

University of Miami

M.F.A. Portfolio

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The Pitch of Sublimity: Williams Carlos Williams and the Entangled Relationship Between
Poetry and Poetics, “The Clouds”

No other modernist and/or imagist poet took up the onus of being “American” quite like William Carlos Williams. Rhizomatic American language, anxious American form, unornamented American aesthetic ideal—one cannot bifurcate between these totems and Williams’s oeuvre. He epitomizes all three. However, a perhaps less parsed and articulated discussion centers around the synchronic nature of Williams poetry, yet diachronic nature of his poetics, and the interstice of complexities in between. Williams’s poems often clash with and wrestle against the myriad authors of his day, which can be seen at a single point in time; however, his poetics, and how he goes about rebutting and corresponding via the actual poetic line encapsulates an enormous breadth of time. While Williams’s poetry evades big, crude classification, it can certainly be evinced as engaging broadly with the movements of his contemporaries, most notably those individuals writing beneath the umbrella of modernism, particularly Imagism. (This first in a line of many factors.) In such respect Williams’s poetry is synchronic: his correspondences and friendship with Pound, as well as those contemporaries which the beak of Pound’s ego touched, e.g. Moore, Olson, Zukofsky, among many others. These wobbling pivots and more Williams tethers his sail to. From this anchor soars the kite of his poetics, much higher towards the clouds and outside the stratosphere, upward to the sublime.

If poetics are the selected tools within which the artist is able to act (the brush width, the hand-picked pigments, the easel height, etc.), then it follows poetry is the striking on the page produced thereafter. Surely this distinction between poetry and poetics is too rigid; however, it is useful in arguing to fix the initial locus of contention upon Williams’s work on poetics and the sublime. As stated, Williams chooses to couch himself diachronically. Coloring his influences from Longinus—noted as key catalyst in his prologue to *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*—all the way to his contemporary Eliot, Williams hones his poetics. It must first be examined which pigments Williams is gathering for his art before putting it to use on the canvas of his poetry, specifically “The Clouds,” which is undoubtedly the locus

classicus of where poetry and poetics clash for Williams. The poem is so heavily influenced by poetics then and past that it in fact becomes quite a mixed materials piece, woven with various fabrics and textures, creating a truly three dimensional view of Williams's poetics.

Williams's approach to sublimity and its effect on poetics is likewise piecemeal, but often harkens back much further than his contemporaries, constructed from bits of Longinus, Kant, and Burke (even arguably Eliot much later on). Traditionally Williams is known as the poet of the anti-sublime, he couches himself side by side with Emerson in *The American Scholar* by trying to capture "Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common [...] explored and poetized. That which had been negligently trodden under foot [...] the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street" (Emerson, 67). However, it is perhaps in those moments where Williams struggles to juxtapose and clash together the feet of the familiar with the sublime that the reader is offered the greatest glimpse behind the curtain and into William's poetics. In *Spring and All* Williams contends, "Even the most robust constitution has its limits, though the Roman feast with its reliance upon regurgitation to prolong it shows an active ingenuity, yet the powers of man are so pitifully small, with the ocean to swallow—that at the end of the feast nothing would be left but suicide" (Williams, 106). In the context of this quote Williams argues to be of the imagination, because one cannot swallow the entire ocean of influence. The imagination is able to make up for gaps in the pen wielders literary repertoire. This passage seems at first a simultaneous tip of the hat and rejection of Longinus's "On the Sublime":

Weight, grandeur, and energy of speaking further produced in a very high degree, young friend, by appeals to Imagination, called by some 'image making'. Imagination is no doubt a name given generally to anything which suggests, no matter how, a thought which engenders speech; but the word has in our time come to be applied specially to those cases, where, moved by enthusiasm and passion, you seem to see the things of which you speak, and place them under the eyes of your hearers. (Longinus, 33)

Longinus, or the author with the attributed name, is not rallying for the same kind, the exact brand, of Imagination as Williams, but rather a different room within the same house. For Williams imagination is a trump card, aces in the hole, against the dealer's deck of what can be called library literacy. Opposed, Longinus is very much concerned with library literacy under the umbrella of imagination; his attitude presents itself as "when we read Homer we become like Homer," and "Sublimity is the echo of a great soul" (Longinus, 79). Echoing individual authors is the responsibility of the poet for Longinus. "[Plato]

shows us, if only we were willing to pay him heed, that another way [...] leads to the sublime. And what, and what manner of way, may that be? It is the imitation and emulation of previous great poets and writers. And let this, my dear friend, be an aim to which we steadfastly apply ourselves” (83).

Williams implicitly takes Longinus’s position and extrapolates, fixing the universal of the classics with the particular of the poet: “The better work men do is always done under stress and at great personal cost. It is no different from the aristocratic compositions of the earlier times, the Homeric inventions but these occurred in different times, to this extent, that life had not yet sieved through its own multiformity. That aside, the work the two-thousand-year-old poet did and that we do are one piece. That is the vitality of the classics” (Williams, 101). It is paramount to point out though that for Williams the poet is not simply enacting a kind of flourished mimesis, a mimicry of what came before, rather, they are imbibing the old and ushering in the new. “In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality—Taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression” (105). More harmoniously mixed inside this wineskin of imagination, both Longinus and Williams are friendly towards enthusiasm in the “truth of expression,” to say the very least. Longinus frames his discussion of how to beget a sublime artifact by articulating that from its parts it must first be rooted in “enthusiasm and passion,” these characteristics grant “sight,” of the thing, whatever thing, surrendering to the artist the ability to present the object before an audience.

Williams takes a similar, yet notably distinct, position in his interview with Emily M. Wallace:

You see, the theory is, the theory is that you can make a poem out of anything. You don't have to have conventionally poetic material. Anything that is felt, and that is felt deeply or deeply enough or even that gives amusement, is material for art. We don't have to take a conventional subject like Greek drama, which could speak only of the gods, or medieval painting, which was largely devoted to the Christian mythology. We can use anything, anything at all. It's what you do with it that counts. It's always been so. It's always been so! Excellence in handling the material is the thing that gives distinction, always. But now we have enlarged the field of choice, that's all. (144)

Craftsmanship, the art of telling, is an axiom of Williams’s approach. He branches out from Longinus in the *process* of reaching the sublime. Any cultural artifact can be taken and shaped, molded with enthusiasm and passion; it need not first be infused with these parts, they may come later. Whether simple psychic debris or immortal talisman, both can be tooled to reach into the sublime.

When Williams parts the sea of possible poetic material, the telos of imagination, and the nature of the object at play, he consciously or unconsciously invokes a Kantian discourse on sublimity and aesthetics. “One cannot swallow the whole ocean,” says Williams, regarding the objects which compose the sublime, and the ocean of influence on the prospective artist. And while Kant has much to say regarding the subject, specifically in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, his discussion revolves not around poetics but “reflective judgments” that are certainly then applied to critical aesthetic theory. The agreeable, the beautiful, the sublime, and the good—all are given categorically unique distinctions by Kant.

“[...] the sublime is a pleasure that arises only indirectly; viz. it is produced by the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them, so that it seems to be regarded as emotion—not play, but earnest in *the exercise of the imagination*” (Kant, 386, emphasis added). For Kant, sublimity is not found in natural phenomena, for that is the realm of beauty; however, natural objects can be utilized to create an overflow of feeling and the necessity to check one’s “vital powers.” The imagination must be incited and the lighting of mental tinder towards a bonfire of cerebral overwhelming. “[...] we express ourselves incorrectly if we call any *object of nature* sublime, although we can quite correctly call many objects of nature beautiful [...] for no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so-called” (386).

If not in the form then where? Kant, like Williams, invokes the ocean to attempt a containment of sublimity. “Thus the wide ocean, disturbed by the storm, cannot be called sublime. Its aspect is horrible; and the mind must be already filled with manifold ideas if it is to be determined by such an intuition to a feeling itself sublime [...]” (387). In the same way Williams argues that the reader brings to the poem and idea of what a poem, any poem, should be about, and this informs the nature of the poetry itself. One cannot “swallow the whole ocean,” nor need they, however, they certainly bring a sea, lake, stream, puddle to any encountered poetry.

The mind is where the sublime is contained, and Williams agrees enthusiastically on this point. “The Clouds” are the canvas for Williams on which he paints, the canvas through which he peers, and the canvas about which he muses. The poem itself is indeed a *thing*, but elevated in its elements. The

purposes are elevated. In *Spring and All*, speaking of Marianne Moore, he says: “I believe this is possible as I believe in the main that Marianne Moore is of all American writers most constantly a poet—not because her lines are invariably full of imagery they are not [...]” Here Williams points out that it is not the imagery that elevates Moore’s verse, or a Romantic ideal. Rather, “[...] I believe she is most constantly a poet in her work because the purpose of her work is invariably from the source from which poetry starts—that it is constantly from the purpose of poetry.” Williams rallies that poetry must articulate what indeed it is. What is poetry? Moore begs this question, guiding her above rhyme schema and lyric fluidity. “It has the purpose of poetry written into and therefore it is poetry” (Williams, 145, emphasis added). Williams will echo this idea in “The Clouds,” supplanting what he sees as lyric convention and imbibing this, attributed, Moorian aesthetic.

Williams is perhaps most concrete when he describes the “hearing” of a poem. He contends against obscurity, and proliferates specificity later on in his interview with Wallace:

Yes, because no one believes that poetry can exist in his own life. That's one of our immediate fallacies. Some Englishman said, "Imagine reading a poem in the American dialects! How impossible!" Well, that's the first hazard, that's the first hurdle, we have to get over that. It has nothing to do with the way it's said. Oh it has something to do, because it can be badly read, and otherwise. But we can't believe that we poor colonials, as we have been ever since the Revolution, we poor people who are not living in the great centers of Europe could have anything happen in our lives important enough to be put down in words and given a form. But everything in our lives, if it's sufficiently authentic to our lives and touches us deeply enough with a certain amount of feeling, is capable of being organized into a form which can be a poem. In fact, those simple difficulties, those things which are at the base of all the English departments and all the universities in the world and make them all asinine, because they're usually twenty years back of the times, are the things that make it impossible to hear a poem! (144)

This goes beyond Williams’s typical US vs. UK tune, and into a commentary on his poetics. Poetry is not to get lost in the unintelligible word calculus of academia. It is not to die out as practice like dancing in armor. (A point made by Pound and embraced by Williams.) Poetry must engage; and, if there is to be American poetry, then it must connect with America. This Romantic approach fits hand in glove with Edmund Burke, his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, and diverges in tone from several Kantian cornerstones and even, in areas, from Longinus. Williams embraces the duality in Burke, between the sublime and the beautiful, synthesizing a unified theory in his outpouring “The Clouds.” Williams specifically draws from Burke in Section XXVII where the sublime and beautiful are compared. The two are distinguishable, yet in indistinguishable harmony:

“If the qualities of the sublime and beautiful are sometimes united, does this prove, that they are the same, does it prove, that they are any way allied, does it prove even that they are not opposite and contradictory? Black and white may soften, may blend, but they are not therefore the same. Nor when they are so softened and blended with each other [...] is the power of black as black, or of white as white, so strong as when each stands uniform and distinguished.”

A succinct and salient analogue presents itself in the jewelry store. Black velvet is set behind the brilliant diamond in order to enhance its gleam, its many refractions. In the same way, the beautiful and the sublime complement one another, but neither would be so brilliant apart from the other. “Sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth and polished [...] beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive” (Burke, 306). The black velvet backdrop is great, massive, dark, solid. The single ring and stone is smooth, delicate, comparatively small, polished. This high-low, large-small, either-or dichotomy becomes paramount in reading “The Clouds” as a schematic of the sublime.

It must be at least briefly, but duly, noted that “The Clouds” owes a piece of its namesake to the play by Aristophanes, which was a satirization of the arts in classical Athens. In his biographical account, Paul Mariani reinforces this notion. “[‘The Clouds’] musical form may have been undertaken as a direct response to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. In that sense it was Williams’ agnostic answer to Eliot’s religious and even “mystical” synthesis about ultimate meaning” (Mariani, 566). Indeed, “The Clouds” takes on a dually antagonistic and agnostic tone when juxtaposed against the elevated sermons of “Four Quartets.” If Eliot was poetry’s king in the forties, it is fair to say that Williams’ contradistinct poem satirizes the arts in then-contemporary British and American letters. Part Three of “The Clouds” will reutilize and ricochet several key devices found in Eliot’s “The Wasteland.” However, many places in the poem do not satirize the arts, and the poem must be illuminated not by light of contemporary reference, but by standing upon its own words. Robert Creeley says just this, quoting a line from *The Wedge* speaking of his own poetics as influenced by Williams:

I believe in a poetry determined by the language of which it is made. (Williams: "Therefore each speech having its own character the poetry it engenders will be peculiar to that speech also in its

own intrinsic form.") I look to words, and nothing else, for my own redemption either as man or poet. Pound, early in the century, teaches the tradition of "man-standing-by-his-word," the problem of *sincerity*, which is never as simple as it may be made to seem. The poet, of all men, has least cause and least excuse to pervert his language, since what he markets is so little in demand. He must find his living elsewhere. His aim must never be deflected by anterior commitment, even to those whom he loves. Words cannot serve responsibly as an apology for those who may wish to make them one. (Creeley, 477)

Williams differs from his close friend Zukofsky (who edited *The Wedge*), and especially here in the beginning of "The Clouds," in that he is much less referential, and the reader must look to the *words* of this introduction, line by line, in order to glean their overall effect; as Creeley argues "I care what the poem says, only as a poem—I am no longer interested in the exterior attitude to which the poem may well point, as signboard" (74). Later on the poems "exterior attitude" will be analyzed, pointing as a signboard, but William's couches his initial stanzas far away from the later contemptuous attitude (like Pound's) that he will take up.

THE CLOUDS

I

Filling the mind
upon the rim of the overarching sky, the horses of
the dawn charge from south to north, gigantic beasts
rearing flame-edged above the pit,
a rank confusion of the imagination still uncured,
a rule, piebald under the streetlamps, reluctant
to be torn from its hold. (Williams, 171)

(1) Longinus's enthusiasm, (2) Kant's cerebral overwhelming, and (3) Burke's contrast of the vast and the delicate, are all elucidated in "The Clouds" opening stanza. (1) "The rim of the overarching sky," "the horses" charging, "gigantic beasts rearing," "a rank confusion," these phrases are pregnant with action, with movement, and enthusiasm. Williams does not begin this poem with pedestrian language; here, he runs, or, perhaps more appropriately, flies. (2) "Filling the mind," "imagination still uncured," "a rule [...] reluctant to be torn," these phrases, dispersed within the enthusiastic movers, shed light on the deeper narrative, the cohesive schema. This imagination is raw, unseasoned, and the mind is filled by its action. (3) Strikingly contrasted are the towering, storming images "overarching sky," "horses of dawn," "gigantic beasts," against the almost timid rule, hiding beneath a simple streetlamp (a delicate signifier), reluctant to come out, to be laid bare by the horses' ceaseless and all-encompassing romp, "from south to

Erasmus, Shakespeare, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Socrates, Plato; what is to become of these “unshorn minds,” these hirsute, wizened bear poets?

Again, it must be pointed out that Aristophanes “knew the clouds,” is an explicit play on both Aristophanes’s own work by the same name and its interaction with the sublime and/or aesthetic ideal. But where do these dead live and what embalms them? “They live today in their old state because / of the pace they kept that keeps / them now fresh in our thoughts” (172). The stone tablet, the leaflet, the written word presents the opportunity to enshrine the sublime; presenting again the sense of both physical and mental “pace.” These are free minds: both digesting the bog, imbibing its parts, but also reaching towards the clouds. Aristophanes interacts with the particulars of his day, but, according to Williams, elevates himself beyond a strictly contemporaneous station. Doubly so, Aristophanes is now consecrated in Williams’s own poem, immortalized. Although, it is certainly not a didactic, preachy, piety that Williams is after. “It is the opposite of piety he was after in ‘The Clouds,’ he told Kenneth Burke in late ‘46: “the unknowability of knowledge and the professional asses who trade on that basic fact—pontifically proclaiming this or that” (Mariani, 567).

Williams lays this idea bare in his correspondence with Kenneth Burke: “[...] I look upon the metaphysician or religionist who uses—the mystic might be the better term—who uses poetry, as that prime mental shit Eliot uses it, for his own purposes. My resentment toward him is as deep as I am. I stake everything I’ve got on it. He is a subtle defamer of poetry, the more contemptible in that he is smart enough to wrap it in his stopgap religion” (Williams, 86). This contempt is both explicitly and implicitly dealt in the following section, Part Three. It begins “(Scherzo),” denoted in Italian to mean “joke,” or in music, a lighthearted or more whimsical movement. This middle poem rushes Williams into the realm of his contemporaries, especially Eliot. For the first time the reader is given a strict narrator’s voice: “I came upon a priest once [...] in crimson and gold brocade.[...] It happened that we tourists had intervened / at some mid-moment of the ritual— / tipped the sacristan or whatever it was.” The narrator is removed from the ornamentation of the clergy, unfamiliar with the argot and ecclesiastical worries, a tourist (“the sacristan or whatever it was”). However, for the priest, this adornment and rococo grandiosity is how he “rides the clouds of his belief” (173).

Those icons which in Eliot's "The Waste Land" are sacred—"Of Magnus Martyr hold / In explicable splendour of Ionian white and gold" (Eliot, 75)—are initially given similar treatment by Williams writing of seemingly stoic solitude: "No one else was there—porphyry and alabaster, / the light flooding in scented with sandalwood" (Williams 174). However, there is a "but" and a "butt" in the way of this grand sublimity. "—but this holy man / jiggling upon his buttocks to the litany / chanted, in response, by two kneeling altar boys! / I was amazed and stared in such a manner." Anti-pretty, anti-institution, anti-Vatican, Williams makes silly that which Eliot holds as sublime. Both Eliot and the priest seem "caught half off the earth / in his ecstasy—though without losing a beat— / turned and grinned at me from his cloud" (174). The scene set is almost a clash between the sublime and the ridiculous, the actual might of the cerebral beasts and their warring—huge against the backdrop of the trite, grinning priest caught up with the young boy.

Part Four tackles death, the beyond, confused and selective reincarnation, and the life of the author lived. It begins by echoing the center of Part Two's chiasmic structure:

as if the certainty of a future life
 were any solution to our dilemma: how to get
 published not what we write but what we would write
 were it not for the laws against libelous truth

The poor brain unwilling to own the obtrusive body
 would crawl from it like a crab and
 because it succeeds, at times, in doffing that (Part Two, Williams, 173)

In Part Four, the author is given the mobility of the naked hermit crab, barely alive, but still living, at the edge of existence he is "at last [...] quite free—exulted, scurrying to some slightly larger shell." Each author picks up a different shell, and that shell, that "piece of the old life, which she carries, a precious burden, beyond!" is her "soul." The imagined then becomes flesh and the clouds a looking glass into the beyond, a permanent ellipses that stretches on:

The clouds remain
 —the disordered heavens, ragged, ripped by winds
 or dormant, a calligraphy of scaly dragons and bright moths,
 of straining thought, bulbous or smooth,
 ornate, the flesh itself (in which
 the poet foretells his own death); convoluted, lunging upon
 a pismire, a conflagration, a (Williams, 174)

Again, for a final time, the reader is struck by a wave of Burkian contrasts. Are these heavens in action—

ripped and ragged—or dormant? More beasts populate the clouds. Dragons, as well as moths; the pebble and the boulder existing side by side. Is man to be more than the red-faced turtle looking up from his ditch in the bog? Is he to aspire to the heights of great beasts? Are the straining thoughts bulbous, or smooth? The poet lunges upon a world-ending fire and seems to lie prostrate before an ant. If enjambment does not force reevaluation, jarring juxtaposition certainly will. Again, the plight of the poet is given flesh.

These clouds, this blueprint of sublimity and experience, is mercurial to the point of contradiction, and it is Williams's hope that the ebb and flow of poetic inspiration does not forever become snared in the eddy of Eliot's influence, as elucidated in his autobiography:

These were the years just before the great catastrophe to our letters—the appearance of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. There was heat in us, a core and a drive that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions. Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics. We did not know how to answer him. (Williams, 146)

Here Williams answers, he is “about the purpose of poetry,” echoing that the good he sees in Moore's self-reflective poetics. Immutable episteme is scorned. Traditional conventions of verse are likewise abated. The poem ends on a literal pismire: a tittle, but a tittle that stretches outward in anticipation of what is to come all the same.

The reader has been and will continue to a participant in the poem even after its abrupt end, a simultaneously primordial and apocalyptic, pre-McCarthyian stretch of contemplation. Ever present above are the clouds. Which clouds? Are they piebald? Or, are these the same clouds driven from the northeast? “By the road to the contagious hospital / under the surge of the blue” (Williams, 95). Caught between a secular, purgatoried heaven and hell, the reader is left to hope and wonder, like Williams, for spring; alone to question as in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Book Six: “For we still had hopes that pointed to the clouds” (Wordsworth, 432).

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Creative Sample from *Light Escapes Us*

Obon, Festival of the Dead

Generation I. Executive Order 9066

Pursued by an ever-tightening net, my ancestral fish, twenty-something,
singing *Red Shoes, Red Shoes*, a children's nursery rhyme:

“Aka—i—kutsu—ha—ite—a,”

(A young girl wearing red shoes
has gone to America with a foreigner.)

“Only American songs,” her husband says.

“A—E—I—O—U,” she works over a cluster of vowels,
whispering to the infant girl on her back while they wade toward Somerset,
Pennsylvania.

No one wants to travel back across a country, yellow-brown despairing,
full moon maples rollicking against pebble-pocked shores, my family
unharbored and demoorred, San Diego wasn't its imagined paradise
in 1942 and fleeing. My grandmother escaping the sea, carmine sandals called
geta soaking in a blazing rain, birdsong lost, having so recently exchanged
surnames

Hasebe for Smith,
an island of motherless dark,
clothed by shorelines the color of waves.

Nisei, Generation II. My mother

(the infant girl) sings Momotaroson
to me (in a yellow house that smells like red
Marlboros and burnt ramen) of a little boy born
in the center of a softball-sized peachling, a stray
piichi that came bumping down a stream
like a present. She sings wholly
gaijin, my grandmother so proud
of her daughter's Japanese-less-ness.
We are all proud to celebrate my third
birthday at the Hibachi Grill: fire excising
from the throat of an onion volcano. Three
generations gather around to teach me
how to pick kernals of “gohan, gohan, go-han” up
off the face of a melamine plate.

Sansei, Generation III. Alone

I am returning to Japan-
town, decades later,
on an LA late summer
night on the corner of Rose
Street and 1st. Stretched ladders

of generations crowd
for the festival: lit-up
kabuki roam the streets between
rows of marinated
salmon, baskets piled
high with tiny,
dry sardines, niboshi
and sashimi sliced
onionskin thin.
Mochi flour
litters the air
as I pay beneath
amber paper lantern light
to have another brittle
box of Kitsune Udon
shipped
back to Pennsylvania.

I turn the corner, and
in a sake bar a white-face
woman stands on stage in red geta,
singing:
“Aka—i—kutsu—ha—ite—a,”
and for the first time it’s only
the English I hear:

“A young girl wearing red shoes
has gone to America with a foreigner

She took a ship from the wharf in Yokohama,
Gone to America with a foreigner.

Now her eyes have turned blue, I wonder
about her as a foreigner in that country.

Every time I see red shoes, I think of her
Every time I meet a foreigner, I think of her.”

I wonder about her, now, as a foreigner
in my country. Widowed images
I cannot shake.

0 to 60—One Horse in a Field

The engine of our silver 1984
Ford Bronco whirrs in a blue
night detour while my father whips
through a cornfield of husk
and copper seed pelting our windshield,
our clattering dash.

“A shortcut,” my father
sings with Leonard Cohen.

His boot double-times the pedal. Baby
cousin Nora sleeps slouched against my lap.
The ricketing cradles her. The tires lick up
Mississippi Plain’s dirt, dark and slurred
at the edges of our car in brown
bully splotches.

I envy her unawares—to her father’s
galloping hunt for newness toward land
of enchantment: New Mexico.

“Dance me to the end
of love,” he hambones
against the steering wheel.
I smell his scalding

breath. I tell myself, don’t cry out in fear. Don’t wake
Nora to this booze-saddled waltz of blue night
pushing down plains, ripping up some unknown
farmer’s blackgold stalk and labor.

Crop parts in yellow waves,
and peaking through the treadless tires
of my eyes it’s

all
open field
sixty—or 60,000—
horses running through unbound plain
stampeding around our little silver car

a streak, a tribe, a falling rock, an earth
of muscled, shuddering
hoovebeats louder
than our radiator’s rat-tat,
and with my voice, I crack
and stutter, ‘stop’

We careen so close to a stallion,
that our bucking wheels are nothing
but a child’s spinning top

below the bass of his thumping weight.

I smell
his ribs, manure-speckled,
through the dew-trickled window.

I reach
toward his spirit warrior lassoed soul,
toward the unbridled fire of his mane.

Nora sleeps. And I won't wake
her to this dream, wilder still.

Mare feet clomp and catch
against our fender denting
its metallic smirk.

Moon flecks sparkle in my father's
good eye—the bad eye twists
blue.

A tumult of flanks romp in dirty-
skirted cream. Horses
toward the edge of dissolving night.

Red circles around their eyes,
their nostrils, their speared knees,
vessels of war
indifferent to our bucking,
our little—

I want to go where they're headed:
galloping into a different kind
of new, but I'm too afraid to ask.

Take me anywhere
except the land of enchantment:
anywhere except New Mexico.

At my barefooted trembling, Wild
Buffalo and a sawed-off scuffle,
where Nora's dreams of feeding
wild ponies haven't yet caught
up to my father and his Wild
Hunt. When she wakes
it will be his unbridled mane
or a stallion's
dead against our Ford
Bronco's bucking dash.

Beneath Carnival Lights

You can't stop morning
from melting plastic bags.

100 other goldfish twisty-tied
up and dreading a hot sunrise.

You're in mourning together
for the old 20+ gallon tank.

For the familiarity of the green leaf
that released you from an orange egg sack.

How'd you find yourself
in one of these again?

You are a woman now
but you have always had scales.

Bulging eyes, torn fins, and a fading
coat, you don't like what you see.

You've been told
you will be born

again and when
it's all over.

You like it when the man yells, *close*
but no cigar.

They say hope is his finger
poking the edge of your new egg sack.

You like it at night, when the coiled scales
glistening with light flicker on/off on/off.

You have ears for children's song.
Their blown bubbles remind you of home.

You think you are strong enough
to die in a toilet bowl.

Mother Walks Free Despite Admitting Homicide in Daughter's Death on Tribal Lands

"No one speaks for that baby," said Bernadine Martin,
the Navajo Nation's chief prosecutor. —Associated Press

What is the news?

"Just put up a headline," says the editor,
"no one will read it anyway."

Reporters round the unresolved murders,
as if the wind eroded every remainder.

*There was swelling around the little girl's skull
and hemorrhages around her brain.*

Who will count the bones?

Silence swings like a pendulum over our
brown body collective. We're told "Do not speak
unless you are spoken" into—unless you are broken
in two—unless

*The scars on her 36-pound body were consistent with burns
from a space heater, a curling iron and hot noodles.*

What does the eye witness?

Maybe you see us windowed in another world.
A dusty whirlwind shimmering through an Arizona night-
watchman asleep, derelict-whipped, without a job.

There was a tear between her right ear and scalp.

What is a hand?

We file our nails into daggers. We sleep in each other's
nail beds. We crack the wind's back and talk big
at the bar about pitchfork promenades. Imagining
our reflection in axe blades, when someone dear to us
says

*It's not enough to sing of cities sacked, of children
slain. What with Murder's maw splintering wide
all across our plain.*

Who will speak?

Who will speak?

Who will speak?

Process Note

I began the process of crafting and thinking of poems for this thesis in the fall of 2015. Since then my poetic sensibilities, taste, and views on poetics have changed drastically. The difference between then and now could practically not be more contradistinct. I went from writing “wall of sound poetry” with every line cranked to eleven (resulting in a deafening roar) to, hopefully, a kind of quieter, more humanly connected school of poetics that attempts to scrape the polyps off the throat of poetry, rather than rupture its vocal chords into a kind of cacophonous seizure.

Much of this change has been spurred on and encouraged by my advisor Jaswinder Bolina, alongside harrowing current events. Every single year it becomes more important to defend the right of marginalized people groups to speak out, to have a voice, and a platform to be heard. And it becomes more evident that the contemporary poet should have a role in this voicing.

Late in 2015, while defending his stance on banning Muslims immigrants from entering the U.S., Donald Trump invoked FDR’s Executive Order 9066 as legislation worthy of praise, of remembrance for its effectiveness—the very same order which placed over one-hundred thousand of my people, Japanese people, *American people*, in internment camps. My grandmother, Mastsume Hasebe, was one of the many Americans who narrowly escaped this racist legislation, fleeing to the East Coast. Across the Pacific Ocean my great grandfather, Naka Hasebe, fought for the freedom to speak out against Japanese involvement in WWII; with a voice (a poem) he was imprisoned for, and eventually died for:

See the Warhorse cry
Japan setting in the sun
of his tear-stained eyes

My mother and her sisters had their voices squelched and all but silenced growing up in central Pennsylvania, post-WWII, where “it felt like no one for a hundred miles shared our skin color, understood our heritage.” My family is no stranger to silenced voices, silenced experiences, and it is this history-charged outpouring that defines my M.F.A. thesis as a James Michener Scholar who does have a voice and a platform to speak out.

James A. Michener, the namesake of my fellowship and my ability to have this encouraged voice, spoke of the internment of Japanese Americans thusly: “This was a bleak period in the history of

American freedom. A few isolated voices tried to protest... but our nation was bent upon revenge. The long years of propaganda were bearing fruit, and we struck out blindly, stupidly, to our eternal discredit.” Isolated voices protesting years of propaganda? It’s as if his response to the 1942 internment is speaking directly into the quagmire before us today. Isolated voices need to be heard. Since the first poem in this thesis was penned, such a sentiment has been at the heart of my poetic project.

The Claws That Catch

The seed of this project was planted many years before coming to UM, however, it was really my advisor M. Evelina Galang who created an environment where I felt “permission” to let it germinate, and where my advisor A. Manette Ansay (with such immense patience and understanding) watered it.

I wrote up to page seventy-five. It lacked a unified voice, was incredibly overwritten, and was my unsuccessful attempt at jamming every idea in my brain for the novel into a single package. Professor Ansay suggested I rewrite it entirely, and, in the rewriting (without looking back at the previous pages) would discover a unifying voice, a stronger sense of cohesion in plot, character, etc. She was exactly right. The second draft (more like twentieth draft, but who’s counting?) of the original seventy-five was/is, hopefully, much more unified, compelling, and just overall better. Going back and reading that first draft is truly cringe-inducing, and I consider that feeling a real accomplishment. It’s like looking back on the woodworker I was last year and thinking, “how shoddy, what poor workmanship, that chair wouldn’t even stand up to the weight of a child,” and now I have something that I can perhaps sit in, build off of. I’m proud of how far the work has come and am eager to take the momentum from this project and transfer it into a completed novel with the same energy, voice, and cohesion my advisors have injected into what would surely otherwise be a grotesquely-seamed Frankenstein’s monster of a piece. Although, I’m sure (and it is my sincere hope) that I’ll look back each year and think the same thing: “how could I have built such a piss poor chair last year? Look how much better of a craftsman I am this year!” only to do it all over again the next.

Annotated bibliography, 2014-2017

Acevedo, Chantel. *A Falling Star*. Durham. Carolina Wren Press, 2014. Print.

This novel centers around the Mariel boatlift, and class consensus seemed to be that character was put before plot to the detriment of narrative structure. History plays a gigantic role in this novel, and, those more invested in the veracity of experience therein, were more inclined to enjoy.

Allen, Donald, ed. *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. Berkeley. University of California Press, 1999. Print.

My second time encountering this seminal collection, but now from the viewpoint of Craft, rather than analysis. Including such major 20th century poets such as O'Hara, Ashbery, Ginsberg, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, and Duncan, the collection is expansive. Though I found many of the poems to be too rigid in their conceptualism, I thought that the artist notes and manifestos accompanying many of the writers were entirely helpful in my understanding.

Baxter, Charles. *Burning Down the House*. Saint Paul : Graywolf Press, 2008. Print.

I compared these essays on writing to others I had read in the past and found them much less accessible, e.g. *Steering the Craft, On Fiction*, and other such classics. Yet, Intelligent, analytical, insightful, not entirely inaccessible, but this work definitely required patience.

Baxter, Charles. *Feast of Love*. New York : Pantheon Books, 2000. Print.

A novel about the character Charles who is and is not the writer Baxter, interviewing various characters who give first person accounts of their experiences, both successes and failures, with love. The multiple POVs and Baxter's sense of voice were engaging, although the end seems to feel flat. .

Bell, Josh. *no planets strike*. USA. Bison Books. 2004. Print.

A heartfelt collection of poems about growing up in Middle America that never comes off as pretentious. The collection is rambling and self-indulgent, but somehow always comes off as genuine. Bell presents the reader with long poems that seem to exist as a means of sorting something out.

Berman, David. *Actual Air*. New York. Open City Books. 1999. Print.

Read in Jaswinder's poetry workshop. Consisted mainly of narrative poems that navigate reality through a slightly skewed and often humorously self-deprecating lens. Berman's work maintains genuine sentimentality and weight despite its indulgence in surrealism. Was really helpful in showcasing how you can be conversational while still flirting with absurdity in poetry.

Brock-Broido, Lucie. *Trouble in Mind*. New York. Alfred A. Knopf. 2005. Print.

This collection is haunting as it navigates and intertwines the past, present, and future through highly discursive language and complimentary form. Brock-Broido's poems are extremely associative and encouraged me to reconsider the poetic "I".

Chang, Lan Samantha. *Hunger*. New York. Norton. 1998. Print.

Chang's text brought up a series of important inquiries and concerns during Amina Gautier's fiction forms course. In particular, the issue of a father's perceived ownership over his daughters became a specific point of interest as my own writing often focuses on gendered binaries and the power dynamics that result from them.

Chang, Tina. *Half-Lit Houses*. New York : Four Way Books, 2004. Print.

Chang explores her family's history through her lush, richly imagined poems, at times adopting the persona of relatives. There's a dreamlike quality to the poetry that appealed to me though the tone and voice was too consistent at times.

Connell, Evan S. *Mrs. Bridge*. New York, Viking Press, 1959. Print.

Bridge's story is told in vignettes that convey vividly the trappings of the privileged women of her era. I had empathy for her as often as I wanted to shake her for being so passive. I loved the vignette format which made writing a novel seem slightly less daunting, also made for an easy, energetic read.

Corral, Eduardo. *Slow Lightning*. USA. Yale University Press. 2012. Print.

A highly praised (and rightly so) collection of poems that deal with submissiveness, HIV, and life in the desert. A great example of poetry taking advantage of white space and moving a greater narrative through abstractions and altered perspectives. I loved how the pieces themselves looked like artwork while reference great pieces of art. Was intrinsic in opening me up to ekphrastic poetry.

de la Flor, Neil. *Almost Dorothy*. USA. Marsh Hawk Press. 2010. Print.

A truly hybrid text! De la Flor ignores boundaries in order to properly investigate the self via pop culture and impressive linguistic association. His collection smashes against history and interrogates stigma relentlessly. Truly inspirational in that it helped me realize just how weird and wonderful you can get in with your writing.

de la Paz, Oliver. *Names Above Houses*. Carbondale. Southern Illinois University Press. 2001. Print.

This collection was one of my favorites as it wove together family, history, myth, and all in a narrative, yet clearly poetic structure. I loved de la Paz's gripping narrative and that he allowed his prose to follow what might be considered a more traditional storytelling while maintaining poetic license on the page. It was helpful as I was at the time working

on a series that navigates a narrative more traditionally, but was working within a surrealist concept.

Faizullah, Tarfia. *Seam*. Carbondale : Crab Orchard Review & Southern Illinois University Press, 2014. Print.

Faizullah recounts history through beautiful language and gut wrenching imagery. She bears witness to victims of rape and torture by the Pakistani army during the 1971 Liberation War. It was a tough read emotionally, difficult to get through in a single sitting. The interviews with the birangonas (war heroines) were overwhelming as I imagine they were for the poet as well. My only major gripe with this collection is that each poem feels interchangeable, and I found myself wanting more variety the farther along in the collection I went.

Guest, Paul. *My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge*. New York. HarperCollins. 2008. Print.

Guest's poems are so immersive and full of unpredictable twists and turns, both in narrative and language. He is the master of quiet sadness, absurd humor, and strangely unwavering optimism. This collection was inspirational to me in that it allows moments of happiness, of relief. That and the language is so down right wonderful.

Hayes, Terrance. *Lighthouse*. New York. Penguin. 2010. Print.

Hayes has a unique understanding of the relationship between persona and language and always makes room in his poems for a variety of vastly different voices that have a charge to them that forces them into the reader's mind. It is exceptional in its pacing and the velocity in which the language travels from page to page. An awesome read.

Hicok, Bob. *Elegy Owed*. USA. Copper Canyon Press. 2013. Print.

Hicok's capacity for introspection within his poetry, but never suffers the loss of awareness in its own absurdity and self-righteousness. Instead, his work thrives from its willingness to confront its own system of thinking, to admit its inherent flaws. Impressively, his elegies artfully mimic life and tragedy: they're both haunting and hilarious in the course of a single stanza.

Hunter, Lindsay. *Ugly Girls*. New York. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2014. Print.

Through multiple POV narrators, the novel revolves around two poor girls living in a rural Florida trailer park. The story employs a unique dialectic that not only gives the reader a more nuanced understanding of the characters, but adds an intensity that propels that story forward. It examines issues of exploitation, tumultuous relationships, and self-preservation, and ultimately leaves the reader to ruminate on whether or not some people really don't have a way out of the struggle they're born into.

Matejka, Adrian. *The Big Smoke*. New York. Penguin. 2013. Print.

Read on the suggestion of a popular podcast, “Between the Covers,” Matejka’s collection is a whirlwind of compelling narrative persona and boxing language. By focusing on a specific historical figure, Matejka’s poems belong to each other, inform the reader. The collection is truly an experience to read, and I don’t think there’s a single poem I would take out.

McCall, Jason. *Dear Hero*. USA. Marsh Hawk Press. 2013. Print.

Inventive as it is brilliant, McCall’s use of the cultural pop phenomenon of superheroes to interrogate society’s persistent mistreatment of outsiders, racial or otherwise, is impressive to say the least. What’s best, to me, is how unapologetic McCall is, and how willing he is to interrogate these heavy issues through an approachable medium. Fantastic read.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. USA. Wave Books. 2009. Print.

Nelson’s *Bluets* is so tightly tied to a concept that it lost my interest. The book is beautifully crafted throughout, but because of the nature of her subject, Nelson sacrifices the ability to aid the reader in their understanding of what is truly significant to her story versus what seems to be just filler. It perhaps was far too waxing philosophical for me.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Black Water*. New York. Penguin. 1992. Print.

This was not my favorite Oates, but it was certainly stylish. Oates reveals new context and information about the impending tragedy by repeating the scene over and over again, toying seemingly endlessly with readers’ emotions. At first I liked the idea, but like so much of Oates’ work, the gimmick’s charm wore off soon after reading the same scene 8 times.

Ozick, Cynthia. *The Shawl*. New York : Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

A very short work, including “The Shawl” plus its sequel, the novella “Rosa.” “The Shawl” is the heartbreaking tale of a mother whose young child is murdered in a concentration camp. “Rosa” is the story of that mother who survived unspeakable horrors. Ozick’s lyrical prose is striking. Rosa’s character—her anger, grief, inability move past the events that defined her—are deftly imagined and written.

Percy, Ben. *Refresh, Refresh*. St Paul. Graywolf Press. 2007. Print.

Ben Percy gets how to write violence: an enviable gift of rendering male rage sympathetic. He incorporates familiar rural settings in unique and unexpected his way and above anything else, this collection shows a willingness to thrust plot forward through action that doesn’t always rely on logic, but instead invites the reader to watch the disaster unfold before them on the page.

Robbins, Michael. *Alien vs. Predator*. New York. Penguin. 2012. Print.

A controversial collection that's known for being overly hip and crude, and I actually agree with the heavy criticism this book has received. Though I can see why this book has received praise, much of the poems seemed self-obsessed, invoking the voice of a record-store hipster elitist in my head. Some of the pieces too seemed to employ language merely for shock value. Overall, a definite disappointing read for me.

Shockley, Evie. *The New Black*. Middletown : Wesleyan University Press, 2011. Print.

I admired the way Shockley experimented with form— white space and dense blocks of text and ekphrasis. The collection is truly diverse. Some of the poems were accessible, others more of a challenge, made you work to get into them, others focused on language left me out completely. All of it was exciting, electric, powerful.

Smith, Patricia. *Blood Dazzler*. USA. Coffee House Press. 2008. Print.

Smith eliminates any sense of protection the reader might have and instead presents the absolutely disturbing tragedy and negligence of Katrina's hurricane response through poems infused with dialect and persona resulting in a devastating effect. I loved this collection because her poems dare to engage politics, social justice, and history.

Stanford, Frank. *What About This*. USA. Copper Canyon Press. 2015. Print.

Frank Stanford tragically committed suicide at the mere age of 27, but before doing so he was extremely prolific, producing a tremendous amount of fantastic work. His style is both immersive and lyric and successfully draws the reader in despite their short length. A truly inspirational read.

Wade, Julie Marie. *Postage Due*. USA. White Pine Press. 2013. Print.

Wade's writing is so openly personal and honest, it's difficult not to feel as though she's divulging a secret to you and only you. Wade stares down stigma bravely and never shies away from genuinely talking about trauma. And perhaps most importantly is the warmth her prose provides; this book mirrors the process of moving past trauma, and provides a beautiful optimism to readers.

Watkins, Claire Vaye. *Battleborn*. USA. Riverhead Books. 2012. Print.

One of the (many) things I most appreciate about Watkin's writing is her ability to render extremely outside characters believable and genuine; she artfully avoids coming off as insincere or exploitive of these outlier characters. Her voice is so beautifully nuanced in its ability to oscillate between an almost journalistic attention to detail and a warm affection towards her characters. An incredible read.

Wilson, Kevin. *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth*. New York. Harper Perennial. 2009. Print.

Wilson so cleanly juxtaposes wildly out-there narratives with a down-to-earth voice that is so approachable. Obviously influenced by magical-realism based narratives, his stories deviate from what we think of when we think of magical-realism in that they always seem to depend most on the intricately intimate and small moments between characters. It is clear as you read that he is affectionate towards his characters, and he reveals that beautifully in his work.

Young, Dean. *Bender*. USA. Copper Canyon Press. 2015. Print.

Dean Young is famous, and for a good reason. This collection in particular is a perfect display of the vastness in which Young has explored and invigorated language, and I've come back to this time after time picking his words like flowers. Young is linguistically fearless, and it pays off; many of Young's lines reach at sublimity, the thesis topic of my academic research paper herein. .