess such an experience? And in this context do accusations of appropriation still possess any meaning?

"I started out."

Forced to work in this factory

killing, stripping, burning,

or killed and stripped and burned

"I am put in this place."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Personal pronouns are moot. Eye only.

Poetry constructed of enormity:

³⁷⁵ Rob Halpern, 'to burn with love (a suite)' *Common Place* (Ugly Duckling Press, 2015) pp.120, lines 7-11.

³⁷⁶ Shluman: <https://jacket2.org/article/criticalpoetic-boundary>

mounds – of faces, limbs, shoes, rags.

The shadow line of times and places.³⁷⁷

This brief exploration of these three related text-centred practices is important to this enquiry because it exposes hitherto unexplored affinities between modes of poetry considered by existing research to be mutually exclusive. However, it is equally important to understand Taylor's poetic project in stated, performance-led contexts, as being deeply concerned with the lament, not solely as a space in which grief is shared, but also anger; an anger which shapes communal identity and shared solidarities between women.³⁷⁸ As Angela Bourke and Kate Antosik-Parsons have both written, the traditional caoin established through performative strategy, a shared discursive space where 'memory, mourning and protest were inextricably located' and in which the keening woman became a kind oracle or psychopomp, presiding over community transitions and crises.³⁷⁹ Indeed, in the brief time between death and burial she was granted licence not only to grieve unreservedly, but to express criticism to imprecate, abjure, menace and to warn.³⁸⁰

Contemporary performance artist Alana O' Kelly interacts with the caoin in just this way, particularly through her piece *Chant Down Greenham*.³⁸¹ In this performance she becomes

³⁷⁷ Blau DuPlessis (pp.141-157).

³⁷⁸ Bourke (p.55).

³⁷⁹ Antosik-Parsons (pp.214). Also see Bourke (p.55).

³⁸⁰ Angela Partridge (p.193).

³⁸¹ Antosik-Parsons (p.214). See also Kate Antosik-Parsons, 'Migrancy, Mobility and Memory: Visualising Belonging and Displacement in Jaki Irvine's *The Silver Bridge* (2003)' *Heritage, Diaspora*

part sean-bheanbhocht, part soothsayer, issuing not just a howl of anguished lament for an imagined nuclear doom, but drawing on the subversive post or anti-colonial components of the caoin to address ideas of memory, identity and cultural 'otherness', as well as the processes by which this otherness is inflicted upon us.³⁸²

The oral lament is a supple Cixousian practice: a fluid, transformative form that embeds and inscribes female experience.³⁸³ It is also a challenge to the 'hierarchies of grievability' constructed by nations, states and institutions.³⁸⁴ Both Bakhtin and Kristeva have written about the ways in which intertextuality, or the 'transposition' of discourse from one source to another creates a complicated dialogic interaction between the borders of both utterances, as well as addressing the political, economic and ideological forces associated with them.³⁸⁵

What interactions, then, and what relationships, does the incorporation into written practice of an ephemeral, process-based form such as keening expose?

and the Consumption of Culture: Movements in Irish Landscapes ed. Iane Sabenacio Nititham and Dr Rebecca Boyd (Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

³⁸² The Sean-Bheanbhocht, Irish for the 'Poor old woman' is a traditional figure in Irish lament songs. In her essay 'Keening the Nation: The Bean Chainte, the Sean BheanBhocht, and Women's Lament in Irish Nationalist Narrative' *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* ed. Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole (Craysford Press 1999) pp.39 -55, Kathryn Conrad suggests that the figure has its origins in the traditional practice of the caoin.

³⁸³ McKibben (p.216).

³⁸⁴ Jahan Ramazani, 'Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning' *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* ed. Karen Weisman (OUP Oxford, 2010) p.617.

³⁸⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel. Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art' ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora et al, in Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Indiana University Press, 1991) p.131.

Firstly, such incorporation disputes the continued privileging of written text in literary studies, and the implied narrative of 'progress' from oral cultures to more elaborated or 'civilised' written ones. Poetry criticism has tended to marginalise performance, seeing it merely as a secondary mode of presentation, rather than, as scholars such as Richard Bauman and John Miles Foley suggest 'an enabling event'.³⁸⁶ Foley in particular emphasises the 'radical integration, or situatedness, of verbal art in cultural context' and this offers a challenge to the elegy and its claims to adequately contain or mediate grief.³⁸⁷ In the act of performance the lament breaks back into an implicated contingent world, asserting again that world's responsibilities both to the dead and to the grieving. What drives the poetics of traumatised loss is not merely inconsolable grief but irreconcilable anger. These are politically 'situated' poems, whose most devastated utterance is equally an accusation and a protest.

When she advocates for elegy Fuss stresses that in our very contemporary concern with 'responsibility' to the dead, we may be forgetting our responsibilities to the living.³⁸⁸ She points to the basic human need for consolation, on a social as well as a personal level. Her argument is persuasive, although it does pose the following question: if we confine our loss to elegy, with its inscribed compunctions to contain and to console, do we not risk recapitulating the containment and coercion of grief by the wider world within the poem? As Jenny Edkins asks in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, can the traumatised utterance be

³⁸⁶ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Newbury House Publishers, 1978) p.8, and John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Indiana University Press, 1995) pp.24, 52.

³⁸⁷ Foley (p.28).

³⁸⁸ Fuss (p.66).

utilized and directed to productively complicate orderly narrative?³⁸⁹ Anger motivates, and might not a poetics of unrestrained grief speak to a deeper responsibility, a more pressing need: to alert us to acts of coercion and sites of social failure, and in doing so offer the possibility of radical change?

Further, Fuss fails to account for those whose experience of grief is not met by the 'artifice of elegy', or for our collective responsibility to those still living whose voices are erased or ignored by a poetics of consolation; those who cannot meet the demands of mourning, or conform to the moral imperative to 'heal' placed upon them by society. In the next section I will probe deeper into the ways contemporary poets are utilizing the epistolary form to develop a poetics of grief, and of traumatic experience.

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In 2015 poet and artist Cynthia Cruz stated '...that which the mind can or will not recall, remains untranslatable, its own wild and inexplicable language. What the body recalls the mind may shut its windows of memory to. But we can give it a language, though the language can never be literal or cohesive in any narrative manner. Instead, this type of memory remains inarticulable – and those who attempt to translate these memories into words find

³⁸⁹ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) p.133.

themselves faced with silence or its various iterations: stutter, holes, and compulsive repetition.³⁹⁰

In this essay Cruz identifies not only the necessary work of writing traumatic experience, but also the risk inherent in such work, the risk of imprisoning yourself within iterative loops of loss. It is however, both for Cruz and for an emergent cohort of contemporary British poets, important and timely work, and the letter, with its network of therapeutic associations is the arena in which this work is often carried out. Contemporary poets who engage with mental health issues and incorporate their own lived experience of the therapeutic program into their writing often consciously incorporate the therapist's assessing eye as a haunting, potentially censoring presence in their poetry.

The work that emerges from or incorporates aspects of the poet's therapeutic program disputes as much as it engages proscribed therapeutic strategies, particularly those associated with narrative therapy. Narrative letter writing is a widely offered scriptotherapeutic technique, advocated by both the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), and as an adjunct to various Cognitive Behavioural Therapies [CBTs].³⁹¹ It has become increasingly popular over the last decade, inspired to a large extent by the writings of Epston and White who attest that narrative therapy extends the possibility

³⁹⁰ Cynthia Cruz 'Notes Toward a New Language: Silence: On Tacita Dean' *Poetry Foundation* (2015): <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/04/notes-toward-a-new-language-silence-on-tacita-dean/>

³⁹¹ *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology* ed. Morton M. Silverman, Alan L. Berman, and Ronald W. Maris (The Guilford Press, 2000) pp.40-43. This textbook provides a guide for reading the poetry of patients symptomatically.

for participants to become 'self-authored', to create their own 'stories' of who they are and how they live.³⁹² A rise in the popularity of narrative therapy can also be read as a response to the material and economic pressures placed upon mental health and social care programs, as government funding is cut and services become increasingly over-subscribed. Narrative letter writing is free to administer and can be conducted remotely with no great expenditure of time or resources. Any research into its efficacy and ethics is therefore timely and potentially important.

In her 'Letter to Dr. Moosa' Melissa Lee-Houghton subverts a structured epistolary interaction between doctor and patient.³⁹³ The therapeutic model for her poem is a standard written component of CBT, where participants are encouraged to write letters to their doctors recording significant themes or feelings arising from their sessions. The letters function both as an official record of progress, and as a subjective account of hopes, frustrations and questions raised by the therapeutic interaction. Within the therapeutic context these letters form part of a dialogue between doctor and patient, but Lee-Houghton's text precludes such a possibility. Instead, the poem insists on its right to be taken on its own terms, to stand outside of clinical interpretation. The doctor is not given his right to reply, to assimilate back into structured clinical discourse the unwieldy emotional rhetoric of the poet's lived experience.

³⁹² Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (W.W. Norton, 1990) pp.1-37.

³⁹³ White and Epston (pp.80-163). Also see Sasha Pilkington, 'Writing narrative therapeutic letters: Gathering, recording and performing lost stories' *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy* (2018) pp.20-48. And Lee-Houghton (pp.33).

Lee-Houghton's text confronts, challenges, insults, attacks and accuses, but it does not offer the possibility of response or of developing dialogue:

...I am nothing to you but a risk you chanced and lost –
a broken little girl who exists on a diet of solitude and nihilism,
whose therapists all gave up after five sessions of
my deflection of their pointlessness of their
neuro-scientific cognitive-behavioural training.
So fix me, puma –
or start locking my cage...³⁹⁴

In its refusal to accept or extend the possibility of a diagnostic rejoinder, the poem opposes the implied imperative to 'heal' contained within the therapeutic program, and negates the expected linear trajectory of therapeutic discourse.

'Heroine Lullaby' by Lee-Houghton's contemporary, Bobby Parker, may also be considered an important example of a contemporary British poet mobilising therapeutic uses of the epistle form.³⁹⁵ The poem is modelled upon the 'unsent' letters that are a common feature of addiction counselling and CBT.³⁹⁶ The letters, addressed to significant people from the participant's life, are intended to acknowledge and allow the writer to take responsibility for both the feelings they have concerning that person, and their actions and behaviour towards them. In Parker's poem the therapeutic intention and value of the letter is undermined or

³⁹⁴Lee-Houghton (p.33).

³⁹⁵ Bobby Parker, 'Heroine Lullaby' *Blue Movie* (Nine Arches Press, 2014) p.59.

³⁹⁶ Riordan (p.263).

subverted by the fact of its publication; the piece is in fact titled 'an open letter'. The poem, nominally addressed to Parker's estranged wife, is framed within a constructed and exploded privacy. While the enclosed and intimate nature of the epistle form invites the assumption of connection, the reader is refused admission and ultimate disclosure is withheld by a poem whose proper names, private jokes and visual motifs serve as signs towards a relationship whose essential nature and meaning the reader cannot decode and from which they are excluded.

In the 'gentle reader' and 'for the dead' sections of *narrowcasting*, my own work frequently and forcefully tests the limits of narrative letter writing technique, and its ability to console or reorient experience. Despite following a proscribed therapeutic pattern, the poems embody a continually threatening incoherence, an experience of non-sequential time, and other elements of anti-narrative.³⁹⁷ Through these techniques I ask questions about the ethics of 'witnessing', and the narrative demands placed upon those compelled to recount their experiences of trauma within a variety of clinical and publication contexts.

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The poets of the unconsoled experience engage both text-centred and performance-led modes of practice to assert that the work of the poem is not to construct a linear trajectory of personal 'healing' but to create a space of encounter with those bodies and voices unable or

³⁹⁷ David Read Johnson Ph.D and Hadar Lubin, *Principles and Techniques of Trauma-Centered Psychotherapy* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2015) p.274, and Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p.224.

unwilling to heal. Healing, in this context, is stripped of its moral authority; its pressures and imperatives subjected to scrutiny. The therapeutic outcome of reintegration is rejected as it requires daily rededication to and participation in the social structures responsible for the originary trauma: for Taylor, the patriarchy; for Lee-Houghton a misogynistic clinical scene.

Frequently dual modes of practice – the written and the oral, the ephemeral and the material – intersect within the letter. The ‘gentle reader’ project that became a generative tool for much of the material in *narrowcasting* was provoked by the idea that the physical act of writing a letter could be a form of lament practice.³⁹⁸ The ‘gentle reader’ project investigates the way in which the scars of stored bodily experience are inscribed upon and mediated through my writing materials; it foregrounds the intimate materiality of the text through the noisy physicality of my manual typewriter, and suggests in the repetitive, tactile effort used to create the ‘letters’ that they bare the tangible traces of my grief.³⁹⁹ My epistolary practice

³⁹⁸ The setting up and eventual abandonment of the project is discussed in some detail within the reflective material. The now defunct ‘gentle reader’ website may be accessed at <https://smithyofhersoul.wixsite.com/gentlereader>

³⁹⁹ For an in depth discussion of materiality, particularly with regards to the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and the letter in the archive, please see the digital research journals that accompany this thesis, specifically the entry ‘THE DICKINSON MATERIAL’/ MATERIALITY, EPISTOLOGRAPHY, ARCHIVE’ at <https://dog-sealion-43cn.squarespace.com/config/> which is also reproduced in the appendix.

Although Dickinson’s hybrid epistolary and poetic practice speaks in interesting ways to much of my research, I took the decision not to include it in the published thesis as it replicated much of the thinking already produced by a robust pre-existing body of work. For instance, Martha Nell Smith, ‘Because The Plunge From the Front Overturned Us: The Dickinson Electronic Archives Project’ *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (1999) p. 133:

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2456824&>

works towards a definition of poetry that, like trauma, takes the images, feelings, rhythms, sounds, and the physical sensations of the body as ‘evidence.’⁴⁰⁰ In other words, a poetry that embodies a unique form of ‘aesthetic knowing’ that renders it uniquely appropriate to the telling of trauma.⁴⁰¹

As Derrida suggests in *Envois*, to have any kind of language is to invoke the spectre of publicity, because even the most confidential communications between people are necessarily inserted into a public space – legibility, the ability to *be* read, the possibility of *being* read, being an essential, irreducible feature of language.⁴⁰² The poetic epistle exists across various systems of permission, poetic and therapeutic, and allows for multiple kinds of charged disclosure. My own creative practice uses the therapeutic letter as a way of navigating the inherently compromising publicity of written language, creating an intimate liminal territory where the various decorums of received poetic practice are suspended, and other kinds of writing, other voices may emerge.

Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (University of Texas Press, 2010) p.2, Kristen Kreider’s, “‘Scrap”, “Flap”, “Strip”, “Stain”, “Cut”: The Material Poetics of Emily Dickinson’s Later Manuscript Pages’ *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, Volume 19, Number 2 (John Hopkins University Press, 2010) pp.67-103, and Marta Werner, *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (University of Michigan Press, 1995). For a full list of my reading on Dickinson, please consult the bibliography.

⁴⁰⁰ Cassie Premo Steele, *We Heal from Memory: Sexton, Corde, Anzaldua, and the Poetry of Witness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) p.3.

⁴⁰¹ Peggy Penn, in *Literature and Therapy: A Systemic View* ed. Elizabeth Irene Burns (Karnac Books, 2003) p.98.

⁴⁰² Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, (University of Chicago Press, 2012) p.90.

Louise Glück describes this willingness to be open to ‘the ambivalent, complex, and truly dangerous’ in poetry as an embodied form of ‘poetic intelligence’.⁴⁰³ Glück defines this kind of ‘intelligence’ as lacking ‘focussed investment in conclusion, being naturally wary of its own assumptions. It derives its energy from a willingness to discard conclusion, its willingness, in fact, to discard anything’.⁴⁰⁴ Embodying poetic intelligence through practice offers a release or escape from the narrative demands of witnessing imposed by therapy, just as the use of the therapeutic letter suggests spheres of operation and meaning outside those prefigured by the publically accessible published poem.

In considering the unique properties of the epistolary form and its ability to speak to crisis and trauma, perhaps the most important factor is its ‘address to another.’⁴⁰⁵ When Lucie Brock-Broido writes that ‘the epistle procession’ is ‘that impure, irresistible form of prose which lies on top of poetry’ she invites us to think about how the epistolary figures in a revival of the lyric ‘you’.⁴⁰⁶ Citing Brock-Broido’s *The Master Letters*, with its ambiguous use of address, Ann Kenniston describes the characteristic mode of lyric poetry in the nineteen-nineties as ‘apostrophic’, extending ‘the traditional notion that the lyric is characterized by

⁴⁰³ In Mary Kate Azcuy, ‘Persona, Trauma and Survival in Louise Glück’s Postmodern, Mythic, Twenty-First-Century “October”’, *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry* ed. Anne Karhio and Seán Crosson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p.35. Also see Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Ecco, 1994) p.56. And Mary Helen Snyder, ‘Our “other history”: poetry as a meta-metaphor for narrative therapy’ *Journal of Family Therapy* 18 (Blackwell Publishers, 1996) pp.337-395.

⁴⁰⁴ Azcuy (p.56).

⁴⁰⁵ Steele (p.3).

⁴⁰⁶ Brock-Broido (preface viii).

turning away from its readers [...] Brock-Broido turns away not only from the addressee, but from the notion that there is a fixed addressee.⁴⁰⁷

In “‘The Fluidity of Damaged Form’: Apostrophe and Desire in Nineties Lyric’ Kenniston explores what she considers to be the contradictory impulses or notions at the heart of poetic apostrophe: to – in Jonathon Culler’s memorable phrase – ‘make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces’ while simultaneously confining, silencing and suppressing the ‘other of apostrophe’; persisting in an act of address that its speaker knows to be unheard, while demanding that both speaker and reader pretend that this absent other is in fact present and capable of hearing.⁴⁰⁸ Kenniston makes the bold but intriguing claim that ‘Apostrophe in the lyric of the last ten years downplays the optimism (or perhaps the delusion) of traditional apostrophe – the faith that the other is there and can hear – by foregrounding the absence of its addressee.’⁴⁰⁹

Whether or not we find Kenniston’s definition of lyric apostrophe quite complete, her claims doubtless have implications for my own creative practice, and for any lyric-centred project of urgent address concerned with ‘creating an address for the traumatic specificity of experience that obliterates or silences the possibility of address’.⁴¹⁰ It demonstrates how

⁴⁰⁷ Ann Kenniston, “‘The Fluidity of Damaged Form’: Apostrophe and Desire in Nineties Lyric’ *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 42, No. 2, *Special Issue: American Poetry of the 1990s* (Summer, 2001) p.317.

⁴⁰⁸ Culler (p.139) and Kenniston (p.298) respectively,

⁴⁰⁹ Kenniston (p.315)

⁴¹⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) p.142.

poetic apostrophe might serve to complicate or sensitize the lyric mode, and challenge both the assumption of presence and the possibility of response evoked by address.

The work of witnessing – with its conscious and unconscious blurring of symptomatic and performative language cannot take place in solitude without a present and implicated reader.⁴¹¹ The poetics of the unconsoled experience are, by implication, also a poetics of urgent address to an ambiguous, potentially silent or absent ‘you’.

In the final chapter I will discuss the centrality of ‘address’ and the politics of naming in relation to both my own practice, and to successive generations of poets writing from grief, trauma, or the unconsoled experience. Lyric-critical discourses have been chiefly concerned with the overthrow of the lyric ‘I’ as a stable speaking subject, with the presence and purposes of a lyric ‘you’, often under-investigated.

A letter must be written to someone. As Dori Laub reminds us, ‘testimonies are not monologues’. What might it mean, then, if the addressee cannot or might choose not to hear?⁴¹²

The potential affinities and cohorts summoned by direct address are also of great importance to my own creative practice; invoking the presence of the other, emphasising the poem’s inherent sociality, and offering an important and timely strategy for negotiating between personal pain and the collective engagement and response such pain demands.

⁴¹¹ Felman, Laub, Cheung (p.70).

⁴¹² Laub (p.70).

CHAPTER FOUR

NAMING: EPISTOLARY POETRY'S AMBIGUOUS ADDRESS

This chapter seeks to offer an account of the importance of address to an epistolary poetics of unconsolated experience, and to identify a cohort of writers whose relationship to address has become increasingly urgent, fraught and politically charged, as greater pressure is applied to the 'cleaning up' or assimilating of traumatic experience, both from within poetry publication culture, and from inside the therapeutic programs whose stated aim is to 'heal' or 'process' those experiences.

To begin with we may compare the epistolary practices of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, as they offer insight into the complex ethics of address. Bishop was a poet greatly concerned with epistolary. As Bishop scholar Jonathan Ellis notes, she considered letters to be a genre in their own right, and in the many letters she wrote she details the many letters she read, from correspondents as diverse as Byron, Chekhov, Hart Crane, and Queen Victoria.⁴¹³ When she came to teach at Harvard, she ran a seminar entitled 'Letters: Readings in Personal Correspondence, Famous and Infamous, from the 16th to the 20th Centuries.' Outlining her proposed syllabus, Bishop wrote that she planned to include 'a nicely incongruous assortment of people' and to discuss correspondence 'as an art form or something', the qualifying, somewhat deflationary 'or something' belying the seriousness with which Bishop regarded the letter form, its affordances and ethics.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹³ Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (Ashgate Publishing, 2006) p.142.

⁴¹⁴ Ellis (p.142).

Bishop published few overtly epistolary poems, yet the letter's characteristic rhythms and rhetorical gestures, its combination of artifice and spontaneity (its 'mediated immediacy'), is prevalent throughout her published material.⁴¹⁵ The epistle form is most overtly evident within the long free verse poems she completed towards the end of her life, but here I would like to briefly consider the letter-like inflections that are scattered across the entire body of her work, with particular reference to *A Cold Spring* (1955), as exemplary and generative of an epistolary inflection that defines a good deal of her work. Throughout her writing life Bishop developed an epistolary aesthetic, marked by the use of intimate apostrophe, quotidian detail, and psychological realism. As Langdon Hammer notes, Bishop deployed letter-like characteristics in her poems to 'limit their literariness', moving them in the direction of 'generic indeterminacy'; away, in other words, from the strictures and system of opposed alternatives that structure conventional literary experience.⁴¹⁶

Letter-like properties abound in 'Letter to N.Y.' and the less explicitly epistolary 'Argument', both from *A Cold Spring*. 'Letter to N.Y.' encodes epistolary communication as an anxious, but generally positive experience. Bishop begins by entreating the named addressee, Louise Crane, to say 'where you are going and what you are doing' in her next letter.⁴¹⁷ This locates the letter within a body of on-going communication, with Bishop as one half of a correspondence, soliciting, but also pleurably anticipating, a response.

⁴¹⁵Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature. Vol. 2* ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Columbia University Press, 1992) p.234

⁴¹⁶ Langdon Hammer, 'Useless Concentration: Life and Work in Elizabeth Bishop's Letters and Poems' *American Literary History*, vol 9, no. 1 (1997) p.164.

⁴¹⁷ Elizabeth Bishop, 'Letter to N.Y.' *Poems* (Chatto & Windus, 2011) p.78, line2.

In proposing and imagining late-night 'pleasures' for her named addressee to pursue, Bishop ascribes her recipient active individual agency beyond the confines of the poem where the speaker cannot follow. In her wistful requests for information about her correspondent's life, she posits the existence of a reader who may be too busy to read or to reply.

The text contains other, more explicit elements of uncertainty, with New York by night bristling with ominous undertones, a precarious Gothic hinterland in which a sense of urgency that hovers somewhere between exhilaration and panic prevails. The cab driver in the second stanza speeds as if to save the occupant's soul, while the 'meter glares like a moral owl', an image which connotes both censure *and* threat.⁴¹⁸ The trees in the park, meanwhile, 'look so queer and green / standing alone in big black caves'.⁴¹⁹ Everywhere the ephemeral, hallucinatory quality of pleasure is underscored, as places melt like mirages into one another, and commonplace objects undergo a strange metamorphosis, queering and distorting the scene. Half heard jokes vanish into the ether like 'dirty words rubbed off a slate' and song are 'dim' like sounds heard underwater.⁴²⁰ There is a suggestion of (perhaps alcoholic) soddenness throughout, streets are 'watered', things happen in 'waves', but the poem returns to dry land in the penultimate stanza with the speaker imagining a dazed but hopeful addressee watching as 'one side of the building rises with the sun / like a glistening field of wheat.'⁴²¹ Bishop reserves her final stanza to state again, in a less emphatic or proprietary manner that she would 'like to know' what her correspondent is doing and where she is going, indicating that the 'pleasures' the poet envisaged represented just one possible

⁴¹⁸ Bishop (p.78, lines 7-8).

⁴¹⁹ Bishop (p.78, lines 9-10).

⁴²⁰ Bishop (p.78, lines 19-20).

⁴²¹ Bishop (p.78, lines 19-20).

avenue of experience. Nothing is known, chosen or decided, least of all by the speaker, and in this way Bishop abandons and resists the authorial omniscience, the privileged all-knowing 'I' that is often ascribed to lyric sensibility.

This close reading tells us something particular about Bishop's epistolary ethics, something that has become important to my own creative practice in resisting accusations of lyric self-absorption: namely that Bishop uses epistolary space to indicate what Siobhan Phillips has called 'a principled attention to intersubjective exchange.'⁴²² To put it another way, the epistolary form resists familiar assumptions about the lyric as an unmediated transcription of lone interiority, and instead moves us towards an understanding of poetry predicated on situated exchange and marked by sociality. As Virginia Jackson notes in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, the epistolary 'unsettles the terms' in which questions about the lyric's essential sociality are commonly posed.⁴²³

Langdon Hammer describes such intersubjective epistolary space as a 'third area', an intermediate zone neither solitary nor social, that transgresses or dismantles the lyric boundary between the private voice and its public appearance in favour of a porous and 'interpersonal' text.⁴²⁴ *A Cold Spring* is arguably the best example of Bishop's intersubjective epistolarity. 'Argument', for example, treats not of potential and anticipated connection, but of failed or delayed communion represented by the battle between, on one side distance and

⁴²² Siobhan Phillips, 'Elizabeth Bishop and the Ethics of Correspondence' *Modernism/modernity* 19, no.2 (2012) p.344.

⁴²³ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton University Press, 2013) p.283.

⁴²⁴ Hammer (p.164-165).

desire, and on the other days and voices. Yet, as Susan McCabe writes in *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, implied within the repetitive insistence of 'Days' against 'Distance' there is also 'time's blessing or "amen" – an acceptance and responsiveness that means "everything" if one allows even provisional reciprocity in others.'⁴²⁵ Accordingly, the poem ends with the rigid battle lines between these two opposing forces 'disarrayed', the 'intimidating sound' of those voices, not merely silenced but, in the language of a chivalric romance, dramatically and finally 'vanquished'. The 'battleground' between speaker and subject becomes 'gentle', and the possibility of connection is once more established.

In her study of Bishop's correspondent poems Heather Treseler suggests that this zone of 'epistolary relationship' in *A Cold Spring* allowed the poet to 'respond ingeniously', to qualify and complicate 'the jingoistic scripts of mid-century warfare', and to address 'the national obsession with civic privacy during the first decades of the Cold War.'⁴²⁶ In assimilating the conventions of intersubjective address Treseler locates Bishop within a cohort of Middle Generation American poets, such as Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Gwendolyn Brooks, who use letter-like tactics to infiltrate and undermine dominant social scripts and ideological discourses. Treseler's thesis, that epistolarity is the defining trait for this generation of poets, is persuasive, and I will revisit the poetry of Jarrell and Brooks later in this chapter, but in terms of an understanding of 'indeterminacy', 'indiscernibility' and of the way in which the epistolary form allows for a fruitful negotiation between private thought and public speech, Bishop is the most relevant and interesting example.

⁴²⁵ Susan McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, (Penn State Press, 2010) p.99.

⁴²⁶ Heather Treseler, 'Lyric Letters: Elizabeth Bishop's Epistolary poems' Ph.D diss. thesis, (University of Notre Dame, 2010) p.7.

Bishop is exemplary, I contend, because she approaches the epistolary in a uniquely nuanced way that differs from that of her poetic contemporaries. As evidence of this we might look at the points of divergence between Bishop's and Lowell's epistolary and poetic practices, with particular reference to Lowell's *Dolphin*, a collection which includes and edits, without consent, distraught and distressing letters written by his own estranged spouse, Elizabeth Hardwick, emphasising, as Debora Nelson notes in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, 'the absolute "privateness" of Hardwick's coerced collaboration to secure the publicness of his own "voice."' ⁴²⁷ It is important here to note the precise ways in which Lowell's notion of epistolary space and epistolary ethics differ so fundamentally from Bishop's.

Lowell shares with Bishop a sense of epistolary space as extending the possibility of collaboration in autobiography as a strategy for writing the self in relation to an 'other' or 'others', neither wholly public nor exclusively private. Yet Lowell's collaboration with Hardwick contains an implicit violence, predicated on the unequal power relationship between his public voice and her private one.

Lowell, as a confessing, omniscient lyric 'I' exercises absolute control of the borders between private life and public speech. David Gewanter suggests that the clarity of Hardwick's voice within the text inscribes her presence with 'autonomy' and 'integrity', yet in her documented and non-consenting presence Hardwick's agency is erased. Gewanter's argument conflates 'autonomy' with speech, and silence with *silencing*. What is taken away from Hardwick in the use of her personal correspondence is not her 'voice' as much as her freedom to use and to withdraw it as she would choose.

⁴²⁷ Debora Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (Columbia University Press, 2002) p.71

The text of *Dolphin* everywhere registers a persistent anxiety about letters, most overtly in 'Doubt 1. Draw', where Lowell asks 'Should revelation be sealed like private letters, / till all the beneficiaries are dead, / and our proper names become improper lives...'⁴²⁸ And indeed the collection raises some deep and important questions about the ethics, not just of letters, but of privacy in general, and its relationship to individual autonomy. These questions, as Treseler notes, are reflected, and reflections of a wider American culture preoccupied by the shifting and blurring of boundaries between domestic and political, historical and individual spheres of action.⁴²⁹ *Dolphin* was doubtless an important intervention into these debates.⁴³⁰

Bishop's epistolary practice, however, seems to me to offer a more radical and still relevant potential: her letter-like texts allow for and imply the possibility of silence, of recipients who may choose not to become respondents, or whose responses it is impossible to second guess or to control. Her epistolary inflections invite collaboration, not documenting presence, but contingency; registering the possibility of continuous and unpredictable communication.

This crucial yet subtle distinction between the epistolary practices of Lowell and Bishop has implications for my own practice, as I consider my own poetic letters as sites and occasions for ethical investigation into public and private 'voices', autonomy and collaboration.

⁴²⁸ David S. Gewanter, 'Child of Collaboration: Robert Lowell's "Dolphin"' *Modern Philology* Vol. 93, No. 2 (1995) p.200.

⁴²⁹ Treseler (p.8).

⁴³⁰ This period of anxiety in American culture is reflected in and responded to through the epistolary form in particular. This marks a significant moment of what I term 'epistolary eruption', an eruption we also witness across the contemporary poetic landscape in the work of DuPlessis, Halpern and Bonney, as they deploy the letter form in response to the shared anxieties of crisis capitalism.

Doubtless there is more to say on this subject, and I will return to the topic of contingency later in this chapter, but what I have set out to show through my use of classical, Enlightenment, and modern examples, is the epistle form's unique capacity for negotiating between private and public traditions of address, and for merging private and public modes of speech through strategies of complex concealment, 'indeterminacy' or 'indiscernibility', and how these strategies are mobilized in the epistolary projects of a range of poets to infiltrate, problematize or undermine dominant discourses or conception.

In the poems 'paradoxical undressing', 'false object permanence', and in the 'breath episodes' epistolary address has a dual or double function: naming serves to locate the poem historically, geography and culturally, but it also rejects incorporation by historical, geographical or cultural narratives and their hierarchies of grievability.⁴³¹

In 'paradoxical undressing' in particular Michael's name in its various iterations, particularly from English into Irish, suggests that identity itself is unstable and contested, both in terms of our shared heritage, which imposes various kinds of 'selfhood' onto us from without, but also wilfully, within the poem as a deliberate disobedience to being 'known' and in being known, being claimed, or absorbed:

i write your name with a capital letter. i write your name as a single initial. i abandon
your name completely. your name is not your body. your name is only a violent event
that puts an end to naming

⁴³¹ Ramazani (p.617).

But a name is also an intertextual fragment, gathering around itself a constellation of accretive associations and meanings. A poem does not exist inside a vacuum, present always is the possibility of publicity, and with that possibility a wider host of contexts and connections. This being the case, what does it mean to use proper names within a poem?

And how does this kind of referential specificity operate within and across both poetry and therapy?⁴³²

The decision to name is not neutral, poetically, ethically or psychologically. To begin with the proper name makes a tacit claim for the authenticity of the text as representative of an embodied experience that exists – historically, geographically – outside of the poem. It frames the terms of encounter between the reader and the text, and it moves this encounter from the page and into the wider contingent world. It is a device for raising stakes, and for conferring status: this is not poetry but testimony, this is not poetry but confession, this is not poetry but ‘truth’. More than this, the proper name orientates and anchors the writer and the thinker, as philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas puts it ‘Perhaps the names of persons whose saying signifies a face – proper names in the middle of all these common names and commonplaces – can resist the dissolution of meaning and help us to speak.’⁴³³

The presence of proper names argues against abstraction, and in a world of theoretical and ontological uncertainty, they connect discourse to lived reality and subjective experience. To insist upon the named specificity of real people, over again, almost obsessively, is to resist

⁴³² ‘Michael’, along with ‘Martyn’, is a central figure in the poems, a figure whose relationship to the poem’s speaker can never be fully uncovered or understood; whose presence is a signpost towards an intimacy the reader can never fully reconstruct nor participate in.

⁴³³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Proper names* (Athlone Press, 1996), p.4.

collusion in their erasure or absorption; to prevent their assimilation into homogenous generality, statistically or narratively.

As with other poetic projects that make a mode or a commentary out of naming, the poems in *narrowcasting* function not only as a work of lament, but as a space for and a way of thinking about the practice of naming and what it means to name within a poem. As with Frank O'Hara's poems of coterie, both the 'gentle reader' and 'for the dead' sequences name others and cite shared experiences to suggest or to satirise kinships within the 'poetry community', and to ask what might happen when those poems escape from (or collide with) the 'inner circles' of that community.⁴³⁴ The 'gentle reader' poems in particular involve an entire cast whose identities are both concealed and alluded to through pseudonyms and ciphers. Thus the 'swan maiden' appears as an object of outlandish enmity, and the 'beauteous lady x', as friend, heroine, and fellow 'girlgang' member. The poems use irony and humour to play with and test various kinds of privileged disclosure (the epistolary, the therapeutic) and to fruitfully blur the boundaries between private and public utterance.

Later in the text naming is used in other, more specific ways. In 'paradoxical undressing' the figure of Michael is used to interrogate the ways in which names are both susceptible and resilient to particular types of 'translation' and absorption within poetry; Michael stands for – or comes to replace – the violent event that destroyed the living Michael. But Michael is also part of an inter-textual and cross-cultural web of inferences, allusions and associations to which the name belongs and upon which it draws to support and create meaning.

⁴³⁴ Lytle Shaw, 'On Coterie: Frank O'Hara' *Jacket* #10 (1999): <http://jacketmagazine.com/10/shaw-on-ohara.html>

The Michael of the *narrowcasts* is also Saint Michael, the Arch Angel, and is also the Michael of Wordsworth's pastoral meditation on patient and accepting loss. Michael is the 'hey Mickey' of the ridiculous pop-song current during our early adolescence; he is also the hunger striker Michael Devine. The poems conflate and confuse these identities in performative ways symptomatic of the disorientation of violent grief; they also enact in figurative and lyric language the obsessive and psychopathological features of my own disorder. The difficulty for the reader is in understanding how to 'decode' or separate these various slippages, how to interpret or 'take' them: as performances of trauma or disordered thought? As clues, or inter-textual jests and feints that hint at meaning? As figurative descriptions of emotional realities? A certain non-trivial effort is required to enter the poem's space and discover that something else is intended, something buried within a shared memory that purposefully and antagonistically eludes the possibility of full disclosure, or continuous coherent interpretation.

The poems embrace and enact all of these various aspects, but they also comment upon and critique the texts they reference and echo. 'Michael' recalls Wordsworth's poem precisely to refute the Romantic ideal of patient and accepting loss. He becomes Saint Michael in part as a comment upon the violent preoccupations of Catholic iconography, and the way Northern Irish politics exploits religious visual language for sectarian ends. The Arch Angel who fights injustice with a fiery sword prefigures with bitter irony the real Michael's death by gang violence. The poems then work to separate these two identities, the figurative and the literal, to strip Michael of his metaphorical or archetypal associations, and to locate the death as something that happened to Michael and only to Michael, first and foremost to the body. The poems first collide in order to deconstruct political, religious, clinical and literary understandings of loss.

Contemporary writers such as Rob Halpern and Kari Edwards also inhabit this territory; relating textual bodies to their living equivalents and using graphic or visceral language to mount forensic reconstructions of identity, as in Edwards' *Bharat jiva*:

exposed to a potential body, exposed constantly
exposed, broken to bits to prove death's limits...⁴³⁵

In Halpern's *Common Place* loss collides with and infiltrates the murderous projects of late capitalism and the military industrial complex.⁴³⁶ Halpern's text is a relentlessly self-interrogating space in which questions are asked about the imaginative colonisation of the 'other' and the mediation of experience through lyric language and form:

Yr mind being that of the mark
– et it's not the secret of yr body
I want but the secret of value be

– ing the thing itself or what
Mystery connects me

— *to the world*⁴³⁷

⁴³⁵ Kari Edwards, *Bharat jiva* (Litmus Press Belladonna Books, 2009) p.68.

⁴³⁶ Halpern (2012). Also Halpern (2015).

⁴³⁷ Halpern (p.115).

In this section from *Common Place* the body of a Guantanamo Detainee becomes a spur around which anxieties concerning representation constellate. Halpern's text questions how lyric address is implicated in the removal of the subject, and the body's subjugation to and absorption by market forces and political histories, connecting 'mark' – the act of writing – to 'market' and the othering ascription of value in which writing is implicated.

But what of proper names that speak not of real people but mythological figures? And what of a poetics that draws upon myths that extend beyond the self?

In the six-part poem 'October' from her 2006 collection *Averno*, Louise Glück uses historical and not contemporary names, and classical rather than personal myth to allegorically represent the after-effects of catastrophic trauma. In transposing the story of Demeter and Persephone into postmodern, post -9/11 America, Glück interrogates her own role in the recreation of myth and the representation of history:

It is true that there is not enough beauty in the world.

It is also true that I am not competent to restore it...⁴³⁸

Glück uses the myth of Demeter and Persephone to reference an implied story of – not unimaginable but unrepresentable – suffering, a suffering that cannot be remembered, forgotten, or fully accommodated within history or historical narrative. Instead the cyclical nature of their anguish is used to represent the looping time of trauma; the ancient cycle of the seasons transformed into the endless repetitive experience of PTSD, as Demeter and Persephone find themselves afflicted again by the retraumatizing stimuli of the twenty-first

⁴³⁸ Louise Glück, 'October, 5' *Averno* (Carcenet, 2006) p.15.

century.⁴³⁹ Cathy Caruth describes the experience of PTSD as one which engenders ‘repeated [...] thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with [...] increased arousal to [...] stimuli recalling the event.’⁴⁴⁰ These effects are represented symptomatically within the text, with the fragmented nature of traumatic disclosure mirrored in the poem’s broken line, its repetitions and silences.⁴⁴¹

Glück’s ‘October’ is marked by another feature of traumatic experience: the disorganised and fragmented ‘self’ or ‘narrative persona’. At times the reader is uncertain who is speaking; the boundaries between the reflective, sense-making contemporary poet-voice, and those of mythical mother and daughter are often blurred. This is a component of the ‘aesthetic knowing’ of poetry.⁴⁴² This form of knowing allows for ‘loss of identity’ and an ambiguous relationship between ‘observer and observed’.⁴⁴³ It also embodies the collapse stable selfhood that occurs following trauma. In *Averno* ‘I’ and ‘you’ are as porous and confused as ‘history’ and ‘myth’, deconstructing the relationship between writer and reader, and debating the text’s historical claims for authenticity, authority, and truth.

⁴³⁹ Caruth (p.63).

⁴⁴⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p.1.

⁴⁴¹ Judith Lewish Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 2015) p.41.

⁴⁴² Peggy Penn in *Literature and Therapy: A Systemic View* ed. Elizabeth Irene Burns (Karnac Books, 2003) p.98.

⁴⁴³ Penn (p.98).

For Glück, Demeter and Persephone function as traumatised archetypes, and this is something I embody within my own creative practice, particularly within the ‘mary’ sections of my ‘gentle reader’ sequence, where I use the personae of both named and unnamed ‘others’ to enact and comment upon the instability of identity and the unreliability of memory, traumatic or otherwise.

The ‘mary’ letters begin by referencing Mary Barnes in address to one of my many unnamed ‘gentle readers’.⁴⁴⁴ The reader is then transformed *into* ‘mary’, and through the application of naming, is forced to participate in a performative theatre of obsession, before I put on ‘my mary mask’ and for the duration of the poem become Mary Barnes:

i’m mary and i am on the stairs going *oh! oh! oh!* the reeling lustre of spring. feeling fizzy. pithed the atom. iodined the sky. [...] *i’m a shark!* i’m in my swerving element. all teeth, my skin a yet more grievous mouth. madness – unlike naming – is a truth you cannot step in twice.

In this way I use the obsessive, schizotypal features of my PTSD to disrupt the hierarchical relationship between writer and reader; rejecting ‘confessional’ modes of encounter which cast the reader as confessant, voyeur or absolute other, to instead embrace the potential for an intersubjective dialogic interaction. In this way my creative practice embodies the assertion that trauma not only exerts a peculiar power over the rhetorics and aesthetics of poetry, but that poetry can utilize trauma as a transformative tool, one that has the power to renegotiate terms of social as well as textual encounter.

⁴⁴⁴ Mary Barnes, English artist and painter who suffered from schizophrenia and was treated at Kingsley Hall by R.D. Laing.

Within the 'gentle reader' sequence the figure of Mary Barnes can be read as both rhetorical and symptomatic device, standing for the 'mask', 'false self' or 'persona' that emerges following trauma, but also reflecting my intellectual discomfort with Romantic conceptions of the lyric 'I' and the lyric 'you'. The 'gentle reader' poems make a project from anonymous, ambiguous address precisely to explore this mistrust, to test Roland Barthes' contention that writing is not the expression of privileged interiority, but that the act of writing constitutes 'the destruction of every voice, every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.'⁴⁴⁵ To explore this idea in the letter, which promises such enclosed and intimate specificity is to question the letter's ability in either poetic or therapeutic practice to disclose or contain subjective experience.

As Lucie Brock-Broido writes in her preface to *The Master Letters*, within these variously populated spaces the poem's 'I' is accessing an imaginative sorority, becomes 'a brood of voice, a flock of women...'⁴⁴⁶ It is a space where notions of 'I' and 'you' are also tested, where addressee and addresser both take on 'the fractured countenance of a composite portrait'. The 'mary' of my 'gentle reader' sequence is a cipher for particular modes of obsessive or hallucinatory thinking, dislocated from the historical and social context of the real-life Mary Barnes. As such she is free to attract other meanings, to cluster them around herself and to construct a complex personal 'myth' and imaginative landscape.

⁴⁴⁵ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image Music Text* (Fontana Press New Edition, 1997) p.142.

⁴⁴⁶ Brock-Broido, *The Master Letters* (preface viii).

In her 2013 collection *Stay, Illusion*, Lucie Brock-Broido interrogates the compulsion – both writerly and therapeutic – towards myth and mythmaking. Through the evolution of a highly complex personal mythology, Brock-Broido ‘confects her eventual mythomania’, succumbing to the imaginative pressure of the stories she creates even as she debates and refuses the urge towards meaning making from concocting aggrandised visions or versions of selves, events and experiences, as in this short extract from ‘Dear Shadows’:

...Once in the imagination's feckless luck, in the excelsior of living wild, I wore a pinafore

Of linsey-woolsey cloth—knowing he was too shy to unbutton it in back [...]

I am of a fine mind to worship the visible world, the woo and pitch and sign of it.

And all that would be buried in the drama of my going on.⁴⁴⁷

Brock-Broido’s myths are simultaneously the methods by which the dead may be summoned and spoken with, and a treatise on the impossibility of that very communication. In ‘Dear Shadows’ the text also reflects on the poetic compulsion to spin these myths from self and subject alike. To worship ‘the visible world’ is a rededication to the real, the hope that poetry might be used to resist illusion, not create or sustain it.

Contemporary poets concerned with both urgent address and personal myth also seek less to evolve a personal mythology than to deconstruct existing ones; to inhabit and exhibit a contingent reality at odds with and hostile to traumatised existence. By situating their poems rootedly in the real, poets such as Lee-Houghton, Parker and Taylor explore how grief co-

⁴⁴⁷ Lucie Brock-Broido, ‘Dear Shadow’ *Stay, Illusion* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013) p.9.

exists with and speaks to dailiness, to material quotidian reality. These poets find themselves increasingly dissatisfied by the limitations of poetic imagination to 'heal', and are increasingly frustrated by its promises of escape.

Written in 2012 following the sudden death of her adult son, Jacob, Denise Riley's *Part Song* is concerned with expressing a similar difficulty. In the personal myth of *Part Song*, the manipulation of address functions as a way to resist a normative performance of grieving and healing.⁴⁴⁸ Riley moves between colloquial and elegiac registers, between lyric and traumatised affect, in a sequence addressed to her dead son, but which also incorporates elegiac exhortations to the various muses of nature, song and soul. In part 'x' Riley engages the traditional modes and themes of the pastoral elegy with the lines:

I can't get sold on reincarnating you
As those bloody 'gentle showers of rain'
Or in 'fields of ripening grain' – oooh

Anodyne...⁴⁴⁹

Contesting the form's historical claims to console and resolve grief, and poetry's capacity to offer meaningful insight into the experience of bereavement, Riley's text is also dislocated in time. Her son appears in *Part Song* as both a child and as a young man. Riley's address alters accordingly, and the text records the slippage between selves that occurs in the destabilising aftermath of sudden loss. Riley contrasts these slippages to the received etiquette of

⁴⁴⁸ Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (Picador, 2016).

⁴⁴⁹ Riley ('x', p.8).

mourning, the proscribed ways of behaving and being she is expected to enact. As she puts it:

A wardrobe gapes, a mourner tries
Her several styles of howling-guise...⁴⁵⁰

Part Song functions then, as a performative engagement with myriad modes of embodied mourning. In a line recalling Eliot riffing on Dickens, Riley 'do the bereaved in different voices', inhabiting and rejecting in rapid succession various accepted models of loss, while creating a performative inter-textual echo.⁴⁵¹

Within my own creative practice I mount a similar engagement with the seductive myths, 'consoling fictions', and contextualising stories we tell ourselves; the flights of metaphor and allegory we are tempted to by loss. The dead in *narrowcasting* and in *caoin*, continually inhabit and escape a psycho-geographical Ireland, one where the trauma of bereavement is inextricably linked to historical narrative and observably inscribed upon public space through destruction of property, through murals, graffiti; the securitizing and surveillance of communal areas. The poems' landscape is a graphic testament not only to community trauma, but to the narratives that constantly claim ownership of that trauma. The poems flirt with, repurpose and denounce these images and ideas, but are ultimately incapable of freeing themselves from their possessive grip.

⁴⁵⁰ Riley ('vi', p.5).

⁴⁵¹ Riley ('xix', p.14).

As Jenny Edkins writes in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, when memory is mobilized through memorial emplacement in national, politicised narratives of heroism and sacrifice, 'intense remembering' is often the morbid precursor to 'intentional forgetting', when the trauma and toxicity of the memories cannot be contained within traditional memorial forms.⁴⁵² The poems in *narrowcasting* find themselves enmeshed in the rhetorics and aesthetics of state, nation and party, unable to escape their destructive legacy.

Through a process of inhabiting and discarding, the *narrowcasts* reject the imposition of various identities as lenses through which my loss might be understood, positioned or assimilated. The identities of the texts' respective 'i' and 'you' become fluid, mercurial, chimerical; they overlap and inter-relate, they simultaneously invite and refuse analysis. The reader cannot wholly locate or decode much of the text – clinically, historically or narratively – and is instead ensnared in a complex web of intimacies, accusations, and implications. The poems in the 'for the dead' section of *narrowcasting* address their various 'ghosts' by name in an attempt to preserve the particularity of my loss, and to reclaim their deaths from the narrative demands of witnessing imposed by cultural, literary, or therapeutic convention.

⁴⁵² Edkins (p.39, 54).

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to specify the key critical components of epistolary poetics as separate and distinct from other poetic genres. Existing literature has tended to characterise the epistle form in poetry not as a genre at all, but as a *manner* of writing, relevant only to the intellectual and aesthetic projects of individual poets or to discreet historical periods. This thesis has attempted to disprove this characterisation, and in mapping significant moments of epistolary eruption across the poetic landscape, I have abstracted the following key features of the epistolary genre in poetry: 1) Doubleness: The epistle form in poetry appeals to the letter's parallel conventions of intimacy and declaration, often exploiting slippages between these two modes to create a fruitful textual ambivalence. The letter form in poetry is both private and performative, using double register to speak to one audience directly, while addressing another by implication. The letter form's dual identity is further compounded by its intersection of written and oral, ephemeral and material practices: the letter serves as a site of stored bodily inscription while also writing into the potential impossibility of a reciprocating addressee. 2) Indeterminacy / Indiscernibility: The epistle form in poetry uses its status as a 'minor rhetoric' or 'minor literature' to infiltrate and potentially destabilize dominant discourses. The letter form is a space of mediation, in which exists a system of permissions not granted by other forms of text. In its apparent subaltern position with respect to literature, the letter provides an opportunity for inserting criticism into political space. 3) Reciprocity / Sociality: The epistle form in poetry acknowledges the letter's intersubjective nature in order to dismantle, disrupt or complicate the lyric boundary between the private voice and its public appearance. Whereas conventional literary forms of poetry consciously or unconsciously disguise their involvement in the wider world, the letter form repeatedly signals the traces of its material existence. 4) Division: The epistolary form

in poetry occupies no fixed position with respect to literature, functioning simultaneously as both literature and testimony. Epistolary poetics uses referential specificity to make a tacit claim for the authenticity and authority of its texts. In this way it can ‘insinuate and multiply’ interpretations, and resist any essentialist reading, either literary or biographical. 5)

Contingency: The epistle form in poetry offers a suspension from and an infiltration into the contingent moment, creating a space in which a readerly and writerly ‘now’ collide.

Epistolary time embeds deferral, and the epistolary poem exploits the subtle shifts and losses of meaning that occur between a letter’s being sent and its being received. But the letter is also always in situ, and epistolary poems open a new ‘now’ with each reading. It is in this state of suspension and contingency that DuPlessis suggests a ‘work of ethical imagination’ can take place. In identifying these key critical features I have attended to the underexplored notion of the epistolary form as genre, and demonstrated the persistence and continuing relevance of the epistolary form to contemporary poetic practice.

In mapping key moments of epistolary eruption during times of great social upheaval or political precarity, I have made explicit the relationship between the letter form and various kinds of pressure or crisis.⁴⁵³ I offers the contention that it is for this reason that the letter form is now re-emerging with such urgency and vigour across the contemporary poetic

⁴⁵³ For poets such as Rob Halpern, Sean Bonney, and Racheal Blau DuPlessis, ‘crisis’ must be understood as inseparable from our experience of late-stage capitalism. For these poets, capitalism both produces crisis and *is* crisis. DuPlessis uses the epistolary form’s recursive, open-ended apparatus to map the dynamics of daily life in ‘the context of global relations’. She manipulates the letter form’s innate deferral against what she calls capitalism’s ‘malignant rapidity, a speeding up of time that robs us of agency ‘outside of moments of crisis’. See Taylor (2011).

landscape, flourishing especially within the myriad poetics of grief, trauma, and the unconsolated experience.

This research is therefore timely in two significant ways: that it contributes to our understanding of the epistolary poem as genre, and that it attends to an under-investigated tendency in contemporary poetry. By focussing on critical points of intersection between the use of letters in therapeutic practice, and their mobilization by various cohorts within contemporary poetry, writing across a broad range of aesthetic and intellectual projects, but united by their thematic concern with trauma in its various guises, this enquiry exposes the intimate yet hitherto unexplored relationship between the epistolary and the traumatic turn in contemporary poetry.

In the broadest possible terms, the historical movement of the epistolary form in poetry can be described as a movement toward difficulty. That is, from the use of the letter as a formal device, constructing fictional intimacies for the purpose of political or social intervention, to the mobilization of the genuinely private in order to resist lyric-reading expectations of understanding, and to test readerly assumptions about the 'ideally universal address of literary language'⁴⁵⁴

By 'difficulty', I mean to suggest something slightly different from modernist projects of aesthetic difficulty. Although both modernist difficulty and epistolary difficulty share an 'essential ambivalence', modernist difficulty is born of the desire to provoke what critic Lionel Trilling describes as 'hard cognitive labour', a sharp, sustained analytical attention to the text

⁴⁵⁴ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 2014) p.32.

and its paratextual supplements that will eventually illuminate or 'reward the reader with understanding.'⁴⁵⁵ No such promise is extended towards the reader of difficult epistolary texts. Where modernist difficulty wishes to reorient the reader, to stimulate 'cognitive tension, irony, analytical rigor' and to 'redefine [readerly] pleasure' against expectations of easy 'entertainment' and immediate gratification, epistolary difficulty is invoked by a referential specificity that cannot be fully decoded.⁴⁵⁶ Although both sets of text require non-trivial effort from their readers, the epistolary poem may appear readily accessible in language and in form. Plath's 'Daddy', for example, is eminently 'readable', and yet the full meaning of Plath's visual motifs and tropes are only disclosed to those with a high degree of contextualising biographical information. As a modern readership, our familiarity with the details of Plath's life is predicated upon deferral; our understanding comes from the outside intervention of a qualified interpreter close to Plath, and able to sift her layers of textual and biographical meaning. In short, then, modernist difficulty exists to defamiliarize, resist, yet ultimately reward the reader, whereas epistolary difficulty precludes or delays readerly comprehension as both a deliberate strategy and an inherent feature of the form.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁵ Lionel Trilling, 'The Fate of Pleasure' *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays* (Northwestern University Press, 2008) p.427.

⁴⁵⁶ Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (Columbia University Press, 2013) p.244.

⁴⁵⁷ My thinking throughout this conclusion is also indebted to my reading of Roland Barthes, particularly *The Pleasure of the Text*, (Hill & Wang; Reissue edition, 1980). Especially relevant to this enquiry is Barthes' notion of 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts. For Barthes, the difference between these two forms is the reader's position in relation to the text. 'Readerly' texts, Barthes claims, maintain readers as a subject, and are productive only of 'pleasure'. For Barthes, 'writerly' texts are those that challenge literary conventions and codes; that allow the reader to extend past her own embodied

My own creative practice has explored referential specificity through the practice of naming, and driven my thinking about the way in which proper names in epistolary poetry make a tacit claim for the authenticity of the text as representative of embodied experience. This thesis has demonstrated that successive generations of epistolary poets have utilised the divided authority of their texts to layer, complicate and undermine meaning; to resist or to imply biographical readings of their work. Epistolary poems are both literature and testimony, artifice and evidence. Everywhere they evince an intriguing doubleness, an unsettling divide: between public and private discourse, specific and general address, biography and performance, chronological and contingent time, self and other.⁴⁵⁸

This thesis has tracked the movement of the letter form in poetry as a medium of personal disclosure to a medium of personal disclosure *towards political ends*. This thesis has drawn on discourses of trauma studies, psychoanalysis, and a series of close readings from poets writing across a diverse spectrum of traditions to identify the transition of the epistolary from in poetry as from 'confession' towards 'testimony'.

experience, and to 'commune' with the author. In other words, 'writerly texts' are those that involve the reader as co-creator of meaning. Such texts, for Barthes are productive of 'bliss'.

⁴⁵⁸ Here I am referencing the notion outlined by Carolyn Hamilton in her essay 'Archives, Ancestors and the Contingency of Time' in Alf Lüdtke and Tobias Nanz *Laute, Bilder, Texte: Register des Archivs*, (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015): when Hamilton speaks of letters and other forms of cultural assemblage as being capable of bringing 'the past into the present' with the ability to 'portend the future' (p.115). According to Hamilton, letters are sites of double-storiedness, of intersecting temporalities.

This thesis has uncovered critical points of intersection between the use of letters in therapeutic practice, and their mobilization by various cohorts within contemporary poetry; this research has demonstrated the ways in which contemporary poets are utilizing the epistolary form in particular to develop a poetics of grief, and of traumatic experience *against* a poetry of socially situated mourning, identifying the epistolary form as uniquely able to speak to grief and to other forms of trauma, highlighting the letter's use as a therapeutic tool and the close affinity between its scriptotherapeutic and poetic incarnations. Using close readings from several contemporary poets merging epistolary and performative elements in their work, as well as a close commentary on my own epistolary work in *narrowcasting*, this thesis has investigated the assertion of trauma studies discourses that the work of witnessing to traumatic experience cannot take place in solitude without a present and implicated reader. This thesis has demonstrated how epistolary texts enact a project of urgent address; creating, to paraphrase Caruth, an address for the traumatic specificity of experience that obliterates or silences the very possibility of address.

Although much research has been done to establish the link between psychotherapy and performance through the lens of theatre and the dramatic arts far less investigation had been made into the close relationship between poetry and psychotherapy. This thesis draws on Lyotard's notion of the 'disreal space' to support close readings from a variety of poetic projects, demonstrating the affinities between both sets of practice. This is an area unexplored by existing research and constitutes an original intervention into knowledge.

In using my creative practice as a point of intersection between various discourses of listening this research has drawn telling parallels between Language Poetry's call for 'retuned attention' and the models of psychoanalytic listening advocated by various models

and trajectories of therapy. As my own creative practice emerges from therapeutic encounter, so both my therapeutic and poetic performances have served to complicate, mirror, and borrow from each other. It is ultimately my creative practice that has suggested parallels between both sets of encounter and that has driven my research into their shared modes and projects, intersections and collisions.

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APPENDIX

EPISTOLARITY AND ARCHIVE – THE LYRIC-LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON:

The following forms part of my research journal. I eventually chose to exclude this material from the final draft of the thesis because it replicates much of the thinking done by a robust and pre-existing body of work. However, I feel it is important to acknowledge my engagement with Dickinson's epistolary poetics as it shaped much of my subsequent thinking surrounding the materiality of the letter form in particular. For that reason this section of the journal is included in this appendix.

Writing in 'Because the Plunge From the Front Overturned Us: The Dickinson Electronic Archives Project' Martha Nell Smith describes some of the ways in which the representation of Emily Dickinson's archive – that is, the surviving material body of her work – has been shaped and determined by both the ideological predispositions of her editors, and by the technology of mechanical reproduction that contours the 'structure of archivable content even in its very coming into existence'.⁴⁵⁹

In her essay Nell Smith compares two contemporary archiverisations of Dickinson's work: the 1998 variorum of her poems, in which Dickinson's poems were reproduced in print, and the

⁴⁵⁹ Martha Nell Smith, 'Because The Plunge From the Front Overturned Us: The Dickinson Electronic Archives Project', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (1999) p. 133:
<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=2456824&site=ehost-live> Also, Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, (University of Chicago Press, 2017), p.17.

Dickinson Electronic Archives Project, a complete digital archive of the poet's writings, reproduced in facsimile from the original manuscripts.⁴⁶⁰ Nell Smith argues, and I find this view persuasive, that the variorum – with its determination to define and police the borders of 'the poem', and thus establish a poetics of the text – destroys, represses, or irretrievably alters the meaning, effect, and intended affects of the manuscript through its reproduction in print.⁴⁶¹ Nell Smith's essay offers an interrogation of the primacy of textual representation, and the way in which such representation fosters a view of the work as separable from its material artefacts.⁴⁶²

How, for example, are readers to interpret Dickinson's Open Folios?⁴⁶³ These texts are distinguishable from the body of work composed by the poet before 1875 in that they are not neatly transcribed, grouped or bound together in fascicles and sets, but rather exist in fragments, in the form of 'scraps', in a 'profusion of shapes, sizes and materials, from brown paper sacks and used envelopes to notebook pages and the backs of recipes.'⁴⁶⁴ This

⁴⁶⁰ R.W. Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

Also, The Emily Dickinson Electronic Archive. The Emily Dickinson Electronic Archive makes high-resolution images of Dickinson's surviving manuscripts available in open access:

<http://www.emilydickinson.org/>

⁴⁶¹ Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998) p.9.

⁴⁶² Nell Smith (p. 133).

⁴⁶³ As discussed in Kristen Kreider's, "'Scrap', 'Flap', 'Strip', 'Stain', 'Cut': The Material Poetics of Emily Dickinson's Later Manuscript Pages' *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, Volume 19, Number 2 (John Hopkins University Press, 2010) pp.67-103.

⁴⁶⁴ As quoted in Franklin (p.1-47) From Franklin's Introduction, ix-x. See also Emily Dickinson, *Poems by Emily Dickinson* ed. Mabel Loomis Todd, and T. W. Higginson (Roberts Brothers, 1890, 1891, 1896).

description of Dickinson's late manuscripts by one of the poet's first editors, Mable Loomis Todd, is eloquent about the material dimensions of Dickinson's archive, and illustrative of the way in which – to quote Martha Nell Smith – Dickinson's various epistolary and poetic projects 'continue to test dicta about literary production and reception.'⁴⁶⁵

According to Nell Smith, through Dickinson's exploration of the 'intertextual possibilities' between poetic and private genres, and in the creation of a 'contextual poetics', the poet 'sensitises' the reader to 'the instabilities of her texts', and to their play of 'identity and difference.'⁴⁶⁶ For Nell Smith this applies not only to Dickinson's exemplary poetic idiom, nor to the letter-like inflections of her lyric texts, but to all that shapes and structures them: their physical presence, and the forces and forms that manifest, limit, disrupt or erase that presence.⁴⁶⁷

Dickinson's epistolary record, for example, includes acts of deliberate omission, accidental erasure, and multiple censorial scissorings.⁴⁶⁸ When we consider her lyric-letters in light of these mutilations, and when we read them together so that 'meaning itself is derived from their concatenation', the epistolary poem emerges as a spur for addressing Derridian ideas

⁴⁶⁵ Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (University of Texas Press, 2010)

p.2.

⁴⁶⁶ Nell Smith (p.2).

⁴⁶⁷ Martha Nell Smith, 'Because The Plunge From the Front Overturned Us: The Dickinson Electronic Archives Project' *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, (1999) pp. 133-52.

⁴⁶⁸ Chiefly by her brother, William "Austin" Austin Dickinson, see Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (Knopf Doubleday, 2015).

connected to the archive and the exercise of power.⁴⁶⁹ What object, after all, can truly be called a 'poem' by Emily Dickinson? And who decides how this category is constituted and presented?

Nell Smith's reading of Dickinson invites readers and researchers to imagine what meanings might emerge from an interaction with the material and spatial aspects of each page, and how these meanings might relate to the texts' verbal message. For other Editors and compilers such as R.W. Franklin, a text is a place where meaning inheres, distinct from its material presence. As Franklin states in his introduction to the 1998 variorum: 'a literary work is separable from its artefact, as Dickinson herself demonstrated as she moved her poems from one piece of paper to another.'⁴⁷⁰ I contend that Franklin's interpretation unduly privileges the print aspect of literary performance, and renders poetry – both Dickinson's poetry, and poetry in a broader sense – homogenous and intellectually abstract, represented by, but divorced from, the real, material world.⁴⁷¹ For Franklin the act of archiving is an act of translation – of decanting the stuff of the poem from its messy

⁴⁶⁹ Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson*, (University of Texas Press, 2010) p.88. Also Derrida (2017).

⁴⁷⁰ Franklin (p.27).

⁴⁷¹ I am influenced in this understanding of Franklin's interpretation by the writing of Richard Bauman, and John Miles Foley, as well as Charles Bernstein, whose ideas surrounding the continued privileging of written text in literary studies is something I discuss at length in the section of this thesis relating to epistolarity, trauma, and performance. Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford University Press, 1998), Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Newbury House Publishers, 1978), and John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Indiana University Press, 1995).

material container into readily legible print to allow for the smooth transmission of inherent meaning.

It strikes me as infinitely more sensible to view each archiving as a faceted construct, with different archival mechanisms – print, digitization, handwriting, memory – producing and accessing a distinct yet related version of Dickinson's texts, versions in which different elements of the poet's writing surface and conceal themselves.

Dickinson's epistolary correspondence, and the ways in which this correspondence is augmented and infiltrated by her poetic practice suggest that Dickinson herself wrote with a deep consciousness of her reader's participation in the creation of meaning.⁴⁷² Nell Smith argues that the print reproduction of Dickinson's work 'often erases significant textual experimentation directed toward prospective readers and their performances.'⁴⁷³

Recent critical approaches to the archive, alongside my own creative archival practice support Nell Smith's nuanced reading.⁴⁷⁴ Eric Ketelaar, for example, writing in 'Archives as spaces of memory', argues for the archive as a site of creative and collaborative contingency: 'Each activation [of the archive] leaves fingerprints which are attributes to the archive's infinite meaning. All these activations are acts of co-creatorship determining the

⁴⁷² For the best evidence of this see Susan Howe's essay, 'These Flames and Generosities of the Heart: Emily Dickinson and the Illogic of Sumptuary Values' in *Sulfur* 28 (Spring 1991) pp.135-155.

⁴⁷³ Nell Smith (p.13).

⁴⁷⁴ This is discussed at length within the reflective material that accompanies *halting sites*.

record's meaning'.⁴⁷⁵ In other words, archives embed within themselves the possibility of expansion or escape beyond their initiating frameworks; rather than remaining tied to the systems, structures and power relationships that originated them, archives extend the potential for a creative and collaborative contingency, where every intervention, each act of interrogation or interpretation by creator, user or archivist is an activation of the record, a contribution to the co-creation of meaning, the performance of the text, and the shaping of collective memory.

As Brien Brothman states, 'one cannot reduce the making of records to an original context or singular creative moment [...] nor do records simply reach a final state or condition. Rather, objects and processes are enmeshed in a dynamic of departure and return, emerging sameness and difference, repetition and recursion along with distancing and differentiation.'⁴⁷⁶

To cite an example that displays the vexed relationship between Dickinson's poetic corpus and the forms of conventional representation into which they are moulded, we can usefully examine Franklin's printing of the letter-poem 'Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory -'. Franklin's treatment of this lyric-letter demonstrates the extent to which

⁴⁷⁵ Eric Ketelaar, 'Archives as spaces of memory' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* Vol. 29, No. 1 (2008,) pp.9-27, as quoted in Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014) p.16.

⁴⁷⁶ Brien Brothman, 'Archives, Life Cycles, and Death Wishes: A Helical Model of Record Formation' *Archivaria 61: Special Section on Archives, Space and Power* (Spring 2006) p.260.

Dickinson's text must be changed in order that it be delivered within a single conventional framework.⁴⁷⁷

Franklin states that this poem concludes 'a letter to Susan Dickinson, following the signature "Sister."' However, inspection of the poem's material artefact reveals that the 'Sister' Franklin attaches to the first eleven lines of the poem is in fact physically attached to the second segment of the text. As Nell Smith sates 'Franklin must ignore the physicalities of Dickinson's document in order to declare as a "letter" writing that does not differ metrically or in subject matter from writing on the same document that he wants to declare "poem"'⁴⁷⁸

Jerome McGann offers another illustrative example of the ways in which the archiving of Dickinson's texts has effectively limited their aesthetic scope, and consequently their potential and intended meanings: 'Dickinson', argues McGann, made use of her 'textpage as a scene for dramatic interplays between a poetics of the eye and a poetics of the ear.' However, according to McGann, generations of editors have 'erased the evidence of these experiments.'⁴⁷⁹ In support of this argument he offers the Thomas Herbert Johnson edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, which McGann claims 'regularly elides Dickinson's

⁴⁷⁷ Example cited in Martha Nell Smith, 'Because The Plunge From the Front Overturned Us: The Dickinson Electronic Archives Project' *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (1999) p.133. Also see R.W Franklin ed. *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Belknap, Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁴⁷⁸ Nell Smith (p. 133).

⁴⁷⁹ Jerome McGann, 'Emily Dickinson's Visible Language' *The Emily Dickinson Journal* Volume 2, Number 2 (Fall, 1999) pp.40-41. Also Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas Herbert Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Harvard University Press, 1958).

irregularities.⁴⁸⁰ McGann's most convincing example is the significant difference between Dickinson's manuscript version of 'Pain – has an Element of Blank –' and Johnson's print version of the same text. Dickinson's text exploits the page to its fullest, the 'blank space of the page is made to serve the argument of the writing [...] the medium of the text is not simply taken as a given, something to be worked within; the medium is part of the imagination's subject.'⁴⁸¹

Pain — has an Element —
of Blank —
It cannot recollect
When it began — or if
there were
A time when it was not— ⁴⁸²

Dickinson's archive then, in its conflicting iterations, incites a multiplicity of interpretations, or ways of reading the poet's extant texts: where are the boundaries between texts, between modes of writing; between artistic and domestic practice, poem and private communication, performance and confession? In provoking these questions Dickinson's archive exposes the continually shifting contextual relationships between her writings and their interpreters, and in doing so provides a lens through which to scrutinise the relationship of context to the epistolary form, and to interrogate Nell Smith's notion of a

⁴⁸⁰ McGann (pp.41-42).

⁴⁸¹ McGann (p.47).

⁴⁸² McGann (p.48).

'contextual poetics'.⁴⁸³ Further, the treatment of Dickinson's texts across their various archival iterations illustrate the distorting pressures – ideological and aesthetic – that the archive is susceptible to, calling into question the ways in which we read and understand the archive.

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Derrida states that 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory'.⁴⁸⁴ We might be conditioned, have conditioned ourselves, into thinking of the archive as a repository of inert facts, as a collection of impartial 'evidence' from which we are able to mount a forensic reconstruction of the past, but in reality the archive is a complicated and contested space, a space where occurs, in the words of Arlette Farge, a 'collision of competing logics'; a space where contesting truths and opposing voices intersect, entangle and undermine each other.⁴⁸⁵

We can best conceive of the archive as both a material – academic, institutional – site, and as an imaginative one: the former evokes the archive's long historical association with private and privileged space; with the walled cloisters of protected and specialist knowledge, whereas the latter is suggestive of interstitiality, potential instability, a conceptual territory in which boundaries are in a constant state of negotiation, dissolution, reconstitution and

⁴⁸³ Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (University of Texas Press, 2010)

p.2.

⁴⁸⁴ Derrida (p.11).

⁴⁸⁵ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (Yale University Press, 2013) p.86.

flux. It is interesting to note that this same duality might apply equally well to the letter form.

This is typical of a certain elusiveness that surrounds and abounds in the archive: the word *archive* is itself semantically slippery: it operates simultaneously as noun and verb, signifying both the spaces of protective enclosure and the act of enclosing: in buildings, in boxes, on paper, in text. To archive is to catalogue. Further, it is to subject the material being catalogued to what Derrida refers to as the 'archontic principle' of legitimization and hierarchization.⁴⁸⁶

The archive, then, should be considered as ideologically-inflected space. A space that, according to Marta Werner and Paul Voss, is 'inseparable from the ensemble of operations deployed within it, [the archive] confers order on its contents and creates a system whereby an official record of the past may be preserved and transmitted intact'⁴⁸⁷ The archive, then, may be a gendered space, a political space, a religious space, a memorial space, but never a neutral space.

Inherent in this understanding is a warning about the ways in which archives have been historically used to establish authority, to legitimate dominant social and historical narratives, to propound and support ideologically driven versions of events. As archivist Verne Harris once stated, the archive, or the 'record' is 'far from being an innocent by-product of activity, a reflection of reality, [rather] it is a construction of realities expressing

⁴⁸⁶ Derrida (p.10).

⁴⁸⁷ Paul Voss and Marta Werner 'The Poetics of the Archive' *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (Georgia State University, 1999) p.i.

dominant relations to power.⁴⁸⁸ In this context we might usefully consider Derrida's formulation that any act of preservation will implicitly include efforts to circumscribe or limit.⁴⁸⁹ The archive protects and preserves, but it also orders and represses. Within the very architecture of the archive, and in the presence of those specialist custodians who control our access to its interior spaces, is the suggestion that the conservation and dissemination of knowledge has traditionally been the privileged prerogative of a chosen few. This raises profound ethical questions for the assembly, the editing, and the distribution of archival materials.

The print editions of Dickinson's works are the products of particular social and cultural moments, when the printed text was the cheapest, most democratic form of mass dissemination; the mechanics of that process imposed severe limits on the presentation of those texts. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Dickinson's early editors understood their responsibilities to her poetic corpus in radically different terms: to bring forgotten or neglected texts to wider public attention the texts must be placed into a form that would not exceed the strictures of mechanical reproduction *nor* the imaginative expectations and assumptions of their intended readership. That is not to say that the archival and editorial acts of Franklin or Johnson were ideologically neutral, but that their very ideology – the way they *thought* about the archive – was itself profoundly shaped by the limited archival mechanisms at their disposal.

The animating question that emerges from this consideration of the archive, and of the letter within the archive, a question that has become crucial both to my research and to my

⁴⁸⁸ As quoted in Ketelaar (pp.9–27).

⁴⁸⁹ Derrida (pp.11-13).

poetic practice, is how, and by what methods might the archive's hierarchical power relations be subverted or undermined? My poetic practice is much concerned with creative strategies for resisting aspects of the archive's postcolonial instrumentality, and here the concept of 'ephemera' has emerged as a particularly useful lens through which to view epistolary-poetics.

Chris Makepeace defines archival 'ephemera' as having the following characteristics: 'it is usually flimsy or insubstantial', it is a 'transient document', not intended to survive 'the topicality of its message or the event to which it relates'; it is a document the acquisition, storage, classification, and cataloguing of which 'may not fall within the conventionally accepted methods of treatment within libraries and record offices'; it may require, in other words, 'special consideration'.⁴⁹⁰ Ephemera represents all that is random and unruly within the archive, that which exists in fragments at its fringes or buried deep within its most secret recesses: uncanny artefacts that serve to unsettle memory, interpretation and context.

Ephemera is only ever awkwardly assimilated into the structures, systems and institutions designed to contain it, and in its apparent subaltern position to the body of the 'official' archive, it may nevertheless augment, undermine or fruitfully infiltrate the authoritative record.⁴⁹¹ The 'ephemeral' is, by nature, miscellaneous and unsystematic, always in situ, intervening affectively and viscerally into the present. Ephemera registers the daily lived

⁴⁹⁰ Chris Makepeace *Ephemera: A Book on its Collection, Conservation and Use* (Gower, 1985) p.178.

⁴⁹¹ Samuel McCormick, *Letters to Power: Public Advocacy Without Public Intellectuals* (Penn State Press, 2011) p.150. This idea is useful here for thinking about the kinds of permissions the letter invokes, the possibilities and ambiguities it opens up.

experience of individuals or communities though its various visual and textual representations; it offers a strategy through which personal testimony might weave itself into the fabric of collective cultural memory.

When Dickinson invokes the ephemeral through her merging of poetic and epistolary craft, she deliberately and creatively positions her texts between two distinct modes or rhetorics – the personal and the literary – each with its own particular status and claim to authority or 'truth'. Dickinson's acts of poetic epistolography mobilize the genuinely private in order to resist lyric-reading expectations of understanding, and to test readerly assumptions about the 'ideally universal address of literary language.'⁴⁹² This hybrid form incites readerly participation, yet it also precludes or delays readerly comprehension as both a deliberate strategy and an inherent feature of the form.

It is for this reason that consideration of Dickinson's epistolary poetic archive has become such a central spur to my own creative practice. Dickinson's poetics have often been considered to elude or defy traditional context, making a mode and a commentary from that defiance, so that, as Margaret Dickie states, her poetry 'came to imagine, create, and incorporate the silence and evasion around it.'⁴⁹³ Dickinson's epistle poetics are an allusive, elusive, and potentially illusive, project of address. They evoke, but never realise or embody, the presence of a listening 'other'.

⁴⁹² Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 2014) p.32.

⁴⁹³ Margaret Dickie, *Lyric contingencies: Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) p.55.

My own epistles share this contradiction, deploying a lyric mode, the 'underlying condition' of which, according to Bakhtin, is 'the absolute certainty of the listener's sympathy', yet consistently refusing to recognise, respond to, or provoke that sympathy.⁴⁹⁴

As Cristanne Miller notes of Dickinson's work, her 'disruption is a conscious strategy', with the poems acting to unsettle the frames of reference inside of which we might expect to read them.⁴⁹⁵ However, her textual difficulties can also be read as reflecting – consciously and unconsciously – the material difficulties of her wider external world. Dickinson deploys a complex variety of allusions and symbols, the precise meaning and significance of which remain unavailable to the reader, thus announcing the absence of what Annette Kolodny has called 'a fund of shared recognitions and potential inference'.⁴⁹⁶ Through Kolodny we can apply a feminist critique to Dickinson's poetic difficulty, suggesting that it reflects the struggle of Dickinson as a woman writer to be received and understood by the wider reading public.

I would further argue that Dickinson's allusive and compressive poetics is symptomatic and performative, and owes perhaps more to psychological subjectivity than to pure feminist dialectic. I am encouraged in this reading of Dickinson by my own practice, where I

⁴⁹⁴ *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* ed. Ken Hirschkop, and David Shepherd (Manchester University Press, 2001) p.114. Also see Lynn Shakinovsky, 'No Frame of Reference: The Absence of Context in Emily Dickinson's Poetry' *The Emily Dickinson Journal* vol. 3 no. 2 (John Hopkins University Press, 1994) pp.19-37.

⁴⁹⁵ Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, (Harvard University Press, 1987), p.68.

⁴⁹⁶ Annette Kolodny, 'A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts' *New Literary History* Vol. 11, No. 3 (John Hopkins University Press, Spring, 1980) pp. 451-467.

frequently mobilize the obsessive, schizotypal features of my PTSD as a form of textual disruption, deployed to complicate and undercut lyric and confessional modes of encounter, seeking to re-inscribes the rhythms, tempos, textures and cadences of dissociative and schizoaffective thought onto the text.

Attempts to account for Dickinson's complex literary practice with psychological or symptomatic readings of her texts, such as in Steven Winhusen's 'Emily Dickinson and Schizotypy' or David R. Williams' "'This Consciousness That Is Aware": Emily Dickinson in the Wilderness of the Mind', provide a negatively pathologized and incomplete reading of her complex poetic and epistolary projects.⁴⁹⁷ A contextual reading of Dickinson, of the kind Dickinson's epistolarity invites, and for which I advocate, instead considers the way in which Dickinson fruitfully and self-consciously exploits her 'symptomatic' rethorics as an integral part of her epistolary aesthetics to create an exceptional poetic idiom. In other words, recognition of Dickinson's neurodivergence is not important or interesting because it allows us to decode her texts biographically, or to situate them clinically, but because it exposes another possibility, another resonance or potential in the unique context of their creation.

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⁴⁹⁷ Steven Winhusen, 'Emily Dickinson and Schizotypy' *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 13, no. 1 (2004) pp. 77-96, and David R. Williams, "'This Consciousness That Is Aware": Emily Dickinson in the Wilderness of the Mind' *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* Vol. 66, No. 3 (Penn State University Press, 1983) pp.360-381.

Context, Susan Brison writes, 'is fundamentally different from what it contextualizes; context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events.'⁴⁹⁸ To put it another way, each activation of the archive proliferates meanings across sites, complicates and problematizes the material in ways that are at once ambivalent and ambiguous; that may be radical or revisionary. For Dickinson scholars questions of how to categorise and present her texts – what 'counts' as a letter, and what as a poem; how these texts are to be given public life, in what form, and across what media – are not neutral, but ideologically driven. I contend that a consideration of Dickinson's epistolary archive exposes the stakes involved in archival presentation, as well as illuminating the centrality of 'context' to an understanding of the epistolary form in poetry.

If it is erroneous to treat the letter, or the letter-poem, as a finite, self-contained literary artefact, then it is equally wrong-headed to think of it as an autobiographical testament. Instead, Nell Smith suggests we consider it as an 'autograph', a fragment, a species of subjective signature; it resists a purely narrative or referential understanding, and suggests that our habitual ways of reading – the literary, the historical, the biographical – may not be enough.⁴⁹⁹ The epistolary poem is mercurial, it embeds the possibility of omission and

⁴⁹⁸ Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ, 2002) p.33.

⁴⁹⁹ Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (University of Texas Press, 2010) p.52.

erasure, it invites us to imagine all that 'the "I" chooses not to inscribe'; it foregrounds the possibility of censorship, of an incomplete, contested, or otherwise unreliable record.⁵⁰⁰

Dickinson's lyric-letters, particularly the late manuscripts, are perhaps the strongest example of this unique epistolary quality. In some cases all that is preserved of a text is a single passage, scissored from a letter of unknown provenance. In other cases the body of the letter is contoured by the damage it has suffered, inflicting what Marta Werner describes as 'great lacunae, [...] tears in the whole cloth of presence.'⁵⁰¹

These mutilated fragments are what Werner refers to as 'cases without criteria': the censor remains anonymous, becomes instead a nameless cipher for the 'force that forbids', limiting analysis to a description of the damage, and to the shape and structure of what remains.⁵⁰²

Werner's notion of 'cases without criteria' resonates profoundly within my own creative practice, which seeks to trace the traumatic experience of Traveller communities across the archival spaces that frequently instrumentalize, administer or erase them. In searching for archival 'evidence' of such trauma my problem is complex: firstly, traumatic memory is, in itself, characterised by temporal gap, by lacuna and aporia.⁵⁰³ Trauma disrupts our

⁵⁰⁰ Nell Smith (p.5). Also see Robert McClure Smith, *The seductions of Emily Dickinson* (University of Alabama Press, 1997) pp.19, 67.

⁵⁰¹ Marta Werner, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (University of Michigan Press, 1995) pp.29.

⁵⁰² Werner (p.29).

⁵⁰³ A key, although often disputed concept in Trauma Studies, as outlined by Geoffrey Hartman in *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic*

continuous coherent experience of time, and traumatic memory is reiterative, interruptive, yet also approximate, existing beyond adequate representation.⁵⁰⁴ Traumatic testimony is riddled with memory losses, with blackouts and blank spaces, with contradictions, distortions, stutters and fugues. As the traumatised speaker heads towards the essence or centre of her testimony – the heart of her trauma – memory becomes elusive, illusive, and slippery. Eric Santner states that such testimonies 'cannot be interpreted only for what exists in them, but, significantly, for what is missing, distorted or obscured.'⁵⁰⁵ Werner's understanding of the Dickinson archive echoes Santner's model of reading for traumatic

Experience ed. Cathy Caruth (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) pp.198, 215. Maurice Blanchot also describes the effect of traumatic experience on our perception of time in *Culture, Trauma, and Conflict: Cultural Studies Perspectives on War*, ed Nico Carpentier (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) p.260: 'the experience of disaster [...] obliges us to disengage ourselves from time as irreversible.' See also Lawrence Langer *Holocaust testimonies: The ruins of memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) p.76.

⁵⁰⁴ My understanding of traumatic memory is influenced by the Freudian conception of trauma as propounded by scholars such as Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) p.10, by Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Wendy Chung in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 2002) pp.29, 57, 94, and by Kali Tal in *Worlds of Hurt* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.15. This notion of Traumatic memory states that the remembrance of trauma is always an approximate account of the past because traumatic experience precludes knowledge, and hence, representation. Also see Ruth Ley, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (University of Chicago Press, 2000) p.83.

⁵⁰⁵ Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Cornell University Press, 1993) p.4

testimony, provoking an analysis eloquent of edges and erasures, suggesting that tears in the manuscript may be interpreted as the 'visible signs of pain – erasure and eclipse.'⁵⁰⁶

In my search for the histories and testimonies of trauma I also encounter practical and spatial difficulties: unlike the sedentary communities in the North of Ireland, where the legacy of sectarian violence is explicit and readily legible, inscribed upon public space, Traveller communities, whose settlements are, by their very nature, transitory, leave no corresponding trace or wound on the physical landscape. If it is possible to conceptualise public space as a container for cultural heritage, then Traveller communities, their histories, and their memories, remain uninscribed, are edited or excluded from the mapping of that heritage. The central question that emerges from a consideration of these facts is how might trauma to be discovered or disclosed when trauma, by its very definition, precludes or renders problematic the possibility of either registration or representation: when, through our contact with traumatic experience, we lose our ability to fully apprehend or integrate the memories of those experiences; when we are unable to give a reliable, coherent and consistent account of those experiences to others, and when the trauma itself is entangled in or emerges from acts – official and unofficial – of forcible removal, compounded by various projects – social and cultural – of denigration and erasure? Traveller invisibility both is and is the evidence *for* the trauma I am attempting to investigate. How then, am I to locate this trauma within archival space, and how ethically embody it through my creative practice?

Again, Werner's understanding of Dickinson's archive provides a model for ethically interpreting these blank spaces. First as a species of 'negative evidence', where absences

⁵⁰⁶ Werner (p.30).

and elisions function as evidentiary markers that *something* occurred, that some kind of violence has been visited upon the text.⁵⁰⁷ Rather than ignore or 'read around' these absences, Werner suggests our reading must incorporate them, perhaps even privilege them as constitutive of the text's ultimate meaning, to read, as Werner states, 'as if the damage it has suffered confirms its beauty and authenticity'.⁵⁰⁸

Secondly, together with Nell Smith and Cristanne Miller, Werner's reading allows for the possibility that Dickinson's fragmented, ephemeral texts form part of a deliberate, creative strategy; a strategy by which censorship is not enacted but resisted. Suppose Dickinson's scissorings were not merely mutilations but 'the inscription of a crossing – into extragrammatical spaces.'⁵⁰⁹ Such a reading is profoundly important in uncovering the resistive and radical potentials of epistolary ephemera.

⁵⁰⁷ From Eyal Weizman's notion that we cannot 'know the past as a conclusive, transparent fact mechanically etched into matter or memory or perfectly captured in an image. Histories of violence will always have their lacunas and discontinuities. They are inherent in violence and trauma and to a certain extent evidence of them. When undertaking our investigations, we must take into account the difficulties and complexities of memory, just as we do with photography and other forms of material investigation.' I contend that Werner's reading of Dickinson suggests a way of examining text similar to that which Weizman proposes for the built environment. Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (MIT Press, 2017) p.128. This is a notion I revisit in depth in the reflective materials that accompany *halting sites*: <https://dog-sealion43cn.squarespace.com/config/>

⁵⁰⁸ Werner (p.32).

⁵⁰⁹ Werner (p.31).

Finally, in stressing the importance of context, Werner illuminates the ways in which meaning carries across texts, becomes accretive, invites us to imagine the poems not as textual 'fragments' but a palimpsest literary performance, continuously evolving across multiple iterations with multiple participants.