Queer creatures, queer times

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QUEER CREATURES, QUEER TIMES

By

Sarah Giragosian

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts & Sciences

Department of English

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Abstract

*Queer Creatures, Queer Times* makes a critical intervention in queer theory and queer poetics through a combination of critical and creative approaches to explore how posthumanist thought and animal studies might correct a blindspot in current critical work on queer experience and texts. Queer theory tends to neglect non/human subjects, yet an ecological and posthumanist critique helps to trouble its humanist bias as well as its overly neat ties to constructivist and performative notions of selfhood. I argue that modern lyric poetry, in emergence during the cultural transmission of Darwinian precepts and the social invention of the homosexual, is uniquely situated to challenge the exclusivist principles that underlie specieisim, Social Darwinism, and heterosexism. While queer theory tends to overlook evolution in the construction of subjectivity and sexuality, I posit that such tendencies diminish opportunities for thinking through non-coherent selfhood and the radical contingency of beings upon other life forms. Accompanying my critical essays on three modernist queer poets, Djuna Barnes, Elizabeth Bishop, and Marianne Moore, are my poetics essay entitled “Towards a Poetics of the Animal” and my poetry manuscript *Queer Fish*. Both poetic texts explore non-dominant forms of queer relation between animals and humans.
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This project originated with a feeling of dissatisfaction with queer theory’s blindspots: its insistence, for example, on performative and constructivist interpretations of subjectivity to the exclusion of biological accounts of being and sexuality. Queer theory tends to neglect the bio, including non-human subjects, yet non-human life is suffused with a queer eros. Most plants and many animals are intersexed, and transsexuality is widespread among nonhuman animals (Hird). As Bruce Bagemihl writes, “Homosexual behavior occurs in over 450 different species of animals, is found in every geographic region of the world, in every major animal group, in all groups, and with equal frequency among females and males” (Bagemihl 235). Queer Creatures, Queer Times seeks to address the omission of the non-human animal in queer theory and argues for a shift in critical mode. This project approaches queer subjectivity not exclusively through queer theory, but also through the queering potential of posthumanism and evolutionary studies. Thus, I trace the formation of a queer feminist consciousness shaped through discursive and social conditions and through an evolutionary and ecological critique.

In a time of ecological and socio-political turmoil when we are in fact inhaling crisis, we must be open to new configurations of being that are not prescriptive or humanizing. While advancing a biological critique of queer theory, this project is deeply indebted to the work of constructivist and poststructuralist critics that have contributed to queer theory, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler among them. As
Foucault teaches us, the turn of the century witnessed the discursive production of the homosexual, whose sexual acts became foundational to her identity and the object of scientific and medical analysis. Sexuality is thus a function of power and disciplinary control; regulatory discourses advanced by juridical, medical, and religious bodies crafted the homosexual subject, implicating it in a gridwork of power relations to which it was both subject and object. In other words, the Foucauldian subject is enmeshed a complex of powers that constitute it and within which it works to constitute the other. Judith Butler pushed Foucauldian thought further, arguing that gender is an act that constitutes the subject socially and makes it an object within an heteronormative hegemony. As a culturally inscribed formation, gender is a performative practice that is repeated through processes of signification that accrue power over time and craft the identity of the subject (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 198). Butler argues that sex—like gender—is an artificial construct subject to change, and that sexuality, while not reducible to gender or sex, is likewise crafted by hegemonic norms and is subject to heteronormativity’s categorical imperative.

*Queer Creatures, Queer Times* takes for granted that sexuality is an in-between formation that cannot be accounted for by any paradigm or thesis that attempts to disarticulate sexuality from bios or culture. Sexual desire is mysterious; it throws us into a crisis of being that reveals identity not as fixed, but instead as malleable, contingent, existing along a continuum in time, and quasi-independent of our will. Desire is a giving over to the other; it fractures identity, exposing its limits and revealing bodily vulnerability to be a condition that
connects us. It interrupts our isolation and exposes the fiction of an integrated self over which we have total mastery. No one can claim to own one’s desire and, as such, it cannot be fully proper to an “I.” Instead, it is an improperty, which we can never entirely author. As Butler reminds us, sexuality is a condition of being outside of the self, of participating in the pleasures and risks of dispossessing. The desiring being risks the dissolution of the narratives that she authors and the world furnishes for her in life. She does not have a possessory relationship to her sexual desire, but rather her desire radically undoes a coherent “I,” a stable human agent and identity.

To redress the anthropocentricism of queer theory, I argue that evolutionary and posthumanist studies can contribute to the field’s inquiry into the limits of identity and its enchanted attachment to the alterity of desire, which exists both within and outside of language. With its stakes in corporeality and eros, *Queer Creatures, Queer Times* recognizes in vulnerability—a shared condition of all life forms—the grounding for a politics that originates with an insistence on the concrete materiality of all life. While the ontological status of life forms is discursively produced, I argue that a focus on their vital materiality, their essential interdependence upon other life forms for survival, and equal evolutionary potential must serve as the criteria for a sound biocentric ethics.

There is a critical trend in queer theory to repudiate evolutionary narratives in the construction of selfhood and sexuality because of threats of biological determinism and Social Darwinism. However, a posthumanist critique that draws from ecological processes and evolutionary studies helps to trouble queer theory’s
humanist bias as well as its overly neat ties to constructivist notions of selfhood. I posit that queer posthumanism, with its emphasis on materialism and the social forces that constitute the self, requires new forms of queer theorizing that performative conceptions of sexual identity cannot provide alone. Queer theory’s critical turn away from evolution diminishes opportunities for thinking through the non-coherence of being, its ontology of process, and its radical sociality, in which lines of contingency and continuity are shared among human, animal, mineral, and flora. Moreover, as Christopher Manes reminds us, Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory is essentially anti-hierarchical and equalizing:

> From the perspective of biological adaptation, elephants are no ‘higher’ than earwigs, salamanders are no less ‘advanced’ than sparrows; cabbages have as much evolutionary status as kings. Darwin invited our culture to face the fact that in the observation of nature there exists not one scrap of evidence that humans are superior to or more interesting than say, lichen. Predictably, we declined the invitation” (Manes 22).

Darwin’s theory of origins, which wears away the boundaries between species, can be placed in conversation with queer theory to extend its inquiry into forms of relation between human and nonhuman life. Unfortunately, highly reductive and distorted Darwinian thought that has promoted human exceptionalism has been disseminated since the Victorian era, but Darwinism has a radical and deeply subversive—even queer—potential in its formulation of the origins of sex and sexuality. As Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man*, “Some remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphroditic or androgynous” (Darwin http://www.gutenberg.org). In other words, all human life evolved from an intersexed descendant. Darwin’s monistic vision of the origin of
human sex and sexuality unsettles the Western obsession with gender and sexual binaries.

Queer possibility also lies in Darwin’s understanding of the inter-implication of plant, animal, and human life. Organic life dramatizes the limits of reading queer subjectivity as an exclusively socio-historical formation. Scholars with intersecting interests in queer theory and posthumanism, such as Myra Hird and Elizabeth Wilson, posit that methodologies seeking to claim homosexual individuals in human and animal life as queer are ultimately reductive. More productive, rigorous strategies for queer theorizing would begin to examine the ways in which nonhuman life might provide a lens for queerness and for reconsidering how queerness is and is not socio-culturally constituted (Hird 242). From this perspective, I can appreciate the fact that the body is culturally inscribed and historically contingent, yet I can also carve open a space for a materialist vantage that recognizes in the bio a queer power. Stemming from this theoretical orientation, my work engages questions of how textuality—specifically poetry—may furnish an ecological ethics that can prepare us to engage in a praxis beneficial to the earth and its creatures.

Non-human life—specifically animal life—presents us with an epistemological and ontological paradox. Our own relation to the natural world is salubriously problematized each time we are confronted with language’s strained relationship to animal life, even while we are constituted of the animal. To begin to approach the mystery of animal subjectivity, we must separate ourselves from our natural foundations and use human frameworks—masks, language, and art,
for example—to conceptualize them. Embedded in the structure of our language and yet existing outside of language, animal lives productively disrupt meaning, identity, and language, and are in this way poised to contribute to queer theory. I argue that lyric poetry, in its testing of the identity-based and categorical principles that structure the empirical world, is well-equipped to confound the imperfect categories of “animal” and “human,” and instead to explore the richer, more fertile and creative site of creatureliness that constitutes all of us.

Many of the mediating constructions of the modern subject in the twentieth and twenty-first century have been premised on humanist and binary conceptions of being: gay/straight, female/male, black/white, human/animal. Perhaps one of the most destructive legacies of the Enlightenment was the denial of the presence of the animal in the human and the bestialization of those who were deemed less than human. This disavowal has entailed the displacement of the “other”—such as the minority—from the category of the human, an exclusion that has occasioned much of the barbarity of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, as oppression of the “other” is normalized at home and abroad and crimes against the earth proliferate, the category of “creature”—encompassing human, animal, and imaginative being—opens up new opportunities for undermining hierarchies of being and imagining new forms of hybrid, queer relation.

The relationship between posthumanism and queer theory—and the unique position of lyric subjectivity to amplify or trouble or expose their intersections—is a site of inquiry still in many ways in its infant stages. In literary studies, there have been some significant critical efforts to connect posthumanism with queer
theory. As Eric Keenaghan notes, queer theory tends to overlook poetry as a viable discourse for thinking through queer subjectivity. I see this oversight as also leading to a lost opportunity for queer theory to engage posthumanism.

With its accent on affect, the imagination, and the social world, modern lyric poetry invites the imagining of forms of being that are not confined to humanist rubrics. Modern lyric poetry, in emergence during the cultural and medical transmission of Darwinian precepts and the social invention of the homosexual, is uniquely situated to trace the emergence of a queer, post-Darwinian consciousness.

Historically, the cultural and social backlash that followed Darwin’s theory of origins, which bridged the gap between the civilized subject and the animal, ultimately threatened the pre-eminence of the Western human subject. In response, forms of Social Darwinism emerged, which displaced the fear of a linkage between the human and animal subject onto oppressed populations. With Darwinism came the cultural fear of degeneration, which permeated scientific, psychoanalytical, political, and social lines of inquiry. Signs of degeneration in the bodily contours of the individual raised the question of whether degeneration could take hold of entire populations. In turn, the fear of a degenerative atavistic resurgence within modern society resulted in a violent ontological and epistemological shift in relation to the human and social body.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sexologists endeavored to account for the etiology of the homosexual, which was informed by the science that classified the non-European racial “other” as primitive. Psychoanalysts
interpreted homosexuality as a symptom of the stresses of modern life, and homosexuality was a metonym for the pervasive ills of modern society. As Jennifer Terry posits, the codification of heternormativity and the denigration of homosexuality were fueled by cultural anxieties about nationhood and the administration of a democratic society (Terry 71). What she refers to as the “American obsession” with homosexuality was tied to social and cultural anxieties generated by modernism, such as the expansion of capitalism and industrialization, social Darwinism, the growth in immigration patterns, technological advancement, and the rise of feminism. Moreover, modernity is marked by the legitimization of science as an interpreter of subjectivity, as the complexities of selfhood became the object of scientific scrutiny (Terry 12). The proliferation of medical and scientific discourse on homosexuality in the early twentieth century reflects the intensification of social and cultural fears. As Terry writes, “The American obsession with homosexuality…[was linked to concerns about] “democracy, individualism, and assimilation, principles that were often in tension with one another” (9). Considered a uniquely modern problem, homosexuality was perceived as an indicator of degeneracy and the root of larger social problems. During the interwar period, medical discourse shaped the way Americans viewed homosexuals, and regulatory social and scientific apparatuses attempted to control homosexual populations. In response, queer individuals formed underground communities, seeking connection beyond the arm of the state.
In addition to the material threats facing queer individuals, temporal vulnerability has long been a feature of queer experience; throughout the twentieth century, temporal constructions have been deployed against the homosexual. The rise of Darwinism altered the notion of what constitutes “natural” desire, and the study of homosexuality along scientific and medical lines led to the construction of homosexuality as a symptom of “unnatural” sexual desire (Miller 70). Stripped of its natural grounding, homosexuality can be understood as a mode of temporal subversion. The post-Darwinian human was temporally out of sync with a modern age, and the homosexual in particular was viewed as retrogressive: a degenerate. Moreover, Freud’s theory of “organic repression” posited that the human’s disavowal of animality produced the human unconscious, contributing to the perception that the invert was one mired in a stage of stalled sexual development. While many sexologists and scientists argued against the criminalization of homosexuality, making it more visible, the medicalization and temporalization of homosexuality exacerbated the stigma associated with it (Miller 70). Vestiges of these constructions have persisted into the twenty first century.

Modernism coded the racialized, sexual, or gendered other in animality, which has been used to justify the exclusion of the other from the common. Carrie Rohman posits that this imperialist project “can be understood as a reinstatiation of human privilege projected onto racial and gendered taxonomies” (Rohman 5). Repudiating the organic relation between the animal and the human, an Anglo
imperialistic and patriarchal order cast its anxieties onto racial and gendered “others,” including queer subjects, casualties of this order. Thus, the formation of the modern subject has been predicated upon an exclusionary principle by which minorities, such as the homosexual, have been relegated to a category below the human. As Judith Butler reminds us, the denomination of the aberrant works to constitute the normal or natural.

The discursive shifts I have outlined above make the modernist lyric a particularly valuable resource for locating the conditions that gave rise to a queer consciousness. The twentieth century queer poetic imagination often found in the lyric—with its stress on affective experience as a source of meaning-making—a powerful form to engage with the social world and test the limits of coherent subjectivity. With T.S. Eliot’s theory of the impersonality of the lyric voice, the lyric poem was no longer charged with the expression of the personality and emotions of the author. Moreover, a rapidly modernizing world and the introduction of new social realities reconfigured the lyric and influenced the innovation of novel forms that gave voice to the social and political conscience of the country. Modernist poetry repudiated the discrete, insular “I” and inaugurated a new conceptualization of a lyric “I,” one with social and political investments. Rather than referring to the narrow scope of an independent and oracular “I” that has been associated with a Romantic tradition, the modern lyric exposed the fiction of a transcendent subject, and instead looked towards the social processes by which an “I” is constituted over time. With this paradigm of the social lyric “I” in mind, I argue that queer modern lyricism may serve as a social intervention that
calls upon a praxis of relating, a blurring of subject positions. Its critical energies are primed to expose identity as a socially constituted practice.

In recent years, a few queer theorists (such as John Emil Vincent, Lee Edelman, Michael Snediker, and Eric Keenaghan) have turned to the modern lyric as a source of queer meaning. For each of these theorists, the queer lyric contests the univocal authority of a lyric speaker and resists the codification of a discrete identity, and thus refuses representational practices that would posit a monolithic subject or meaning. Charles Altieri, for example, argues for a direct correspondence between the complexities of queer subjectivity and the lyric, positing that the lyric poem exposes and overcomes “the limits of lucid self-consciousness” (Altieri as qtd by Vincent xiv). Moreover, as queer theorists Eve Sedgwick and others have argued, too rigid an identity produces negative affects, such as melancholy, and others, such as Leo Bersani, argue that a stable and coherent identity breeds aggression. I argue that a queer poetics can function as a disruption in a hegemonic order by pursuing the mixed feelings of pleasure and disorientation that accompany ontological and epistemological instability. A queer poetics asks its readers to think and feel queerly, to challenge normative sense-making practices. It does not seek to establish a norm or operative paradigm, but instead it enacts its deconstructionist impulse to question an immanent subject.

Despite many exciting developments in modernist studies and in second-wave queer theory, the limitations of present vocabularies for addressing queer female erotics and for slantwise coquetries still remain and are especially dramatized in
much scholarship on three queer modernist poets, Djuna Barnes, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop.

These poets, like many female poets in the early twentieth century, had an uneasy relationship to the construction of the “woman poet,” who was often trivialized or denigrated by her male counterparts and by the forerunners of the modernist movement. While many of these female poets enjoyed a new social, sexual, and artistic freedom, they had to account for professional identities that were read as anomalous and “masculine.” Finding their gender and sexuality under question, these poets often faced a hostile critical environment in which forms of self-disclosure could have immediate and lasting effects on the reception of their work.

Their refusal to be either sexually or textually explicit has provoked a diverse range of readings among queer and feminist scholars. Often Moore and Barnes are read as sexual failures, although the writing of each poet I examine is charged with an abundant eros. Rather than define their sexuality in terms of object orientation, I argue that all advance a queer posthumanist vision founded on Darwinian principles: the idea of being as an evolving, creative process informed by its relations and interdependencies with a diversity of other beings. Their poetics react to epistemological constructs that do injury to the other in the name of stabilizing the boundary between the human and animal. As has been discussed, the cultural and social practices used to secure this boundary are exclusionary, but the lyric itself, poised to offer alternative realities to the
empirical world, is uniquely situated to challenge the categorical and exclusivist principles that underlie Social Darwinism and heterosexism.

I also posit that the poets in my study undertake a queer return to the past. For each poet, the backwards gaze—figured in Elizabeth Bishop’s methodological and artistic investment in Darwinian evolution, Marianne Moore’s retrospective final collection, and Djuna Barnes’ atavistic creatures—is tied to a backwards modernism: a site of resistance to the inexorable march of progress, which occurs at the expense of the socially marginal. For each poet, the temporal architecture of retrospection, atavism, and anachronism presents new affective and epistemological thresholds, which queer the subjectivity of the animal and human.

Through temporal reversion, identity is effectively disrupted and subjectivity is liberated from disciplinary apparatuses, identity-based ideologies, and a humanist ontology.

In chapter one of my dissertation, “A Brindled Myth with Icy Mane: Animal Metaphors and Queer Atavisms in Djuna Barnes’s Poetics,” I argue that Djuna Barnes recuperates a queer nature by proxy of the animal, which exists within the human imaginary as a generic entity and metaphor. Her poetics challenge the ontological stability of the human and posit an essential intersectionality of symbolic and metaphorical constructions of animality and lesbian sexuality. In her work, subjectivity is inherently unstable, challenging the border between the human and animal. Her intervention in a humanist and heterosexist social order occurs via a queering of normative temporal and tropological structures. While working within and against the absolutizing character of metaphor, Barnes
emphasizes its materiality to unsettle the constructions of the lesbian and animal. Indeed, the discursive production of homosexuality, structured by a metaphorical logic, tends to occlude alternative expressions of queer personhood. As Lee Edelman posits in *Homographesis*, the queer body has historically been read under the classificatory logic of metaphor, which in turn helped to naturalize heterosexuality and heterosexism and ossified homosexuality as a rigid, stable category of identity. Through a study of the queer stakes of her tropological, temporal, and rhetorical strategies, I argue that Barnes’ poetics disrupt figurations of the animal and lesbian, as well as the metaphorical logic by which both exist in the human and heterosexist imaginary.

The second critical chapter, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Evolutionary Poetics,” theorizes the queer biopolitical investment of Elizabeth Bishop’s poetics. There is a tendency in Bishop scholarship to read her as an apolitical poet. I wish to challenge this reading by providing an exegesis of her early affiliations with anarchism, John Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy, and Darwinian evolution. I argue that along with the aforementioned, a nexus of creative and philosophical writers influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, including Lewis Carroll, Prince Peter Kropotkin, and William Empson, also exerted an influence on Bishop’s thinking. In my analysis of her personal readings, I trace her early philosophical and political leanings that helped her to articulate a queer posthumanist subjectivity, one with radical social and proto-political implications.

“Queer Sociality in ‘Late’ Marianne Moore,” the third chapter of my dissertation, seeks to offer an interpretation of Marianne Moore’s textual sociality
through a reading of her final collection *Tell Me, Tell Me*, which has been neglected or disparaged by many modernist critics. This text marked her emergence into a popular realm and is generally read as a more “accessible” text than her earlier works, yet many of the allusions in the collection are “difficult” or targeted for a limited readership. Queer poetry is generally associated with textual difficulty to the extent that it suspends meanings and interpretative practices forged by a heterosexist culture. Moore’s trademark strategies of obliquity and indirection, occurring at the level of allusion and affecting in material ways the audience’s ability to penetrate meaning, are similarly queer. Queer sociality, as I define it, does not require that the subjects be human or that the relations be even sociable. Namely, there is an antisocial thrust, a negation of normative social bonds (or in Judith Butler’s words, a “sociality that is not always sociable”) and the deployment of semi-private allusions that can be traced in her poetics, even while her later work is poised to offer itself to a popular audience (Butler, “Remarks on Queer Bonds” 382). Through an examination of the text’s polvocality and use of allusion, I posit that her brand of sociality is conditional, premised on familiarity with her poetic coterie and a less ego-centric notion of authorship and—by extrapolation—the person. In her poetics, the person is in fact only one life form among many.

The posthumanist ethos of these modernist poets informed my poetics essay “Towards a Poetics of the Animal.” In this experimental piece that combines both poetry and collage, I examine the intersection of a queer posthuman politics with the lyric in order to arrive at model of relation that does not reduce subject and
object to a dominant/submissive paradigm. To arrive at model of reciprocal relation among beings, including those deemed “other,” such as the animalized “other,” I offer up alternative communicative and linguistic approaches that accommodate interspecies relations and privilege queer feeling and the visceral imagination over today’s contemporary lexicon for human and nonhuman relation.

My poetry manuscript “Queer Fish” tests these ideas directly. In it, I am interested in the power of metaphors that emerge from the combination of imaginative projection and empirical observation of organic lives different than our own. I believe metaphor can bridge and engage questions of difference in a way that is both creative and enabling for our sociological imaginations. My manuscript is an experiment in metaphor that entertains questions related to the representation of the human-animal and its precarious place in the environment.

As a bestiary, the manuscript is involved in a critique of personhood and a re-vision of queer subjectivity through the context of the creature. The bestiary is a site of overlapping genres and forms: myth and (rudimentary) science, philosophy and poetry, allegory and representational “errors” (i.e., the unicorn was once believed to be an empirical being). The medieval bestiary was a testament to Creation (with God at its center) and a moral lesson book. It also inaugurated the symbology of today’s fabulous creatures: the hybrids, the monsters, and the blessed. Once the supernatural was the bedfellow of science, comprising the stuff of dreams and art. It is a rich minefield, and as a historical document, the bestiary
is in many ways the nexus of origins, informed by the natural world and the early human imagination.

As a modern bestiary, my manuscript pays homage to the creative act that is at the center of the genre. My poetics position the social and political implications of queer subjectivity in the same orbit as creatureliness, while highlighting the creative act (resonating on evolutionary, organic, metaphysical, and aesthetic registers) that constitutes its root. A range of modern experiments in the bestiary form (most especially those of Djuna Barnes and Marianne Moore) has set a precedent for my own manuscript. There are several issues—ethical, political, philosophical, and ontological—that are at stake in this text. My poetics affirms that the creature, as both an empirical being and an object of figuration, offers opportunities for thinking outside of humanisms that impose limitations on being. As an inquiry into animal phenomenology and animal representation, the manuscript is rooted in ethical and ontological questions of how we relate to and understand the other. The creature dramatizes the alterity of the other, brings to the fore issues of justice, the mysterious nature of desire, the politics of representation, and the limitations of current vocabularies for addressing intimacies between the human and animal. While the person is present in any lyric poetry, as it is in mine, the person is a source of both critique and creative impetus. Lyric subjectivity, placed in conversation with biological forms and structures, can serve as a point of inquiry for how we—humans and animals—forge meanings, relations, and social practices, and how we communicate with one another.
A Brindled Myth with Icy Mane:

Djuna Barnes’ Queer Temporalities and Animal Metaphors

I. Barnes’ Queer Modernism

Best known for her journalism and her novel Nightwood, Djuna Barnes the poet has been significantly undertheorized by her critics, perhaps following the cue of T.S. Eliot, who enjoined Barnes to stick to prose (Caselli 83). However, she was a serious poet and considered herself as such, producing an extensive output of poems with multiple variants and drafts and doggedly compiling a poetic oeuvre as she approached the end of her life. During her career, she published sixty eight poems and one chapbook of poems, The Book of Repulsive Women (1915), as well as the verse play Antiphon (1958) and passages of verse that she included in her books of prose.¹ Even Nightwood (1936), although technically a novel, demands from its readers a poetic sensibility; as T.S. Eliot wrote in his introduction, it is a text that would “appeal primarily to readers of poetry” (Selected Works of Djuna Barnes 227). The publication of her collected poetry in 2005, edited by Phillip Herring and Osias Stutman, has only recently brought her work to a larger audience.

Certain elements abide across the span of Barnes’ poetic career: a Gothic imagination, the use of premodern sources, and a sardonic wit. However, in the

¹ In 1915, ten years before the publication of Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, Barnes published The Book of Repulsive Women, a booklet with eight poems and five drawings that was one of the first modern literary works in English to topically advance the theme of lesbian sexuality.
introduction to her collection, Herring and Stutman posit that the style of her early and late poems are distinct. They read the early poems as mostly “lyrical” and “transparently clear,” while her later poems are “difficult experiments in modernism” (5). However, while the early poems do employ formal verse, archaisms, and arcane diction and are influenced by the decadence of the 1890s, these poems are not less critically interesting for modernist studies—particularly queer modernism—than her late poems, which often frustrate readers’ attempts to pin down a unified or coherent meaning. The early poems, in contrast, may appear to be transparent, but that appearance belies the complex rhetorical and figurative mechanisms by which she re-writes animality and lesbianism. One of the best readers of Barnes, Daniela Caselli also reads the poet’s writings as significant for modernist studies to the extent that they advance a queer “posthumous modernism” that draws from unmodern precursors, embraces intertextuality, and performs its own untimeliness.2

Queer modernist poetry is generally associated with textual difficulty to the extent that it suspends meanings and interpretative practices forged by a heterosexist culture. Critics routinely note the hermeneutic difficulty of Barnes’ texts, particularly *Nightwood*, in general terms, yet it is useful to identify specifically what makes her work difficult. For analytical purposes, the poet and critic Reginald Shepherd identifies multiple forms of textual difficulty, including

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2 Caselli writes, “Barnes’ oeuvre is posthumous because ‘being posthumous means coming too late for comprehension,’ because it stages its own recycling practices (inter-and intratextual), and because the relationship between writing, forgery, and genealogy is the centre of the work” (Caselli 80-1). For Caselli, Barnes’ “improper modernism” challenges the “purity” of modernism by making the reader a party to her poems’ performances of spectacularization (Caselli 82).
lexical, syntactical, figural, formal, allusive, semantic, and modal difficulty, which occurs when readers ask, “What makes this a poem?” (Shepherd 39-40). In her later work, Barnes gravitates towards forms of lexical and syntactical difficulty. Figural difficulty may perhaps be the most prominent feature of Barnes’ early poems, perhaps accounting for the reason why critics have struggled with *The Book of Repulsive Women*, being uncertain of the tenor and vehicle of her metaphors and the poet’s own stance towards the “repulsive” women that she represents.

I argue that the early lyrics de-naturalize or queer the metaphorical and temporal constructs that shape us and which we use to shape others. A queer poetics does not seek to establish a norm or operative paradigm, but instead enacts its deconstructionist impulse to question constructs that determine principles of being in advance. Thus, lesbianism, for Barnes, does not inflect an investment in a fixed form of identity, but rather an ongoing arbitration with the ways that metaphor and time structure lesbian experience. In doing so, her early poetics re-imagine Sapphism (which are explicit in her poem “Love and the Beast” and which will be discussed further) and medico-scientific representations of the lesbian as a primitive degenerate.³

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³ From a cultural context, homosexuality can be understood as a mode of temporal subversion. The post-Darwinian human was temporally out of sync with a modern age, a being related to her animal ancestors, and the homosexual in particular was viewed as retrogressive: a degenerate. Moreover, Freud’s theory of “organic repression” posited that the human’s disavowal of animality produced the human unconscious, contributing to the perception that the homosexual “invert” was one mired in a stage of stalled sexual development. As a primitive or degenerative type that displayed characteristics contrary to nature, the “invert” was perceived as one whose gender and sexuality did not conform to a heteronormative imperative. The invert was in this sense the opposite gender. The woman that displayed desire towards another woman was regarded as to some degree male, a “masculine” soul being trapped within the “wrong” sexed body.
Any full appreciation of Barnes’ queer poetics must first take into account her handling of metaphor, which is the primary mode of the lyric. For Barnes, metaphor is more than mere poetic device; it is vital and deeply connected to our own cognitive and affective processes. We make meaning through metaphor and through neural tricks that confound the boundaries between the literal and figurative. Metaphor also has a social function; it affects our behavior and re-writes our existing reality. It can bridge and engage questions of difference in a way that is both generative and enabling for our sociological imaginations.

Rhetorically, metaphor constitutes meaning by transferring one signifier to a dissimilar one across a field of difference. Epistemologically and ontologically, metaphor is functional; humans depend on metaphor to construct meaning and relations, and yet metaphor in the construction of social identity has often been complicit in structuring representations of otherness and—potentially—erasing difference. In this sense, there is a paradoxically necessary epistemological and ontological dilemma at the heart of metaphor. Recognizing this paradox, Barnes calls attention to the mechanics of metaphor so as to expose the limits of its operations. I will return to this idea later.

Time too is a queering force in her writings, although first it is important to sketch out its cultural significance. Throughout the twentieth century, temporal constructions have been deployed against the homosexual. Repudiating the implications of Charles Darwin’s theory of origins, which describes the organic relation between the animal and human, an Anglo imperialistic and patriarchal order cast its anxieties onto racial and gendered “others,” including queer
subjects, casualties of this order. Thus, the formation of the modern subject has
been predicated upon an exclusionary principle by which minorities, such as the
homosexual, have been relegated to a category below the human. The production
of the animal as a subhuman entity used to bolster the human enabled the
positioning of marginalized groups within its rhetorical zone. Both the animal
and queer, in other words, are not only vulnerable to discursive strategies of
othering, but the animal provided the occasion for a demarcation of a temporal
and tropological territory in which the queer could be subjected. While many
sexologists and scientists argued against the criminalization of homosexuality,
thus making it more visible, the medicalization and temporalization of
homosexuality exacerbated the stigma associated with it (Miller 70).

Modernism reduced the racialized, sexual, or gendered “other” to a being with
an animal status. Carrie Rohman posits that this imperialist project “can be
understood as a reinstatiation of human privilege projected onto racial and
gendered taxonomies” (Rohman 5). However, modernist formalism, in its
embrace of nonlinearity and fluctuating points of view, as well as its antagonistic
reaction to Enlightenment rationality, occasioned a recuperation of animality for
such writers as Barnes, according to Rohman (27).

While there have been several critical accounts of Barnes’ representations of
animality and her abiding preoccupation with the interaction between lesbian
sexuality, spectatorship, and representation, to my knowledge there has not yet
been a full consideration of the shared rhetorical, tropological, and temporal space
that the creature inhabits with queer figures in her poetics.⁴ A posthumanist project, her poetics challenge the ontological stability of the category of the human and posit an essential intersectionality of tropological and temporal constructions of animality and sexuality. In her work, the dividing line between the animal and human is porous; it is not the limn for the marginalized subject to transcend, but rather it is the source and limit for the lyrical and rhetorical derangement of humanist precepts of being. It is the vertiginous and agonistic experience of desire, operating within and outside of ideological rubrics of being that queers and re-writes the human in Barnes’ poetics.

Rather than importing the animal as a rhetorical category through which non-reproductive, non-heterosexual identities accumulate negative associations, Barnes reconstitutes the animal into a figure that disrupts the categorical logic of metaphor itself. Through the derangement of metaphorical structures and the destabilization of allegory, she undermines the authority of given epistemological and ontological structures. In this way, Barnes’ project, while being invested in the specific experiences of the lesbian, is queer to the extent that it intervenes in structures of signification. Throughout her oeuvre, she plays within and against the absolutizing character of metaphor, which has been used to mediate our collective understanding of the homosexual and the animal. She recuperates a queer nature by proxy of the animal, which exists within the human imaginary as a generic entity and metaphor. While working within and against the absolutizing character of metaphor, Barnes emphasizes its materiality to unsettle

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⁴ See, for example, Daniela Caselli’s Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’ Bewildering Corpus.
representations of the lesbian and animal. Even while relying on metaphor—the basis for poetic thought—her work is also invested in its critique.

Moreover, anticipating the work of queer theorists, Barnes’ temporality is queerly inflected and concerned with the affective intensities of retrospection and pastness, even while she is invested in the ontology of creaturely becomings. Her temporality is conversant with Heather Love’s discussion of a queer modernism, in which queer figures in their social isolation “feel backward:” seek connection across time. Love approaches history as a process that may reveal the discontinuities of identity; as such, historical identification may offer a critique of identity. Texts that “feel backward” register a historical ambivalence; they do not rest comfortably within the parameters of a historical continuum. Eschewing narratives of progress for queer individuals, she writes, “Over the last century, queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects” (7). For Barnes, the temporal architecture of retrospection, atavism, and anachronism presents new affective and epistemological thresholds, which queer the subjectivity of the

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5 Heather Love’s model of queer temporality is in conversation with Elizabeth Freeman’s Time Binds and Christopher Nealon’s Foundlings. In the latter, Nealon seeks to recover the texts that do not follow what is a typical trajectory in queer literature: a movement to escape a biomedical inversion model of homosexuality and co-optation in a quasi-ethnic model of collectivity that seeks cultural unity among queers. Instead, the foundling imaginary does not tell stories of inversion, nor are they canonical texts that are used for purposes of building community. They instead wish to “feel” historical. Under Nealon’s rubric, Nightwood would not fit neatly into a foundling tradition, but would instead follow the “pathology to politics” trajectory that Nealon construes as its antithesis.

In Time Binds, Freeman is invested in a queer time that rejects sequential forms of temporality and is instead congenial with alternative forms of history premised on bodily sensation. Freeman’s metaphor of binding is employed to connote the way in which queer artists work within what is interpreted as a “bound” time, such as a “postgay” world. Her project is concerned with the excesses generated within “bound” times. Freeman’s binding metaphor has purchase on sex itself, which “unbinds” selves and meanings, but “rebounds” into fantasies.
animal and human. Through temporal reversion, identity may be effectively disrupted and subjectivity may be liberated from disciplinary apparatuses. Backwards modernism is thus a site of resistance to the inexorable march of progress, which occurs at the expense of the socially marginal. In all of these ways, Barnes is a backwards modernist.

Below, I examine two early love lyrics, “She Passed this Way” (1923) and “Love and the Beast” (1924), that appear to be anti-modern in their use of formal verse and antiquated themes, yet are exemplary queer modern poems for their radical re-imagining of normative temporal and metaphorical structures. First, I analyze the ways in which heteronormative interpretations of homosexual bodies are formulated through recourse to metaphor. I then consider the ways that metaphor has the potential to reify identity and stabilize epistemological and metaphysical constructs that do harm to the other. I argue that metaphor can operate as a semantic directive and affirm resemblance while overlooking degrees of difference. However, in de-stabilizing metaphor and engaging “animetaphor,” which exposes the limits of language, Barnes is engaged in a re-vision and affirmation of creative power itself. I then turn to Nightwood, a text that I read as the culmination of her poetic experimentation in metaphor. This text advances a metaphysics of metaphor that allows her to re-script queer lives, human and animal relationality, and atavism.
II. The Homosexual Body and the Problem of Metaphor

Historically, homosexuality has operated as a metaphor for the ills of modern life. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a range of political, scientific, and medical discourses about degeneration co-opted the homosexual as a metaphor for the possible infinite regress of advanced civilization. Imperialist inflections of degeneracy, founded on racist precepts that read the African as primitive, influenced the public’s perception of homosexuality as deviant or criminal, a threat to the stability of nationhood and bound to an archaic past.

Moreover, the construction of homosexual identity has been structured by the logic of metaphor. Lee Edelman theorizes the signifying practice whereby a conservative order ascribes legible signs of homosexuality to the queer body. His text *Homographesis* identifies a cultural “tropological imperative” that would conceptualize sexuality metaphorically and interpret it as constitutive of identity (8). As he posits, the queer body has historically been read under the classificatory logic of metaphor, which in turn helped to naturalize heterosexuality and heterosexism and ossified homosexuality as a rigid, stable category of identity. As Edelman posits, the spectator wields the greatest power, able to commodify and violate the queer body as it becomes the receptacle of the spectator’s desire. In addition to referring to the codification of identity, with its oppressive designs, homographesis also connotes the opposition to such signification, involving the “de-scribing” of identity (10). However, the
production and recognition of homosexuality, structured by a metaphorical logic, tends to occlude alternative expressions of queer personhood.

Like the homosexual, the textual animal necessarily embodies an epistemological slippage. Since few animals can be the subjects of their own representations, the animal can only ever be a non-transparent signifier; the “real” animal eludes us. To develop the connection between metaphor and the animal, I turn to Akira Mizuta Lippit’s work, in which he adopts the term animetaphor, evoking the portmanteau’s associations of animal-metaphor and anti-metaphor, to describe the way in which there is a dynamic transversality that shuttles between the animal and logos. As he writes, the animal exists within the consciousness as a metaphor, just as the structure of metaphor, tapping into the language of the unconscious, is inextricably bound to the animal. Metaphor enables a critical movement between the unconscious, the psychic realm associated with the animal, and logos, which is instantiated by dreaming. The origins of dream wishes became patent in regression, and dreaming furnishes a mode of regression to not only the dreamer’s childhood, but also to the early conditions of the entire human race, which in turn offers recourse to the animal world. "[D]reaming," writes Freud, "is on the whole an example of regression to the dreamer's earliest condition, a revival of his childhood . . . Behind this childhood of the individual we are promised a picture of a phylogenetic childhood—a picture of the human race, of which the individual is in fact an abbreviated recapitulation" (Freud 548). Dreamwork, in this sense, connects us to our collective unconscious.
Metaphor gives rise to the expression of the unconscious in language, which is the realm of prehistory and the territory of the animal, our experience of which is mediated by metaphor. Lippit writes, “One might posit provisionally that the animal functions not only as an exemplary metaphor but, within the scope of rhetorical language, as a kind of originary metaphor” (1113). The animetaphor suggests that the animal is directly related to practices of signification; it is present within the structure of metaphor, while also indexing the limits of metaphor itself. As such, the animetaphor is also anti-metaphor. Animetaphor, as it can never recover the real animal, poses a challenge to the politics of representation. For Derrida, animal alterity resides within language, framing its expressive possibilities (1115). Since the animal qua animal does not speak directly, but speaks something else through its own semiotic, animetaphor also functions as metonymy (1115).

According to Lippit, the animal gravitates towards an ontology of metaphor. In this way, the animal is “magnetic” because, he writes, “it draws the world-building subject [in Heideggerian philosophy, this is the subject with linguistic capacity] toward an impossible convergence with the limits of the world, toward a metaphysics of metaphor” (1118). The magnetic animal occasions a transformation of a figure from a metaphoric register to the metamorphic (Ibid.). This metamorphosis occurs at the level of language, overlaying language with “the catachrestic force of affect” (Ibid). With its magnetic power, the animetaphor can induce affective responses that result in concrete action.
Lippit’s conception of animetaphor can be placed in conversation with Barnes’ handling of metaphor and animality. Her animals are chiefly figural and allegorical rather than mimetic or “realistic,” and she interrogates the animal as a tropological construction. Her animetaphors perform their double function: they are involved in disrupting figurations of the animal while calling attention to the metaphorical logic by which the animal exists in the human imaginary. As mentioned earlier, one form of difficulty in Barnes’ writing is figural; her animals expose the limits of metaphorical construction. In other words, the animetaphor traffics in metaphor, while also gravitating towards its limits, dis-figuring metaphor itself.

Her poem “She Passed This Way,” published in *Vanity Fair* in 1923, is exemplary in this way. Barnes reprises a tradition of courtly love, in which desire entails conquering or possessing the female object, yet queers its form and telos. Once the rapine nature of the love conquest, reminiscent of the rape of Helen, had the power to galvanize war and inspire the epic. This lyric draws from a premodern source, yet is modernist to the extent that it exposes the limitations of representation as an accurate reflection of social reality. Overtly concerned with the slippage between the human and animal in the presence of desire, the lyric is reproduced in its entirety below:

Here where the trees still tremble with your flight
I sit and braid thin whips to beat you down.
How shall we ever find you who have gone
In little dresses, lisping through the town?

Great men on horses hunt you and strong boys
Employ their arrows in the shallow air.
But I shall be heard whispering where I follow
Braiding long wisps of grass and stallion’s hair.

And in the night when thirty hawks are high
In pendent rhythm, and all the wayside loud;
When they are burning field and bush and hedge,
I’ll steal you like a penny from the crowd. (Barnes, Collected Poems 75)

The poem begins with the flight of an elusive and illicit love object, a provocative female “in little dresses” who goes “lisping through town.” The source of her eroticism, which is recognized by a universal “we,” seems to derive from her equivocal or hybrid status as woman-child-creature. Hunted by potential suitors, she inhabits the rhetorical zone in which the woman is cast as the embodiment of the animal other; that is, she is drawn to an ontology of metaphor and becomes animetaphor. That the gender of the speaker is ambiguous suggests that we cannot impute a female viewpoint on the lyric speaker, nor can we read the speaker as a suitor in the tradition of the “great men” and “strong boys.” For the gender-ambiguous narrator, who is differentiated from the parodic “great men” and “strong boys,” desire is a radically dramatized, quasi-sadomasochistic power relation, figured in the manufactured whips for “beat[ing] down” the desired object. Later in the poem, these “whips” are modulated and become “wisps,” yet the intention to subdue the flighty love object—the bird/female—remains. Desire is conflated with rapacious possession and the violence involved in taming a wild creature. The shocking presence of the whip alongside the more conventional weapons employed in the art of love de-naturalizes the genre and rhetorically re-arranges the telos of the poem. In addition to asserting an erotic
presence, the whip, a tool of arousal, in turn bestializes the desired object, reflecting a literary tradition and a violent tropological construction that represents the woman as animal other. To “beat down” a creature, like “breaking in” an animal, connotes turning the being to human purpose. As such, the chase of the desired woman-creature is tied up with the same violent drives that are directed at the animal. The love object is subject to both a masculinist and anthropocentric attitude that is directed at the woman in the same way that it is directed at the animal.

Re-staging the scene of a love conquest, the poem introduces a third vantage: that of the pseudo-voyeur/hunter/speaker. The love as hunting trope, typical in the works of Wyatt and Yeats (among others), is complicated by the presence of the erotic whip and the speaker-seducer, which re-configures the power relation among the male hunters, the desired object, and the speaker of the poem. Moreover, the criss-crossing of sexual desire disrupts the model of the Petrarchan lover in conquest for an unrequited love object. Unlike the explicitly male figures of the poem, whose courting is cast in the economy of the hunt, the speaker of the poem is more closely aligned with Nature with a whip derived from the earth and the animal. In stealing the beloved from the burning fields, the speaker is also saving her.

Although intimate, the relationship between the speaker and the desired object is cast within a public arena while the poem performs the play of absence and presence, as the love object of the poem proves elusive to the reader as well as her pursuers. Crisis unfolds in pursuit of this Laura or Helen, figured in the
predatory hawks and in the chaotic and destructive impulses of the crowd. The speaker, who claims to be a thief, capitalizes upon the opportunity to “steal” the love object “like a penny from the crowd.” Possession is no longer figured as an act of overcoming the other through art, but instead of appropriating the other. Desire, in this context, is at once transgressive and run through with power relations, while love involves an unreciprocated and unnatural transaction between lover and beloved. The speaker as rapine presents a challenge to the model of the lover as a deserving seducer, a recipient of laurels for his conquest. Moreover, the reduction of the love conquest to a petty theft subverts the chivalric code and deflates its elevated trappings. Ultimately, in the context of this poem, there is no ideal union of lovers; desire is instead mapped along an acquisitive axis. While dressing itself up in a heterosexual framework, the lyric ultimately presents a parody of Petrarchan desire, highlighting its cultural constructedness. Despite its premodern frame, the poem is in these senses entirely modern.

Reminiscent of the dynamics evident in “She Passed This Way,” Judith Butler argues that we are all exposed to a heterosexual matrix that is cast as originary. However, the parodic repetition of heterosexual models in queer contexts brings into view their status as constructs. Butler writes, “The parodic repetition of the original…reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and original” (Butler, Gender Trouble 43). “She Passed this Way” presents the transversal between the traditional division of natural and cultural categories. Undergirding this lyric is a spirit of critique directed towards a heterocentric and misogynistic literary tradition, in which there occurs a slippage
between the erotic female body and the animal in the name of desire. However, if desire is paradoxical, being at once pre-lingual and yet embedded within the structure of language, desire often calls upon metaphor to name itself.

III. “Love and the Beast”

If desire, being in some ways ineffable, is represented in an economy of metaphor, metaphor may also be said to be effective in critiquing the social conditions that name certain forms of desire illicit, such as same sex love. Barnes’ investment in the rhetorical structure of metaphor is also an investment in the social world. Metaphor may be said to be a means of intervention in the status quo to the extent that it proffers a social critique.

Before I turn to Barnes’ poem “Love and the Beast,” which models animetaphor’s subversive potential, it is necessary to sketch out biographical details pertinent to its creation. Living in Paris when the city was identified as the capital of same sex love, Barnes was a central figure within the Sapphic literary movement. This interest was coincident with her relationship with Natalie Clifford Barney, who was a friend, patroness, and lover of Barnes. A central figure in the American expatriate community of artists in Paris, Barney was a friend of such figures as Ezra Pound and Mina Loy. As a patron of the arts, particularly of female writers and artists, she became an important supporter of Barnes’ work. Along with their contemporaries, the two participated in a movement among twentieth century female artists to resuscitate and re-invent Sappho as a literary mother of a feminist or lesbian tradition. Pivotal to Barney’s
Sapphism—and Barnes’ as well—was Paris, a center of artistic and sexual freedom. It was “the only city in which one can live and express oneself as one pleases,” as Barney wrote (Boone 233). In this climate of freedom, many lesbians were able to forge a community for themselves.

In 1924, Barnes and Natalie Barney had a brief but intense affair (Rodriguez 282). They remained friends after the affair ended, and Barnes dedicated a small handful of works to Barney, including *Ladies Almanack*, a satiric roman a clef about her literary coterie, and the poem “Love and the Beast.” Phillip Herring, the co-editor of Barnes’ collected poems, relegates the poem to “merely a patron’s due,” guessing that Barnes thought little of it (Herring 148). However, the poem is far queerer and more salubriously rigorous than he admits. The poem is exemplary for articulating the complex imbrication between the tropological constructions of animality and lesbian love and sexuality. Barnes’ beast presents an alternative metaphysics that is situated in relation to the traditionally melancholic formulation of queer identity. In it, the beast forces a re-assessment of outlawed love and curates an ontology of metaphor, while exposing the limits of metaphorical representation:

The forest tears, and lo, is seen  
A brindled myth with icy mane,  
Walking in a phantom dream  
A vision in a vision slain.

On every branch the night moon feeds,  
And still the Beast comes forth alone,

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6 A range of theorists, from Eve Sedgwick to Lee Edelman, has discussed the melancholic structure of homosexuality so that until recently melancholia figured as the assumed structure of queer affect. With the publication of such texts as Michael Snediker’s *Queer Optimism*, there has been a much-needed critical shift towards positive affects that underlie queer personhood.
Love is burning at the heart,
Echoless and cast in stone.

Echoless by same on same
By kind to kind. The Sapphic pyre
Looms above the arctic head
Ashless and a tragic fire.

Still the Beast with wint’ry eye
Marks the shadow come and go;
Pacing down mortality
With a lost, immortal cry (Barnes Collected Poems 101).

The lyric scrambles the categories of cultural constructs and the animal, and both are worked through the same mediating genre of allegory. As allegory, the poem is elliptical, enshrouded; it refuses an explicit interpretative frame and instead invites a reading approach that would seek out a latent meaning. Even while coded in allegory, “Love and the Beast” also challenges its telos. The poem at once allegorizes and de-allegorizes the animal, detouring the genre’s moralizing impulse. Traditionally in allegory, such as in the work of Aesop and La Fontaine, animals function as bearers of a human moral code; however, through de-allegorization, a form of double signifying, Barnes evacuates the categories of lesbian and animal of their residual moral inflections.

The lyric announces its preoccupation with the politics of representation as it opens, encouraging a deconstructive reading strategy. A tableau of a forest “tears” open as if to reveal an anterior myth, exposing “a brindled myth with icy mane.” The word “tears” also has a sentimental valence, suggesting Barnes’ experience of disappointment at the end of her affair with Barney. Interestingly, in the upper lefthand margin of Barnes’ lyric in her handwriting are the words, “Be
disappointed sweetly” (Barnes, **Collected Poems** 101). This may indicate that the end of her affair with Barney did take an emotional toll on her.

Encrusted physically by ice and rhetorically by metaphor, the animal-myth of the poem recalls Lippit’s animetaphor, posing a transversal between the logos of myth and the animal. The animal-myth is a primal entity, a hybridized being constituted of flesh and logos. The “real” animal is an ever-elusive form of life that is often both the source and object of our myth-making energies. Indeed, the animal is *of* the myth, just as myth, drawing upon the language of the unconscious, delimits the contours of the animal. The figuration, by virtue of the fact that it unsettles the categories of the animal and the cultural, self-deconstructs, exposing how the animal is subject to the metaphorical principle that underwrites myth. Myth is produced through recourse to the unconscious, the animal within. The animal-myth overreaches the bounds of metaphor, drawing upon an economy of mytho-poesis that marshals the animal and myth within the same rhetorical field. The mythic animal or the animal-myth, as the material embodiment of the collective unconscious, is pure metaphor, a creature inhabiting language itself. Ultimately, the material and rhetorical are inseparable; there cannot be a recovery of the natural animal in a human linguistic economy, since a cultural framework necessarily mediates our relationship to the animal. The animal is already interpellated by culture. As such, hybridity is the primary ontological foundation as myth and nature become imbricated with one another.

Given the biographical details about the production and impetus for “Love and the Beast,” there is an occasion for a queer reading of the text. As Michel
Foucault shows, the emergence of a queer consciousness can be traced back to a modern age, making the modernist lyric a particularly valuable resource for tracking its appearance. In this case, the poem queers metaphor itself; the “brindled myth with icy mane” resists semantic closure. As both animal and myth, the metaphor resists a purely figural status. To queer metaphor is to avoid the absoluteness of identitarian logic, in which the tenor is assimilated into a single vehicle. Instead, the poem references its representational mechanics and the scaffolding of the metaphor’s structure is revealed. Queering in this poem also refers to the chiasmatic crossing between practices of signification and the animal. In Barnes’ work, the animal bears the status of a textual entity, embedded within praxes of signification, and yet intervening directly within their structures. Her work questions the natural status of the animal, being already within a mythic economy.

The lyric further reaches for the realm of the unconscious as the embodied myth “walks in a phantom dream.” All of the tropes of this stanza, the animal, the dream, the vision, and the myth, are in some way duplicitous; each has the potential to obscure the divide between the real and the symbolic. Myth engenders a quasi-phantasmagoric world, which both produces and reflects an imaginative vision. Moreover, the Beast in her poem bears a relationship to lesbian sexuality. In the context of this poem, the animal-myth shares the same discursive space as the lesbian, who is herself subject to a phantasmagoric vision. As Terry Castle argues, the lesbian is apparitional, both a blindspot within a heteronormative imaginary and a derealized figure that authors traditionally cast
in spectral metaphors. Obscured by literary and non-literary discourses, the
lesbian has been cast as a disembodied, frightful, and ghostly entity (Castle).
Barnes would have been familiar with a heterosexist imaginary that casts the
lesbian as specter and ironizes the trope in her poem. The hybrid creature, subject
to the “Sapphic pyre” and to the domain of dreaming, is cast within the recesses
of the unconscious, an animal terrain. This myth-within-a-dream or vision-
within-a-vision is mortal, however; the verb “slain” materializes an unconscious
ontology and reinforces the fleshly character of the animal residing within the
metaphor.

While the vision-within-the-vision is “slain,” the animal-myth re-surfaces in
the form of the Beast. Indeed, the Beast, like the category of the animal itself, is a
capacious signifier that holds an excess of meanings. In addition to representing
the allegorical animal, the Beast signifies the degraded status of the animal and
what Barnes referred to as a “nice word” that she sought to re-appropriate and re-
cast (Seitler 543). The Beast is a discursive production, an animal-myth, or an
over-stressed metaphor that cedes to its own collapse, becoming an antimetaphor.
Conceptually, it is at once the lesbian, a figure of degeneracy, and animetaphor,
the animal inhabiting metaphor itself.

In the second stanza, Barnes fashions an allegorized Love that is a pure
agency, not a property of the Beast. “Love is burning at the heart,” while the
heart is figured in familiar terms as wounded, benumbed: it is “echoless and cast
in stone.” The somewhat banal theme of a stony heart appears, pointing to the
poem’s ongoing arbitration with orthodox representational practices. However,
the adjective “echoless” is further interrogated in the poem; through repetition, Barnes performs a verbal echo, suggesting that Love acts upon all in the same way: “same on same, by kind to kind.” Universalized, Love entails suffering, yet the suffering of the lesbian is particularized. That the Sapphic pyre looms above the Beast’s head suggests that it is an immanent threat. It produces an “ashless and tragic fire,” intimating a destructive force that is perpetual, that does not consume and thereby extinguish itself. Perhaps the fire is particularly tragic for this quality of perpetuity. Lesbianism, in its traditionally melancholic trappings, is characteristically wounding, but also positioned within a sacrificial economy. The rituals of lesbian sexuality and the funereal are intertwined, but not consummated, as both remain only within the realm of possibility. That the Sapphic pyre does not engulf the Beast suggests that it is a threat that may be avoided; one may choose not to sacrifice oneself to it.

The inclusion of a “Sapphic pyre,” or a punitive end for the lesbian, was a common trope in French literature during the nineteenth century, a tradition that would have been familiar to Barnes. For instance, the author of Les Demi-Sexes (The Half-Sexes), Jane Vaudere, concluded her novel (published in 1897) with a tragic end for her lesbian pair. The character Nina, a proponent of sexual freedom, urges her lover Camille to leave her husband for her and, rather than lose Camille, she deliberately steps into a burning fireplace, killing both of them. This Sapphic pyre may have influenced Barnes’ own. The fate of Vaudere’s characters was typical for the time, a testament to the anxieties that attended representations of lesbian sexuality. Liane de Pougy, a French courtesan and
lover of Natalie Clifford Barney, addressed the challenge of writing about lesbian sexuality, stating that the demise of the lesbian “was necessary…in those days, in order to find a publisher who would consent to bring out a book on the subject” (Rodriguez 94). It’s possible to read Barnes’ “Sapphic pyre” as a critique of the literary climate that prescribed negative representations of lesbian sexuality. Her poem may indeed refer to the discursive production of the lesbian as a degenerate, ultimately bound to suffer for her perversion.

In the lyric’s final stanza, the Beast “marks” the shadow, the term’s polyvalence inviting a range of interpretive possibilities. In “marking” the shadow, the Beast is both the privileged observer and judge of the shadow. This simultaneously supports a reading of the Beast as a tropological reversal of the empirical humanist, who traditionally is tasked with naming and categorizing the animals. The Beast instead is represented as the eternal omniscience that both identifies and gravitates towards the shadow, the illicit or secondary self.

This end is curious, because—as Castle notes—the figure of the lesbian as shadow or a secondary, immaterial image of the original, is a trope of heterosexist discourse, which imagines lesbianism as an imitation or copy of heterosexuality: the supposedly original sexuality. Discursively produced as an unviable or unthinkable identity, the lesbian, when imagined, is traditionally placed within a heterosexual framework, as it is in Freudian psychology. Interestingly, the subject of the shadow goes missing in Barnes’ poem. Without a volitional subject, the shadow comes into presence only by virtue of the Beast’s presence. The fact that the Beast marks the dysphoric being, a creature rendered invisible or
lesser than by society, is in some way affirming of its existence, legitimizing it, even while it stalks the shadow. There is a natural affinity between the Beast and shadow. At once pathetic, transgressive, and timeless, the Beast goes “pacing down mortality/ with a lost, immortal cry,” representing the desiring subject in pursuit of what is both a love object and prey. The question of the Beast’s identity, whether it is purely a textual entity, a mythic figure, or a Sapphic incarnation, underscores the generally equivocal nature of the lyric itself.

Critiquing an humanist inheritance, which would inscribe an ontological boundary between the animal and human, Barnes draws upon the animal-metaphor to free the animal from the stronghold of a Western imaginary that is prone to dualistic forms of thinking about animality and humanness. In her lyric, “the immortal cry” of the Beast signifies a pathetic communication that crosses the critical threshold between the human and animal. One possible way to read the Beast is as the radical alterity of love, its cry signaling both vulnerability and timelessness as it closes the frontier between itself and the mortal.

Pathos introduces vulnerability, which exposes us to our commonality with others and our shared ontology with the animal, evincing an ethical necessity for an appreciation of our mutual capacity for pain. Such commonality is not contingent upon identity, but instead the Beast’s pathetic cry opens a space of likeness-in-difference between the suffering animal and human animal, introducing the possibility of an affective transference between the two.

Additionally, the lesbian, like the animal, is culturally inscribed, a figure that is always socially mediated. During a period when cultural and scientific arguments
for the natural basis of heterosexuality were pervasive, Barnes subverts traditional practices of representation and instead calls attention to the imaginative quality of the representational act through the figure of the Beast. Moreover, she levies a critique of metaphor in favor of advancing a queer metonymic that operates throughout the poem.

Such devices of rhetoric occasion a critical, rather than virtual immersion in the text’s reality as readers become participants in meaning-making. The homophobic representation of the lesbian as an “unnatural” sexual being is complicated by her blurring of the normative epistemological borders between the natural and cultural. Daniela Caselli also analyzes how she disrupts the boundaries between cultural constructs and a “natural” domain, but I believe that it is important to note the queer and posthumanist potentialities of such a rhetorical move. Throughout her poetics, Barnes melds organic and cultural, material and rhetorical categories, destabilizing the notion of any “natural” being, animal, heterosexual, or otherwise, that is not already inscribed within cultural constructs. Ultimately, this lyric furnishes an alternative model of queer being through (ani)metaphor.

Animetaphor enables a critical re-evaluation of Barnes’ temporality, as atavistic possibility may be lodged within language itself. As has been discussed, the animetaphor transverses the material of the unconscious, which is tied to our animal prehistory, and language. Moreover, to the human imagination, the animal bears the ontology of metaphor. Temporally speaking, both metaphor and the animal enable us to access our origins, offering the means to retrace our past and
interpret the present. The metaphorical terrain of myth furnishes the archaic data of the collective unconscious, where there reside traces of the animal. As Levi-Strauss reminds us, “A myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place a long time ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (Levi-Strauss 209). Being original, myth bears the same symbolic structures and meanings across time and cultures. Myth’s applicability across various temporalities is marshaled in Barnes’ poetics via the animetaphor, as was seen in “Love and the Beast”.

For Barnes, the animal, laden with symbolic import and representative of the unconscious, possesses the temporal superstructure of myth. The Beast of the poem, as an atavistic animal that emits its “lost, immortal cry,” has an ingrained pastness and a preludious relation to time as it is organized by humans, just as in her poem “Pastoral,” “Each [animal] is before, and each behind its time” (Barnes, Collected Poems 82).

IV. The Queer Temporality of Barnes’ Creatures

Only recently have critics begun to resuscitate interest in Nightwood, Barnes’ high modernist “poetic” novel. Originally Barnes considered titling her novel Night Beast, yet she ultimately jettisoned the title because of the negative connotations that trail the word “beast,” although she herself considered it a “nice word” (Rohman 134, Seitler 543). As Carrie Rohman points out, this title
indicates that Barnes favored the animal as the critical entity of the text (Ibid).
That she figures the entity of the Beast prominently in her poem “Love and the Beast” suggests that she was invested in re-inventing the word and notions of bestiality itself.

In 1936, Nightwood was received with both great acclaim and ambivalence. Considered a “dangerous” book, unsuitable for the general reading public, it frustrated many with its difficulty (Caselli 151-2). In a letter written to her friend Emily Coleman, whose advocacy of the novel helped to bring it to the attention of T.S. Eliot and ultimately to publication, Barnes discusses her “dislike of parading or ‘telling on’ the innermost secret, feeling that it should only be exposed in art, and then only by the best artist... In exposing it in art, it is lifted back into its own place again, given back to itself, though also given to the reader, the eye. Only the best reader will understand it, like initiation” (Barnes as qtd by Herring 263). A site of instruction to what is secret or recondite, Barnes’ statement suggests that reading her requires a period of becoming trained in the difficulties of her style. One may, with time, learn how to read her or—one might posit provisionally—learn how to think and feel queerly.

To read Nightwood well is to read as if for poetic meaning. A hybrid text, straddling poetic and prosaic convention, the novel disrupts generic distinctions between prose and poetry. As an ideological concept, genre does not merely mark off a particular rhetorical or literary discourse or make textual classifications static, but it can be recognized as a powerful means of de-stabilizing classificatory systems. Her work exposes the powerful in-between zones of prose and poetry, a
space in which narrative need not have a rational or coherent trajectory, but instead yields to a poetic logic that gives credence to the imagination and the unconscious. The poetic mode of her novel is a rejection of narrative norms, and in turn, a critique of identity as it is made coherent by the invocation of a past narrative.

In many ways, her writing calls upon a hermeneutic framework styled by poetry if we are to think of poetry in Lyn Hejinian’s sense. For Hejinian, poetry is experiential rather than semantic; it abides “in the transitions” (2). It is the radically transitional quality of Nightwood, with its transient characters, its fluctuations between the logos of the conscious and the unconscious, and its metaphysical preoccupations with becoming, that solicits a habitude of mind that is at home in the flow and flux of shifting contexts and play of poetic meaning. Poetic meaning encompasses multiple, heterogeneous meanings and resists semantic closure.

From a marketing perspective, the novel’s resistance to the conventions of novel writing dampened its prospects for publication. Many of the first publishers and critics to whom Barnes farmed out the novel bemoaned its formlessness and lack of realistic treatment (Barnes Nightwood xi). However, Barnes had little interest in producing a realistic novel; her intention from the beginning was to write from the vantage of the poet. “With the correct artist we contemplate life,” she wrote, “with the poetic artist we make a new one” (Ibid). However, a challenge to the status quo and to a social order that devalued those on the margins, the novel was also vulnerable to the influence of a homophobic
T.S. Eliot and Frank Morley, who were active in revising the text in preparation for its publication, omitted much of its lesbian content in the fear that the novel would be banned by censors (Nightwood xxiii). Barnes was worried that the manuscript would be hijacked by its editors: “E. and M. like brothers, conspiring,” she wrote (Ibid). Although she did make concessions in order to get the book published, she insisted that the structural unity of the manuscript remain intact despite the protests of Eliot, Morley, and Emily Coleman, also an early editor of the novel. Eliot wanted the last chapter “The Possessed” to be jettisoned and Coleman wanted much of the content involving the character of Felix cut. However, Barnes argued that the concept of “disqualification” should surround the love story of Nora and Robin. In other words, Barnes considered Felix’s story as a Jewish man to be pivotal to the novel in that it was symptomatic of a society that dismissed and shamed the other, be it the homosexual, the Jew, or even the circus “freaks” that attracted Felix early in the novel (xviii). The characters of the novel are thus deeply reflective of one another and connected in their outsiderhood, and Barnes was able to preserve both sections of the novel.

As Judith Roof shows, the novel also structurally undercuts narrative heteroideology. Arguing that narrative on a textual level (as opposed to a topical level) is inextricably bound to sexuality, she reads Nightwood as an exemplary model of narrative perversion. Traditionally the novel as a generic category presents a metaphorical heteronormative dynamic in which narrative arc is structured by a compulsion towards reproduction. Drawing from Freud, Roof posits that the perverse text presents a structural challenge to such a narrative
architecture. The perversity of Nightwood is not instantiated by the text’s queer characters, but rather by the novel’s structural perversion of a reproductive narrative. As a “novel about narrating,” according to Roof, Nightwood figures narrative perversion in the transvestite character of Dr O’Connor, whose narrative disclosures about characters do not conform to those of the text’s third person narrator (Roof 141). Thus, Barnes disrupts the novel’s generic, narrative, and ideological norms.

It also disrupts the novel’s temporal norms. Like “Love and the Beast,” her book is in part an experiment in forms of pastness and the temporality of myth, which is universal, timeless, and metaphorical. Without an attachment to linear time or traditional conventions of narrative pacing, the novel works across various continuums of temporal experience, including atavism. In late nineteenth century medical discourse, homosexuality was often interpreted as a form of atavism, contributing to the isolation and pathologization of the homosexuality. However, Nightwood resists subscribing to the usual sense of atavism. Time in the novel is at once cosmic, im/personal, metaphorical, and influenced by principles of evolution.

Nightwood is preoccupied with the subject exposed to de-humanizing modern conditions, as well as the equivocal status of the human, following Darwinism and Freudian psychology. Ultimately, to think outside of humanist and heteronormative ideologies, Barnes extricates her novel from calendrical time. Her characters find themselves to be anachronisms, temporally misaligned with their age and one another. These characters live outside of the social norms of
their generation. A recurring trope in Barnes’ work is the queer experience of being temporally incongruous with one’s age, suggestive of a temporal vulnerability, as well as a creative power. Out of sync with the ideologies and codes of their generation, these characters transverse several axes of time: historical, mythic, and cosmic.

Mobilizing a radically non-sequential, non-narrative temporality and reorganizing time along a synchronic and diachronic axis, Nightwood is restricted to no single time in history. Characters live both inside of and outside of their respective times. “Remember your century at least!” one minor character, an ex-priest, cries to Dr. O’Connor when he claims to have bled Catherine the Great (Barnes, Nightwood 135). Time functions as a metaphor for the persistence of the past and the inevitability of death. To some extent, characters are cogs in a deterministic universe: they exist as reincarnations of former beings who are as if doomed from the novel’s inception. And yet, because they inhabit a poetic universe, where meaning lies in transitions, they are of a metaphorical ontology in which the impossible is possible. Despite the chaos of their lives and the certainty of their destruction, their suffering is a form of knowledge that opens up the possibility of understanding the other. It is this capacity for inhabiting the other’s body, whether through re-incarnation or the agonistic dimension of unfulfilled desire, that allows for a radical re-imagining of subjectivity, which is bound to a cosmic, im/personal conception of being.

This metaphysics of metaphor is perhaps most manifest in the text’s hybrid creature, Robin Vote, a “beast turning human” (Barnes, Nightwood 143).
Unsettling the categories of the human and the animal, Robin embodies a deep-rooted atavism; she offers “a way back” to prediscursive sexuality and a time when the human was in touch with its animal nature (Ibid. 265). The text’s foremost wanderer, a being whose very name is representative of her affinity to the animal, Robin Vote is part woman, part girl, part beast. She is both an anonymous and an everyman figure, whose isolation and anonymity is reflective of a modern condition. A refraction of the other characters in the novel, Robin is also the face of frustrated desire and the radical otherness that we embrace when we give ourselves over to our desire. She is “incest,” which makes her relative to all of us, characters and readers, who are always implicated as spectators and participants in her construction (Ibid. 129). More specifically, as the “second person singular,” she is at once Felix the “Wandering Jew,” Dr. O’Connor the “other woman that God forgot,” and the medium through which other figures confront the stark nakedness of their desire, the force that—like compulsion—offers up the half-fiction of will and, by extrapolation, the coherent subject (Barnes, Nightwood 107, 8, 119).

Robin wanders through the Parisian streets at night in a somnambulist fugue. Desired by multiple characters in the text, including her husband Felix, her lesbian lover Nora, and Jenny, who replaces Nora as Robin’s lover, she is the most sought after and elusive character in the text. Neither animal nor human, she is a being who is more verb than pronoun, more metaphorical than empirical, more prototype than person:
Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding caught in the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and a wedding veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth, as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey. (Barnes, Selected Works 262)

Barnes enacts the rhetorical gestures of myth, as the passage lifts off from character description to the elevated register of archetype. Robin’s state of suspended metamorphosis, her condition of animal- becoming, turns metaphorical and finally metonymic, as the mythical entity of the unicorn comes to stand for a “human hunger.” This hunger is rhetorical rather than material. One possible way to read this passage is that the human fear of the fleshly animal results in the transference of our fantasies, fears, and imaginings to the rhetorical animal, a placeholder for our myth-making energies. The transference is at once violent and intimate, a visceral and orectic human drive. This passage seems to suggest that the fear of the corporeal other whets the philosophical and affective human appetite for mythologization. Robin, who is “possessed” by the novel’s conclusion, bears the same tropological significance as the animal in the human imaginary. This metaphorical existence supplants actual being in the same way that the animal exists within our consciousness as a generic or metaphorical entity.

Robin also represents atavism’s hold on the modern subject. Her atavism presents a challenge to identity and personhood; it is, in fact, queer. Atavism reminds us that certain genetic features can re-emerge in the modern subject. It
also can remind us that we can share the same genetic material with other species, and that relations among various species are more promiscuous, more slippery, and more mysterious than we traditionally allow. With atavism, the human as a discrete categorical entity breaks down; instead, the human is a shared contingency with the animal. Atavism, in turn, is an efflorescent site of possibility, which disturbs epistemological certainties and confounds the boundaries between the animal and human, the past and the present. Atavism, in this sense, involves a more complex, queerer temporal movement than regress alone.

Beyond its corporeal manifestations, atavism in the form of memory is embedded in the unconscious; we access its residues in dreams, metaphor, and myth. It may be said to have a temporal function, producing the dynamic crossing between an atavistic past and the present. Atavistic memory is a function of an experience that one does not author in one’s lifetime. While akin to memory in that it inheres in subjectivity, atavistic memory is not a function of one’s earlier perception and, as such, it is precisely posthuman. As such, there is no direct connection between an experience in lived time and the constitution of memory. Problematizing causation, atavistic memory queers subjectivity and reconfigures relatedness. The atavistic being is a physical trace of the past; it is a visible reminder of our ancestral relations. In all of these ways, the formational conditions that shape subjectivity come undone. In this sense, queer atavism does involve a productive movement between temporal orders; it is a form of materially realized continuation between the past and present.
One of the most cogent critics of \textit{Nightwood}, Dana Seitler argues that Barnes’ atavistic animals disrupt scientific discourses, specifically degeneration theory, that ascribe the racially or sexually other’s body with perverse denotations (Seitler 113). According to Seitler, Barnes’ \textit{Nightwood}, a narrative about the atavistic creature Robin, re-writes biomedical interpretations of sexuality. Her narrative incorporates medical discourse about homosexuality, yet re-figures these discourses in the character of Robin while situating her within the “ever-deteriorating landscape of bourgeois modernity” (Ibid. 127). In this interpretation, Robin is not an aberration but a cipher for the devolutionary regress of modernity.

According to Seitler, atavism brings to light the synthesis of past and present “in which the entanglements of human history and natural history cannot be undone” (33). Extrapolating from the work of Bruno Latour, she posits that the role of atavism in modernity complicates conceptualizations of the modern as a rupture from past cultural forms and epistemes. The modern, in fact, is constituted by the very logic of its rupture and from the premodern, which it positions as its opposite. Latour refers to modernism’s involution of rupture and re-formation as modernism’s “double asymmetry,” out of which two practices emerge: practices of purification, in which the human and nonhuman are divided into separate ontological zones, and mediation, which constitutes entirely new forms of beings, hybrids of nature and culture (Ibid).

Barnes’ creatures, from the Beast of “Love and the Beast” to Robin Vote, are just such hybrids, beings that present a challenge to the formulation of the subject
as bounded. There is an obvious appeal to queer theory in the ontology of composite beings that suggest multiplicity within singularity. Queer bodies suggest interconnectedness, the non-discrete character of identity. According to its own etymological origins, queerness itself represents a metaphysics of crossing. In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick defines queer as a kind of movement, a transversal: “The word ‘queer’ itself means a cross movement—it comes from the Indo-European root-twerkw, which also yields the German quer (traverse), Latin torquere (tow twist), English athwart…The immemorial current that queer represents is antisepatarist as it is anti-assimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange” (Sedgwick xii). Moreover, as a hybrid being that is also a “beast turning human,” Robin invokes an ontology of becoming that is realized by her own status as a composite being. As the site where identities transverse and mingle, Robin’s identity as such is undone.

In a statement that is suggestive of Barnes’ own temporal experiment, Dr. Mathew O’Connor, another hybrid being in the text, says, “I wanted… to go behind the scenes, backstage as it were, to our present condition, to find, if I could, the secret of time” (Barnes, *Selected Works* 327). The “inverted” transsexual and verbose philosopher of the text Dr. O’Connor experiences his gender and sexuality not as a conflict of identity as much as a conflict of time. He understands his sexual identity as the consequence of a temporal fluke:

Am I to blame if I’ve been summoned before and this my last and oddest call? In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps its that memory that haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things
past is all we have for a future, and am I to blame if I’ve turned up this time as I shouldn’t have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted…with a womb as big as the king’s kettle… (Barnes, Selected Works 304)

Barnes’ situates O’Connor’s disclosure in her chapter “Watchman, What of the Night?,” in which Nora Flood, Robin’s floundering former lover, seeks out O’Connor to question him about the metaphysics of the night. She is implicitly asking him about Robin, who inhabits a nocturnal order. Dr. O’Connor, with his “over-large dark eyes,” is the novel’s Tiresias, burdened by his knowledge and subject to the divagations of an unstable—and also creative—mind just as Robin is subject to the divagations of a restless heart. Born as a temporal aberration, he is in the thrall of someone else’s amnesia, presenting a challenge to humanist interpretations of memory, causation, and volition. If queer subjectivity resists and re-writes principles of identity, he is perhaps the queerest figure in the novel.

Angel, god of darkness, Dante, bearded lady, mother, omniscient narrator, public figure, and actor, he explodes notions of identity as fixed or singular. Even his monologues, which are frequent in the novel, suggest an inherent theatricality structuring his engagement with the world. Reading Nightwood, one has a sense that Dr. O’Connor is performing to an audience that is only half-there. Characters in the novel rarely converse or listen to one another. And even while Dr. O’Connor is the novel’s narrator, he is hardly reliable; every speech is artful and potentially duplicitous.

No character in the novel is to be completely trusted. Each is susceptible to forces beyond their will, be it possession, desire, or art itself, with its non-telos of
pure play. Aware of his own constructedness, Dr. O’Connor walks the stage of the novel with the consciousness of one who has created it. Even in his suffering, while bound to the laws of the universe, he also authors the metaphysics of Nightwood. Every characters’ existence radiates out of his words, hinges upon his own caprice. God as trickster, poet as quack doctor: the metaphors for creation that grow out of the novel are slippery and always permeable.

They are also powerful, polemical. Throughout her oeuvre, Barnes’ radical temporality undermines the medical discourse that influenced the public’s perceptions about homosexuality in the early twentieth century, her temporal strategies subverting the notion that the “invert” was mired in a stalled stage of sexual development. Re-writing the Freudian developmental narrative about homosexuality, Barnes instills in Robin a prediscursive sexuality liberated from heteronormative constructs. Bound only to the moment and driven by instinct, Robin is seemingly antithetical to the evolving character; she is instead “the eternal momentary” (Barnes, Selected Works 332). Throughout the novel, her consciousness is concealed in shadow; she is the most laconic figure in the text and readers are granted access to her point of view only in rare, brief glimpses. She is never represented as an “I” with a human ego, but rather she is the consummate “other” with a radical alterity, akin to the animal. As the novel deliberately skirts admission to the question of Robin’s interiority and aligns her with animal temporality, she is a posthumanist figure.

Her temporal make-up, as it were, is also opposed to the Freudian notion of “organic repression,” in which the human unconscious is the product of the
regression of our animal natures. In Barnes’ novel, the repression of the animal unconscious is tied to psychic constraint. As Dr. O’Connor states, “Animals find their way about largely by the keenness of their nose. We have lost ours in order not to be one of them and what have we in its place? A tension in the spirit which is the contraction of freedom” (Barnes, Selected Works 325). O’Connor’s statement inflects the logic of Freudian “organic repression,” in which human civilization was actualized through the psyche’s repression of its animal nature. Robin, who is “the eternal momentry,” steps outside of the civilizing—and therefore constricting—effects of temporal “progress” (Barnes, Nightwood 332).

Throughout her work, Barnes embraces temporal aberration: atavism, anachronism, asynchrony, and belatedness. Similarly, allegory, myth, and the courtly tradition of “She Passed this Way” all engage a pre-existing story. Barnes’ poetics entail a multiplicity of temporalities, her lyrics glancing backwards in multiple senses. Temporal elasticity becomes useful in articulating alternative possibilities for subjectivity and upsetting the phantasmic nature of heterocentric identity. As Butler reminds us, identity is “regulatory” and “maintained through norms of intelligibility “ (Butler, Gender Trouble 23). Similarly, Barnes’ temporal strategies bring into view the socially constructed character of identity and the performative nature of the gendered body, as they do in her poem “She Passed this Way,” which rewrites the model of the Petrarchan lover and the telos of the love conquest.

And yet Barnes moves beyond a purely performative conception of sexual identity. In her representations of atavism, she engages deeply with a conception
of the remote past as a kind of improper property of the psyche, advancing her own queer, evolutionary version of subjectivity. The proximity of figures such as Robin Vote to the origin of being unsettles the model of the human as an entity discrete from the animal. The temporal architecture of atavism and anachronism presents new affective and epistemological thresholds, which queer the subjectivity of the animal human. Metaphor enables the testing of these thresholds.
Elizabeth Bishop’s Evolutionary Poetics

I. Queer Darwinism and the Influence of the Old Left

Djuna Barnes and Elizabeth Bishop are generally not read in conversation with one another. While Barnes has been generally bracketed off in literary histories on American modernism or has been read as a “minor” poet, Bishop is unequivocally secure within modernist narratives. When they are named together, it is generally noted that they moved within the same social and professional orbit as T.S. Eliot. In placing them alongside each other within a critical analysis, however, I wish to shift the focus onto their philosophical affinities: both shared a posthumanist vision intimately bound up with the social implications of Darwinism and the question of queer being. However, while Barnes’ focus was on the epistemological and ontological dilemma at the heart of metaphor, as I have discussed, Bishop’s poetics in the thirties—shaped by the radical politics of the decade—sought to furnish a political ideal out of the scientific materialism of Darwinism and the aesthetic philosophy of one of the great pragmatists of the century, John Dewey. Along with the aforementioned, a nexus of creative and philosophical writers influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, including Lewis Carroll, Prince Peter Kropotkin, and William Empson, also exerted an influence
on Bishop’s thinking. In turning to her personal reading, I wish to trace her philosophical and political affiliations and use them as a mode of inquiry into how these figures—while diverse in terms of genre and in their placement on a political spectrum spanning from liberal to anarchist—helped her begin to articulate a queer posthumanist subjectivity.

Biographically, Bishop is typically read as a closeted lesbian, whose passionate, complex relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares is generally recognized as the most significant of her life, influencing her own poetics. However, rather than define Bishop’s queerness in terms of object orientation or examine the occasional poems that depict homosexuality explicitly, I wish to consider the radical proto-political stakes of her queer evolutionary narratives. Strongly influenced by Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, her poetics draw from an idea of being as an evolving, creative process informed by its relations and interdependencies with a diversity of other beings. As such, possibilities for being are not bound to strictures of humanness, but are instead radically contingent upon other non-human lives. Her poetics imagine a demos rooted in an organic materialism; rather than being a fixed condition handed down by a state power, it is instead an activity made possible by reciprocal, dynamic interactions between human and nonhuman realms.

Bishop’s Darwinism helps to trouble queer theory’s humanist bias as well as its overdetermined connection to constructivist and performative conceptions of selfhood, which—as Michael Snediker reminds us—often are formed at the expense of the natural. Following deconstruction, queer theory has
conventionally read as “fictive” the domain of the natural (Snediker 193). While nature is necessarily mediated by culture (most dramatically and visibly through language), the evacuation of the role of evolution in the construction of subjectivity and sexuality limits our capacity to imagine non-coherent selfhood, which evolution shows is a process radically contingent upon other life forms. With its emphasis on materialism and the social forces that constitute the self, queer posthumanism requires new forms of queer theorizing other than what performative conceptions of sexual identity can provide alone.

Before I sketch out the connection between Bishop’s political investments and her queer posthumanism, it is necessary to address explicitly the relationship between queer subjectivity and evolution. Generally, queer theory resists engaging evolutionary studies because of the threat of biological determinism or Social Darwinism, yet Darwin’s theory of evolution, which breaks down the boundaries between species, can be placed in conversation with queer theory so as to undermine its privileged space for the human. Through a reading of Cary Wolfe, Tim Morton reminds us that an ecological critique helps to trouble speciesism, with its destructive and exclusivist logic, which also pervades homophobia and racism (276). Bishop’s poetics understand Darwinian evolution as a creative force with a queer political potential. This potential hinges on domains of experience that are typically deemed apolitical: the imagination, evolutionary precepts, the spectrum between conscious and unconscious states, and intimacy.
In recent years, a number of critics have begun to offer compelling and nuanced queer readings of Bishop’s poetics, including Snediker and Marilyn May Lombardi. In her lifetime, Bishop mainly concealed her lesbianism, cautious in an age when her sexuality would be judged deviant or unnatural among many of her contemporaries, yet—as Lombardi notes—she published love poems that have sustained homoerotic readings for a number of years (Lombardi 46). Her journal entries reveal that she had been looking for a mode of representation for her own sexuality, and Gertrude Stein’s poetics offered her one possibility: “…Stein’s reason for ‘concealment’ of the automatic nature of her writing = [equals] or, is another form of ‘concealment’ of the ‘homosexual’ nature of her life—False scents we all give off…” (Bishop as qtd by Lombardi 47). While Stein’s method of composition provided her with one model of a quasi-hermetic homoerotics, Bishop’s Romantic sensibilities, her investment in narrative and lyric, and her turn to animal experience as a basis for poetic possibility led her in another direction.

Like Darwin, her thinking drew from the lessons of the natural world. As an admirer of Darwin and a student of his optics, she worked against the generalizing impulse that is a product of hypostatizing habits of looking. All humans are subject to a potentially imperializing optics, and she saw in animal life a corrective to an anthropocentric vision. Even as a young student at Vassar, she applied her observation of the natural world to her thoughts on aesthetics, optics, and literary interpretation. In her essay “Time’s Andromedas,” she distinguishes

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7 See Snediker’s *Queer Optimism* and Marilyn May Lombardi’s *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics*. 
a human time-pattern from a nonhuman time-pattern while reading bird migratory patterns. She writes the following:

...by watching one bird, then another, I saw that some flew a little slower than others, some were trying to get ahead and some flew at an individual rubato; each seemed a variation, and yet altogether my eyes were deceived into thinking them all precise and regular. I watched closely the spaces between the birds....infinitely important was the impression the birds gave me of setting up a time-pattern all their own, of having brought down the very sky and fused it with them in an absorption in their motions that left the other parts of the sky and lower world to move at a quite different clockpace. (Bishop, Poems, Prose, and Letters 642)

With an eye trained as much towards the repeated nature of the bird’s migration as to the interstices of repetition, Bishop finds that while humans can mark time by bird migration, it remains independent from human significations. Her sense of “experience-time,” which she describes as “the time pattern by which realities reach us,” evokes a non-restrictive multi-temporality that is experiential and can arise within the human consciousness through psychic and non-human material (Ibid. 659). Her observations also indicate there are temporalities imperceptible to a human tempo. Extrapolating from this realization, she considers the way in which literary works establish multiple time-patterns among subjects that do not concede to a normative linear time. An awareness of the alterity of time, the insight that there exist time-patterns that do not readily submit to a modern human consciousness is in many ways a posthumanist revelation.

The poem that inaugurated Bishop’s queer posthumanism, as I read it, is her enchanted, much-debated narrative “The Man-Moth” (1936), the primary subject
of my study. It is no coincidence that the poem was produced in the thirties, a tumultuous and aesthetically fecund time for Bishop, as it was for many Leftist writers. Following the crash of Wall Street, many radical writers rose to prominence as they sought an alternative political reality to the dehumanizing conditions of capitalism. “The Man-Moth” is a significant poem, I argue, because it is the first she produced that furnishes a radical proto-democratic vision based on altruism and the communal power of grief. Democratic relationality in the context of the poem is connected both to the imagination and to close observation, as well as to social connection with the other, including the creature. The Man-Moth dramatizes a dynamic of connection through difference, although connection comes with a cost. In the final stanza of the poem, the Man-Moth is moved to sacrifice his one possession: “If you catch him,/ hold up a flashlight to his eye… one tear, his only possession, like the bee’s sting, slips./ Slyly he palms it, and if you’re not paying attention/ he’ll swallow it. However, if you watch, he’ll hand it over… pure enough to drink” (Bishop 16). This sacrificial exchange is exemplary of Bishop’s ethical and social investment in animals. Concerned with the effects of modernism’s fragmenting of culture and consciousness on both human and nonhuman vulnerable lives, she imagines a form of relation forged through difference and sacrifice.

Prior to her creation of “The Map” (1934) and “The Man-Moth,” Bishop had largely been producing Hopkins-esque imitations and experimenting in short fiction. However, the thirties had exerted a strong pull on her poetics: in this decade, she first met Marianne Moore (in 1934), the greatest influence on her
work, and she was carving out a space for her own poetic vision in a politically charged and conflicted literary climate in which the aesthetic appeals of high modernist literature were in tension with the urgent demand for politically explicit and expeditious writing.

In a retrospective interview (1966) with Ashley Brown, she identified her younger self as a socialist, yet expressed her dissatisfaction with the conventions of proletarian literature: “Politically I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked ‘social consciousness’ writing” (Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop 22). She was sympathetic to an Eliotic, high modernist tradition in an age that she believed had come to value a more explicitly political poetics (Ibid). However, while she may have rejected propagandist literature and agitprop, she was politically sympathetic to the radicalism of the Old Left. Had she oriented herself in the direction of her contemporaries who were writing and promulgating proletarian literature, it might be more difficult to imagine how she would have arrived at what is now possible to read as a posthumanist political vision. I argue that her poetics re-imagine evolution as a queer process that opens up a proto-politics with an affinity to the radical politics of the Old Left.

Because of her choice to pursue a different poetics than many other radical Leftists of the time, she has often been misread. James Longenbach cites Adrienne Rich as an exemplary (mis)reader of Bishop’s social conscience. As he notes, Rich’s ambivalent essay “Contradictions” presents an interpretation of Bishop’s formalism as apolitical (Longenbach 467). Rich laments the apparent

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8 For a posthumanist reading of Bishop’s formalism, see my article “Repetition and the Honest Signal in Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics.” I argue that Bishop’s forms of repetition can be placed in
lack of anger or breakthrough in her collection, as she does not overthrow traditional forms and develop a self-proclaimed political poetics, as others of her generation did. Ultimately, Rich’s reading reduces Bishop’s formal aesthetic to a marker of political dis-identification, yet the latter’s reluctance to declaim a particular political affiliation in her poetics cannot be read as an abdication of political responsibility. According to Longenbach, Bishop was preoccupied with questions raised by the Marxist thirties and the social inequalities of her time. In fact, recent studies by such scholars as Longenbach, Camille Roman, and John Lowney have made significant efforts to analyze and highlight the political and social import of her writing.

In her early career, much of her work had been placed and curated in leftist journals. As a student at Vassar during the Depression, Bishop engaged with contemporary political alternatives and founded the experimental, left-leaning magazine *Con Spirito* with Mary McCarthy and probably Muriel Rukeyser in 1933, publishing her work in the *Partisan Review*, and reading about the anarchists Nicco Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (who arguably were executed in 1927 for their political leanings) (Longenbach 467-8). However, resisting the formal and thematic strictures of proletarian literature, Bishop instead developed a political and aesthetic sensibility that shared affinities with the *Partisan Review* in the thirties. The journal’s left-wing editors were concerned with the social conditions of the time but were unwilling to jettison the aesthetic values shaped...
by modernism. Longenbach writes, “While Granville Hicks of the New Masses maintained that the function of art is to ‘lead the proletarian reader to recognize his role in the class struggle,’ William Phillips and Philip Rahv said this in the opening editorial of the Partisan Review: ‘We shall resist every attempt to cripple our literature by narrow-minded, sectarian theories and practices’” (Longenbach 469). During this period, Bishop published several works in the journal, alongside Leon Trotsky’s “Art and Politics,” Victor Serge’s “Marxism in our Time,” and Stephen Spender’s “September Journal” (Roman 18).

While dissatisfied with existent political structures, Bishop, who considered herself a radical, was reluctant to associate too readily with any political ideology, tending towards skepticism in her own political identifications and praxis: “…I tried anarchism, briefly,” Bishop recalled in her interview with Brown (Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop 22). Her political affiliations were mobile throughout her life; she identified at different periods as a socialist, anarchist, and liberal democrat. In reply to Marianne Moore’s reading of her tendency to distance herself from her subjects, what the older poet referred to as the younger writer’s “tentativeness,” Bishop questioned whether this quality reflected her own resistance towards articulating a political position in her work. However, she said of herself: “I’m a ‘Radical’ of course” (Bishop as qtd by Millier 138). As Brett Millier reminds us, “to be a writer coming of age in the 1930’s, to be ‘important’ was to write about the social and political issues of the day” (Ibid.). While not explicitly political, Bishop’s early work reflects an engagement with political and social questions concerning structural inequity, and as Lowney notes, critics have
begun to read her work in relation to other discourses of marginality in the 1930s (69). 

While Moore read her work as tentative, Bishop’s political thinking was informed by a number of radicals. Her relationship to anarchism is more complex than her interview would seem to indicate. An “anarchist” working at a writing correspondence school during the Depression, Bishop satirizes her acquaintance with a doctrinaire disciple of communism and proponent of proletarian social realism in her personal essay “The USA School of Writing.” It is perhaps not surprising that anarchism would have appealed to her, albeit—as she claimed—briefly. Anarchism provides a capacious political space with ideals that would be enabling for her politically and aesthetically, particularly in that it does not compel ideological affiliation among its adherents. Hypocrisy, political fundamentalism, and doctrinaire politics turned her off, and she was not interested in manipulating art into a political instrument. However, anarchism, commonly misunderstood as a destructive or violently combative political force, is instead a radicalism that dis-identifies with existing political structures and seeks a new form of political engagement based on evolutionary and creative principles.

Although Bishop would not wish to identify herself as an anarchist poet, nor would she want to claim her work as a political poetics, it is interesting that a significant part of her personal library was composed of the writing of radicals and anarchists, including George Woodcock, Robert Duncan, Prince Kropotkin, and William A. Hinds (VC Box 111). She was also reading the works of Lewis

9 See for example James Logenbach’s “Elizabeth Bishop’s Social Conscience” and Betsy Erkkila’s “Elizabeth Bishop, Modernism, and the Left.”
Mumford and Hannah Arendt, proponents of a cultural individualism that has affinities to philosophical anarchism. While living in Brazil, she sent sections of Lewis Mumford to the Governor (Bishop, One Art 415). In the way of many of these thinkers (including Arendt, who was an acquaintance of Bishop’s), Bishop dis-identified with failing political structures and sought an alternative vision of community that safeguarded the liberties of the individual.

II. “A True Lingua Unicornis”

In 1935—the same year that she wrote “The Man-Moth”—Bishop found herself traveling aboard a Nazi steamship bound for Europe. The moment was remarkable in that it caused a psychological crisis that pressurized her aesthetics and implicated her in international politics. While aboard the ship, she experienced extreme psychic disturbance and a hallucinatory vision. During her travels, she felt what she later identified to be a crippling sense of “homesickness,” which she described as “an awful feeling of deathly physical and mental illness” (Bishop as qtd by Millier 87). However, the period was also an efflorescent one for Bishop’s poetic imagination. Her journals between 1934-37 reflect a growing awareness of her own powers as a writer, which for her were

10 In a journal entry dated July 1935, Bishop records her first trip to Europe and experiences a hallucination and panic attack, writing, “There are men on rafts, poor wretches clinging to a board or two…I am positive I see them there, even a white body, or the glitter of their eye-balls rolled towards us…I was twice] overtaken by an awful feeling of deathly physical and mental illness—something that seems ‘after’ me…When this feeling comes I can’t speak, swallow, scarcely breathe….I placed it as homesickness” (Bishop as qtd by Kalstone 21).
based on a transmutation of somatic experience to something else, something spiritual:

It’s a question of using the poet’s proper materials, with which he’s equipped by nature, ie, immediate, intense physical reactions, a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything—to express something not of them—something, I suppose, spiritual. (Bishop as qtd by Costello 3)

Bishop, locating in her body’s somatic reactions a force of potentiality, became invested in the physiological dimension of experience and its connection to metaphorical cognition and meaning-making. With a mind subject to non-causal, autonomous systems—both panic attacks and hallucinations—she experienced the otherness of her own subjective reality. In other words, without control over her physiological response to stimuli, she was forced to confront the incoherence of her own being and the world around her. Tinctured by hesitancy, the hallucinatory eye must look with caution upon its material surroundings. The viewer is not entirely free to look without self-reflexive monitoring, as the mind becomes keenly aware of vision’s radical contingencies. Presented with surroundings that cannot be readily interpreted or translated in a material realm, the hallucinating subject must rely on an alternative mode of perception. For Bishop, perception is informed by both of metaphorical cognition and skepticism. Her poetics often interrogate acts of perception through qualification, fluctuating points of view, and permutational similes, all of which undermine her speaker’s authority as an objective observer. Unlike William Blake or Allen Ginsberg, who claimed heightened authority, transcendent power, or prophetic stature as a
result of their hallucinatory visions, Bishop understood the vexed relationship between perception and sense- and metaphor-making as a condition for inquiry, rather than visionary power.

“The Man-Moth” explores themes of alienation, visionary transcendence, language and the politics of representation, and the psychic and corporeal valences of sense and sensation. These concerns are bound up with not only a human order, but also the animal world. It is important to note that the animal is a privileged entity in her work, appearing throughout such poems as “The Moose,” “The Fish,” and “The Armadillo,” as well as such prose pieces as “The Last Animal,” “In the Village,” and “The Country Mouse.” Bishop, according to Priscilla Paton, portrays the “animal-as-lesser,” a trope of the vulnerable, lowly beast used for negotiating issues of identity and the desire for belonging, as well as conveying sympathetic connections to the “other” (Paton 2). She contends, “Bishop’s portrayals diminish animals when she dwells on them as lesser in identifying with vulnerable neurotic creatures” (Ibid.). However, while it is true that Bishop’s animals are vulnerable creatures, such vulnerability need not be imagined as a deficit. In contrast to Paton, I argue that Bishop’s engagement with the animal occasions an opportunity for new modes of relation that she viewed as radically democratic. Much can be learned about her theory of the politics of animal representation through her review of Marianne Moore’s poetics entitled “As We Like It” (1948):

A great deal has been said about how authors should not condescend to their working class or peasant characters …It was perhaps consoling to think that the animals were just like the citizenry, but how untrue, and one feels Miss Moore would
feel, how selfish. There are morals a’ plenty in animal life, but they have to be studied out by devotedly and minutely observing the animal, not by regarding the deer as a man imprisoned in a ‘leathern coat…[Moore’s] unromantic, life-like, somehow democratic presentations of animals come close to their treatment in Chinese art…Her animal poetry seduces one to dream of some realm of reciprocity, a true lingua unicornis. (Bishop, Prose 259)

Bishop places the working class in a metaphorical relationship to the animal in order to dismiss the problematic conceit, but thus also reminds readers of the persistence of the metaphor in history. This history has entailed the displacement of the other—such as a minority—from the category of the human, an exclusion that has occasioned much of the barbarity of the twentieth century. Not in any sense “lesser” than the human or tied to any hierarchic category, the animal may be positioned in a reciprocal relationship to the writer.

According to Bishop, “The Man-Moth” was born out of a misprint in a newspaper that read “man-moth” rather than “mammoth.” A misprint and a hybrid, textually mediated chimera, the Man-Moth lives in a borderland, a liminal, penumbral zone. An aberration and fantastic body, much like the unicorn mentioned above, the Man-Moth exists in a disorienting urban-scape, a hallucinatory world of “artificial tunnels” and buildings (Bishop, The Complete Poems 15). It is a dreamy poem that combines surreal elements with everyday, recognizable furniture, which the presence of the Man-Moth troubles out of its normalcy in the first two stanzas of the poem:

Here, above, cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight. The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat. It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth
pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,
the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges
from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection.
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb. (Ibid)

The poem opens in media res with images of geographical indeterminacy, the way
a dream might. The speaker positions readers “above,” but above what object
specifically is never disclosed. Are readers oriented simply aboveground or
above Man? What are the implications of the reader’s heightened vantage? Is the
reader too in an inverted spatial relationship to the Man, as the Man is to the
moon? These questions of orientation compel a re-evaluation of normative
conceptions of space, perspective, and logic. Lying outside of normative sense-
making, fantasy, in this way, can expose the weirdness of the mundane, the
otherness of everyday life.

Throughout “The Man-Moth,” the reader is lodged within a landscape where
there exists geographical confusion and inversion, and where binary
conceptualizations of identity are troubled. The culturally imposed boundary
between Man and animal is tested, and the Man and the Man-Moth, like man and
animal, are not mutually exclusive entities: the Man-Moth is of Man, although an
imaginary being.
Moreover, there exist incongruities and inexactitudes between language and environment (there is an ineffable “queer light” and the moon’s temperature is “impossible to record”) and body and environment (the Man-Moth cannot push his head through the moon). From the perspective of a creature, an industrialized cityscape is not unlike a Wonderland in the sense that it imposes rules and conditions that undermine the animal’s facility within its environment. As such, the spatial and referential logic of the poem became strained, as does the narrative logic. The Man-Moth, for example, reads the moon’s hole as proof that the sky is useless for protection. Still, compulsion moves him to “investigate.”

Moreover, Bishop’s images of inversion can be placed in conversation with the biomedical discourse of her time that designated the homosexual as an invert. The invert, considered a primitive or atavistic type that displayed characteristics contrary to nature, described one whose gender and sexuality did not conform to a heteronormative imperative. In other words, the male that displayed desire towards another man was regarded as to some degree female, a feminine soul trapped within the “wrong” sexed body. An inverted pin or an automata metaphorically reducible to a doll or hat, the Man inflects and re-writes this reading of perversion. In terms of his diminished scale and proportion, Man is off-kilter, perhaps spiritually stunted. That he “observes” the moon’s properties, rather than sees the moon suggests an intellect divorced from sensory vision.

I am not the first to read the Man-Moth as a queer figure. Lombardi, for example, sees the man-moth as a vampiric figure, suggestive of sexual deviance, lesbianism, and compulsion, while others, such as Susan McCabe, read him as a
source of “exhilaration” for Bishop given his “uncertain sexual denomination” (McCabe 76). However, I read him as both a queer and *queering* figure. The Man-Moth productively problematizes the modern world in which he lives and offers up an alternative psychical and ontological landscape that is defined neither by humanness or binarizing identitarian categories.

It is curious that analyses of the Man-Moth, who is so often assigned to one identity (an artist figure, the alienated urbanite, or a persona for Bishop herself), often neglect to develop readings that address its polysemantic textual status. In my reading, the Man-Moth is queer not only by virtue of its hybrid animal-human ontology, but by his complex creative—simultaneously biological, aesthetic, and linguistic—*evolution*. Through the narrative of the poem, he evolves from a discursive (mis)production, a linguistic variant, to a being that is both ontologically actual and aesthetically charged, describing an evolutionary process. He marks the origin of a species, while also a figure of aesthetic and linguistic possibility. The Man-Moth’s fabulous body in the world that it enchants ultimately exposes the disjuncture between the empirical world and the world of art. Art’s other world is not an idealized, utopic space, but rather the realm of the imagination, in which the terms of relation and being are in continual emergence rather than determined preemptively, a particularly queer state of becoming.

From a linguistic and bioscientific morphological standpoint, the Man-Moth is not merely a typo, but a random mutation, which is the basis of natural selection. Although Bishop narrated the conception of the Man-Moth as a product of an everyday, coincidental experience, it is not insignificant that her poem includes a
notation that explains the origin of the Man-Moth and that he is a variant of an
extinct animal—a mammoth. From an evolutionary perspective, the Man-Moth is
not merely a discursive formation; he inaugurates the origin of a new species,
ontologically and linguistically.

For Darwin, language is analogous to an “organic being” and, like any species,
it is subject to a process of natural selection. His theory of language might serve
to introduce the organic and textual dimensions of the creature’s ontology, as well
as occasion an alternative, evolutionary reading of the poem’s narrative elements:

The formation of different languages and of distinct species,
and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual
process, are curiously parallel…But we can trace the formation
of many words further back than that of species, for we can
perceive how they actually arose from the imitation of various
sounds. We find in distinct languages striking homologies due
to community of descent, and analogies due to a similar process
of formation... Languages, like organic beings, … can be
classed either naturally according to descent, or artificially by
other characters. Dominant languages and dialects spread
widely, and lead to the gradual extinction of other tongues. A
language, like a species, when once extinct, never reappears…
…We see variability in every tongue, and new words are
continually cropping up; but as there is a limit to the powers of
the memory, single words, like whole languages, gradually
become extinct… The survival or preservation of certain
favored words in the struggle for existence is natural selection.
(Darwin, Evolutionary Writings 241-2)

Language arises through a natural, evolutionary process, and it is adaptive,
contingent, and vulnerable, as prone to extinction as any endangered animal.
Language, in this sense, is not merely a cultural acquisition, but it is—following
Darwin and Bishop—organic, alive, evolving, and continuous with animal
communication. Subject to natural selection, the language that is “fit,” that can adapt to its changing cultural and natural environment, is most likely to survive. Natural selection is also the process that leads to variation within a species, and by extrapolation, language. Otherwise, it is subject to extinction. The Man-Moth embodies the variant: the physicalized word, a bio-logos. The creature’s conception at once marks the origin of a species and an etymological origin. Morphologically, it is a mutation on the level of language and being. Natural selection depends on mutation—a spontaneous and random occurrence at the genetic level—to produce different characteristics in an organism. Alongside the existential concerns of the poem, one may also read it as a narrative about the struggle for survival and the individual’s instinct for altruism. I will address this point shortly.

Wearing away at the border between the natural and cultural, the Man-Moth queers the world around it. As an emergent being, he is a creative presence that bears generative ties to feeling and being. A creature that highlights the creative act, he may be read as the locus of creation: the connection between lived experience and textual experience, the concrete and the imaginary, pain and genesis, art and the artist, nature and culture, and the oracular and mundane. The creative energy in the maintenance of these states, which are often read as antithetical, is the source of its queerness. Not limited to the ontological category of the human alone, he stands in opposition to the human qua foundational and

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11 Bishop retrospectively discussed the epiphanic, prophetic charge of the typo when she happened upon it in her reading: “I’ve forgotten what it was that was supposed to be "mammoth." But the misprint seemed meant for me. An oracle spoke from the page of the New York Times, kindly explaining New York City to me, at least for a moment” (Bishop, Poet’s Choice 101).
eminent being and complicates an identity-based logic. His subjectivity resists easy identification and exceeds normative modes of representation, yet to conceptualize it, we must still rely on identifiable schemas (i.e.: Man and Moth). As a chimera, he dramatizes the problem and necessity of identity. Identity may be based on the narratives told to us by others and ourselves, but Darwin’s work introduces an idea of language as organic and thus slippery, evolving, at once of and beyond the terms of our own narratives. Such a notion is queer to the extent that it introduces discontinuity into language and the creation of our own personhood.

Bishop was greatly influenced by Darwin the scientist and the person. In fact, it has become commonplace for Elizabeth Bishop scholars to address Charles Darwin’s influence on the poet, although the interpretations about his impact are diverse. The most comprehensive study of Darwin’s influence on Bishop to date, however, is Zachariah Pickard’s analysis of the aesthetic, intellectual, and empirical methodology that his theories furnished for her poetics. This study is premised on Bishop’s frequently cited 1964 letter to Anne Stevenson (the writer of the first full-length book on Bishop), in which she responds to Stevenson’s reading of the continuum of conscious and unconscious experience in her poetry:

12 According to Marilyn May Lombardi, it was Darwin’s “somatic imagination” that appealed to her (Lombardi 8). Other critics, such as Bonnie Costello and Brett Millier, have traced in her representation of Robinson Crusoe in her poem “Crusoe in England” a scientific mind and naturalist’s eye suggestive of Darwin. (Costello 203; Millier 451) David Kalstone notes that Darwin’s method of perception enabled her to feel more “at ease” and “confident” in her habits of observation (Kalstone 16). Susan McCabe argues that his theory of evolution would have offered an alternative, queer vision of sexuality and reproduction that would have appealed to Bishop and her mentor Marianne Moore more than Freud’s psychosexual developmental theory, which is dependent on humanist principles and a heteronormative drama of oedipal conflict.
Dreams, works of art (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can't believe we are wholly irrational--and I do admire Darwin! But reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic--and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and then one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (Bishop, Prose 414)

The slippages that she describes between unconscious and conscious states, between science and art, and between the imagination and empiricism are suggestive in their relation to an ethics. An appreciation for spontaneity and epiphany underlie her articulation of the connection between “unexpected moments of empathy (?)” and the unnamed but “important thing” that one sees peripherally in everyday life, although her question mark indicates a reluctance to make any absolute claim. She recognizes latent intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic possibility in the capacity to accumulate facts via an empirical process and still move beyond the limits of pure empiricism to a realm of imaginative projection.

What appeals to her is the unsystematic, romantic nature of Darwin’s mode of observation, as well as a methodology that blends conscious and unconscious experience. In the same letter to Stevenson, she writes that a general “lack of observation” is “responsible for so much cruelty, ugliness, dullness, bad manners—and general unhappiness, too” (Bishop, Prose 413). It is possible that Darwin the writer and the person (and not just the scientist) helped Bishop to
articulate a process of discovery based on embodied experience and the
conjunction of a romantic and scientific sensibility. The Man-Moth himself is an
heir of Darwin’s influence:

   Up the façades,
   his shadow dragging like a photographer’s cloth behind him
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.
(Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)
But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although
he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.
(Bishop, The Complete Poems 15-16)

The reversals, inversions, and shifts in scale are also evocative of the
imaginative, dreamy terrain of Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in
Wonderland. Between 1935-6, Bishop would have had Alice in mind after
reading William Empson’s study of Alice as a pastoral figure in Some Versions of
Pastoral (1935). An admirer of Empson’s style and criticism, Bishop
encountered ideas that would have appealed to her as a young poet. In his
study, he argues for a more nuanced definition of pastoral and provides an
exegesis of modern pastoral. Bishop, resistant to proletarian literature, the
favored art of the era, likely would have sympathized with Empson’s critique of
the genre. He posits that it succeeds insofar as it divorces itself from social
realism and propaganda and undertakes a form of “covert pastoral,” which

13 In a letter to Marianne Moore (dated February 4, 1936), Bishop mentions reading Empson’s
Seven Types of Ambiguity and Some Versions of Pastoral, calling some of it “excellent” and
asking for Moore’s opinion about his work, which she had apparently introduced to Bishop
(Bishop One Art 39).
14 In an interview with Edward Lucie Smith, Bishop discusses her admiration for Empson, naming
his work as her favorite alongside Darwin’s (VC Folder 90.1 “No Jokes in Portuguese”).
presents “more subtle, more far-reaching, and... more permanent, ideas” (6, 20). The pastoral process involves “putting the complex into the simple,” in which the simple is aligned with a rich ambiguity, universality, and an artistic ingenuousness that makes no distinction between conscious and unconscious states or intellectual and intuitive forms of perception. Metaphor functions as an intermediary between them (Ibid 113). These ideas are particularly resonant with Bishop’s poetics, as they are expressed in her Darwin Letter. For Empson, Alice in Wonderland is presumably a form of covert pastoral that—as he announces—“stands for something that produces a feeling of solidarity between classes” in the aristocratic systems of Wonderland (Ibid. 18).

In his chapter, “Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain,” Empson opens his discussion of the pastoral process by first establishing a connection between Darwin’s writing and Carroll’s. Noting the contemporaneous publication of their works, he writes, “The first Neanderthal skull was found in 1856. *The Origin of Species* (1859) came out six years before Wonderland, three before its conception, and was very much in the air, a pervading bad smell. It is hard to say how far Dodgson under cover of nonsense was using ideas of which his set disapproved” (Empson 254). Wonderland is suffused with evolutionary ideas about nature and childhood, and he reads such moments as Alice’s transition from reality into her dream world from an evolutionary perspective (in which the pool of tears from which she emerges symbolizes the sea from which life emerges and amniotic fluid). In his reading, Alice in Wonderland (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) reflect Carroll’s metabolization of Darwin’s theories of evolution.
shrewdly disguised by ambiguity and equivocation. The Alice stories serve as an allegorical testing ground for the political and social implications of Darwin’s work.

With Bishop’s own readings of Empson and *Wonderland* in mind, one might approach the narrative of “The Man-Moth” from a new vantage. The Man-Moth may be read as the alter-ego of Alice, a pastoral figure whose superficial status as a naïve or simple character belies the complexity and universality that they embody by virtue of their suggestive ambiguity. Empson writes that “in pastoral you take a limited life and pretend it is the full and normal one," making a humble life bear the status of an everyman figure (Ibid 110). By his definition, pastoral impulses may be read in the industrial setting of the poem, as well as the Man-Moth’s underground existence, his status as a disenfranchised figure who seems to stand for the condition of modern man.

Much like Alice, the Man-Moth experiences the problem of how to read an alienating, defamiliarizing environment. Both are challenged to exert control over their physical and linguistic environment, in which everything is referentially and physically unstable. Seemingly compelled by an empirical impulse, as well as the vagaries and divagations of the imagination, the Man-Moth seeks out the sublime threshold of the moon, even when doing so promises peril. Ultimately, Bishop reconfigures a modality of the Romantic sublime in which the ambitions of the Man-Moth, which are alternately empirical and transcendental, teleological and aesthetic, do not result in the mastery of a transcendent power. Confusing the boundaries between finite life and eternity, the minute and mighty, and well as the
real and the symbolic, the Man-Moth misreads the sublime. For him, the moon is not a rhetorical or aesthetic frontier, but a literal frontier. His fear may be read as both somatic and epistemological anxiety, signaling the beginning of a difficult passage, one that recasts commonly held conceptions of space, transcendence, and representation. For this version of the credulous child, the skywards rabbit hole (the “tube”) opens up a possibility for sublime manifestation that comes at a metaphysical-discursive cost: a passage from linguistic to photographic representation. As a non-metaphorical medium, photographic representation would seem to cause a rupture in the sublime and to impoverish the Man-Moth’s existence and deprive him of his figural status.

Arriving at an ontological-generic impasse, the Man-Moth is bound by a world of post-Darwinian contingencies in which creation is not a mystical skywards frontier, but very much of the earth. In withdrawing transcendence, Bishop insists upon the crisis of everyday existence, which will ultimately hinge upon the primacy of embodied feeling. Her poem marks a significant departure from a Romantic tradition that displaces the material role of the senses and the body in the subject’s movement to transcendence. Instead, her poetics describe a process of working through a body in conflict. In this particular poem, the task for the reader is to suspend her disbelief, as in all fantasy, and to be open to all possibilities: a particularly queer state of being.

Falling from a transcendent reality, the Man-Moth returns to a postlapserian, modern world. In his urban environment, the Man-Moth is exemplary of modern
man; an isolated individual, he is a microcosm for a societal condition. He bears the everyman status of a pastoral figure:

Then he returns
to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,
he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.
The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,
without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.
He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.

Each night he must
be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.
Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie
his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window,
for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,
runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease
he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers. (Bishop, The Complete Poems 15-16)

The Man Moth’s backward travel is a trope highly suggestive of Alice’s railway travel through the first square in Through the Looking Glass. Sitting opposite a man dressed in newspapers that Empson identifies as Disraeli, Alice is told by the Guard aboard the train that she too is “traveling the wrong way” (Carroll 170). In both works, conceits of progress and regress have a particularly modern ring. As Heather Love maintains, “The idea of modernity—with its suggestion of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness. The association of progress and regress is a function not only of the failure of so many of modernity’s key projects but also of the reliance of the
concept of modernity on excluded, denigrated, or superseded others” (Love 5).  

Modernism is indeed intimately—insidiously—tied to the obfuscation of the other. Love’s notion of progress and regress as a trope of modernism is exemplified in the cultural and social backlash that followed Darwin’s theory of origins, which bridged the gap between the civilized subject and the animal and ultimately threatened the pre-eminence of the Western human subject.

Temporally, backwardness connotes the electric field of anxiety around atavism and devolution, the post-Darwinian notion that humans are capable of regression. Such ideas helped to stoke social Darwinism and other forms of cultural exclusion that involved displacing the fear of a linkage between the human and animal subject onto oppressed populations. Modernism has entailed the coding of the racialized, sexual, or gendered other in animality, which has been used to justify the exclusion of the other from the common. Bishop would have been familiar with this tradition, and backwardness is a familiar trope in her work.  

Backwardness is a capacious signifier, suggesting perversion,

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15 In her text Feeling Backward, Love examines a tradition among queer authors of “turning backwards” to the negative affects, the failures, and past histories of those marginalized or overlooked in their time. Not interested in overstepping issues of identity, she recognizes that in looking to the past, one is looking for resemblances and images of oneself (Love 45). Rather, she approaches history as a process that may reveal the discontinuities of identity; ultimately, historical identification may offer a critique of identity. “Feeling backward” is a figuration for the “longing for community across time,” which is “a crucial feature of queer historical experience” (Love 37).

16 See for example her recently published fragment “Young Man in the Park” in Alice Quinn’s edited volume Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box. In this poem, backwardness is anti-imperialistic, past-oriented, and associated with cultural and national outsiderhood, the condition of the immigrant:

…Oh homesick young man
that’s not the way
to conquer the country
…sitting the wrong way round
Oh homesick young man, the steamers are nudging you inland
belatedness, marginality, reversal, deviancy, and an orientation to the past. As a
lesbian, a female poet in a male-dominated field, and an expatriate living in Brazil
for nearly two decades, she would have been sensitized to the experience of
gendered, cultural, and sexual outsiderhood throughout her life.

Backwardness also inflects the realm of the imagination. The Man-Moth’s
regression is closely related to dream work: his “rushing brain” dreams “recurrent
dreams.” Influenced by Darwinian thought, Freud conceptualizes dreamwork as a
connective tissue to our primal condition. Bishop, a reader of Freud, would have
encountered his theory of the origin of dreaming (Lombardi 47). The origins of
dream wishes became patent in regression, and dreaming furnishes a mode of
regression to not only the dreamer’s childhood, but also to the early conditions of
the entire human race, which in turn offers recourse to the animal world.

"Dreaming," writes Freud, "is on the whole an example of regression to the
dreamer's earliest condition, a revival of his childhood . . . Behind this childhood
of the individual we are promised a picture of a phylogenetic childhood -- a
picture of the human race, of which the individual is in fact an abbreviated
recapitulation." (Freud 548)

While it is possible to read the Man-Moth as inaugurating a new species, he
may also be read as a regressive body whose repetitive dreaming reinforces his

you refuse to look into your future
you have put the back of a park bench like a fence a barred gate
between you and the interior
He wants to get back all his feeling
Is in his [bent] the long sun heated muscles of that back

IMMIGRANT

Oh land-sick continent-sick. (Bishop 96-97)
atavism: the repetition of Man’s ancestral origins in a modern body. This dual temporality—the site of the archaic and the new—is an important feature of the Man-Moth’s subjectivity. Bishop’s task of dissolving artificial boundaries between the human and the animal is in many ways coextensive with the realization of the past’s dynamic interface with the present. For her, the atavistic quality of the Man-Moth may have served as a useful metaphor for a deviant modernism. In repurposing degeneration theory, she may have been able to claim backwardness—not only spatial or phenomenological, but also ontological—as a site of resistance to the inexorable march of progress. The Man-Moth’s incarnation as an atavistic creature disturbs the future-oriented temporality of “enlightened, civilized” modernism, and instead inscribes the vestiges of animal, pre-state life within modern subjectivity.

The genealogical inflection of the body is articulated via the suicidal temptations of the Man-Moth, figured in the third rail, “the unbroken draught of poison,” which “he regards… as a disease he has inherited the susceptibility to.” Many critics, including Lombardi, have read the poison as a metaphor for Bishop’s alcoholism, but it also is important to read the poison as technologized, signaling the highly charged electric volt of the third rail. As an extension of the Man-Moth, the subway system, which can be read as a product of technological advance and a symbol of progress, inscribes and naturalizes the technologization of the body. The Man-Moth reads the inscription as pathological. His is a particularly modern inheritance.
The Man-Moth, fleeting, inchoate, and vulnerable, presents a challenge to the reader to integrate him into lived and imaginative experience. A transitive subjectivity, eluding fixed concepts of identity, the creature is prone to transgression and injury within a social domain:

If you catch him, hold up a flashlight to his eye. It’s all dark pupil, an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids one tear, his only possession, like the bee’s sting, slips. Slyly he palms it, and if you’re not paying attention he’ll swallow it. However, if you watch, he’ll hand it over, cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink. (Bishop, The Collected Poems 15-16)

In this stanza, the reader—implicated in the fabric of the poem—seems to graze a forbidden knowledge: the alterity of the other. On the level of ars poetica, the “you,” signifying the reader, performs a transgression of the body, the animal-other, and art itself. Through the course of the poem, the Man-Moth becomes a credible entity, no longer an aberration, but a narratable, aesthetically significant being. The reader’s empirical impulse to perceive the creature’s interior recesses suggests a reductive misreading of the creature’s material and metaphorical significations, which exceed its corporeal objectness. Like Alice in the chapter “Looking-Glass Insect” from Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass who is examined by a guard through a telescope, a microscope, and an opera glass while traveling the “wrong way” aboard the rail, the Man-Moth is subject to the other’s penetrative gaze.¹⁷ Both Alice and the Man-Moth, running counter to the telos of

¹⁷ In Looking Glass, Carroll writes, “All this time the Guard was looking at her, first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera-glass. At last he said, ”You're traveling the wrong way,” and shut up the window and went away” (Carroll 170).
industrial progress, are curiosities in their world, reducible to the spectatorial economy of the specimen. In Bishop’s version of the modern allegory, looking and wounding are one.

In “The Man-Moth,” the prying reader’s gaze results in a diminishment of the creature’s life force. The Man-Moth’s eye, an “entire night itself,” would seem to be impregnable and thus inviolable, yet it is possible to read it as a metaphorical doubling of the moon that he earlier tries to penetrate. Mystically and metaphysically charged, the Man-Moth seems to augur the imminent presence of the transcendent, a liminal site of preliminary wonder. However, objectified by the flashlight, he is reduced to pure corporeality, which involves an aesthetic and ontological cost. From a biological standpoint, the closed eye can be read as a protective, although costly gesture: a sign of fear that limits the creature’s ability to collect information about its observer and renders it more vulnerable. Finding itself under the threat of possible “predation” or at least optical violation, the Man-Moth surrenders its only possession: a furtive tear, which is likened to a “bee’s sting.” By the metaphorical logic of the poem, the tear is also fatal to the Man-Moth. The reader should recall that the bee will lose its stinger after it stings its provoker and, in so doing, kill itself.

A sacrificial exchange, the offering of the tear may be read as horizontal, social reconfiguration of Man Moth’s attempted vertical transcendence. In this version of a boundary crossing, the spotlighting of the eye is a transgression of the domain of the aesthetic sublime. However, one may also read the Man-Moth’s relinquishment of its tear—its only possession—as an altruistic gesture. Although
costly, connection is formed between the spectator and the Man-Moth, and the sharing of the tear may be read as inaugurating the opening of a politics.

Crisis precipitates this moment of connection and grief, and in evolutionary terms, as John Dewey reminds us, crisis bears a critical relationship to growth: “…evolution means continuity of change…. Significant stages in change are found not in access of fixity of attainment but in those crises in which a seeming fixity of habits gives way to a release of capacities that have not previously functioned: in times that is of readjustment and redirection” (Dewey, The Middle Works 197). As a reader of Dewey, Bishop would likely have felt drawn to his philosophy. 18 In Dewey’s account, Darwinian evolution’s temporality, with its emphasis on present growth, is inherently ethical as it challenges a politically inflected temporality of future progress.

III. Grief and the Opening of a Radical Politics

The communal dimensions of grief may be read as a pre-text for politics. As a spontaneous and social gesture, the sharing of grief is also in some sense a sharing of being. The bodily re-circulation of the tear—its production and subsequent consumption— is premised on a cooperative and communicative gesture that is based on feeling, rather than language. The Man-Moth participates in a semiotics that suspends the signified, undoing the logic of semantic signification. Instead, the being communicates according to an affective semiotics that interrupts

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18 Bishop was reading Dewey’s Art as Experience in the early thirties and met him for the first time in 1939 (Samuels 307).
meaning as a stable linguistic signification. It is a queer, equivocal, intuitive transaction, one that imposes a translational problem. What exactly does it signify? As a mode of communication, the exchange of the tear does not tend towards the synthesis of possible meanings, but rather enacts their dispersion and play. It is at once a politically and aesthetically charged moment, as well as the site of both creation and destruction.

In her unpublished masque “The Proper Tear,” Bishop was also concerned with the semiotic import of the tear and its relation as a communicative gesture to the social world. Written roughly around the same time as “The Man-Moth,” “The Proper Tear” involves a “doctor or magician (?)” who has captured a “hero or victim” in order to extract a proper tear, which is costly to the hero. In the preface, she writes, “Because [the doctor] has no instruments which are capable of testing the genuineness of the hero’s emotion ...he is attempting to have produced by him a ‘specimen’ of the proper tear...he [lines up] one after another the nervous citizens of modern life...Finally, he cries...under POVERTY? And the reprisal succeeds all too well” (VC Folder 72.2). Although the hero “cries easily enough,” Bishop is less interested in the spectacle of grief as she is in the original provocation of grief and suffering. Significantly, Bishop ambivalently names a societal condition as the tear’s origin: poverty. The language of spectatorship, modernity, and grief are intimately related to the themes in the final stanza of “The Man-Moth.” The Man-Moth may even be read as a re-incarnation of the “nervous citizen” of “The Proper Tear.” In this version, he is an exemplary figure
of altruistic and social possibility against the alienating forces of an industrial modern world.

In my reading of “The Man-Moth,” the aesthetic significations of the Man-Moth are not displaced by the emergence of political possibility, but rather the two domains are intertwined. Their mutual embeddedness is connected to a socio-political ideal that John Dewey articulates in his aesthetic and political philosophy. Although he is not traditionally mentioned in relation to the Darwin letter and its larger import, Dewey, who also had a strong hold on Bishop’s imagination, is a palpable presence in the context of her ethical-aesthetic theory. As a leading philosopher who defended Leon Trotsky and developed his most radical political theory during the decade, he also exerted a strong pull on Leftist political thinking that would have appealed to Bishop. During the thirties, he also was a regular contributor to the Partisan Review. Moreover, as a close friend of his daughter Jane Dewey, she admired his “democratic” conduct to those on “all social levels,” which suggested to her an affinity to Marianne Moore—high praise indeed given the fact that Moore is traditionally read by critics as the most important influence on Bishop (Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop 27). Both, according to her, had an “instinctive respect for other people” and “loved little things, small plants and weeds and animals” (Ibid). For the poet associated with intensive description about the minute and peculiar and who believed that attentiveness had its own ethical cast, the observation and appreciation of “little things” is in fact a high compliment.
Much of Dewey’s work is premised on a Darwinian worldview, which is manifest not only in his philosophical thought, but also his aesthetic theory. He writes, “To grasp the sources of esthetic experience it is necessary to have recourse to animal life below the human scale. The activities of the fox, the dog, and the thrush may at least stand as reminders and symbols of that unity of experience which we so fractionize when work is labor, and thought withdraws us from the world…” (Dewey, *Art as Experience* 18). Animal life is impregnated with purpose and form, while in the human world there is disequilibrium between means and ends, which is most poignantly played out in the industrial sphere, according to Dewey.

Interpretations of her theory of the imagination are traditionally facilitated by reading her poems alongside the work of Wallace Stevens, who was a significant influence on her poetics, yet I wish to suggest that they may also be placed in conversation with Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy. Stevens too was a reader of Dewey, and any full appreciation of either poet should also take into account the influence of the philosopher’s work on their conception of the social import of the poetic imagination. Both Dewey and Bishop shared an idea of a renewable creative faculty based on the material, physiological, and imaginative underpinnings of perception. Disavowing Kantian disinterestedness, Dewey posits that aesthetic experience hinges on corporeal engagement, entailing the body’s full integration with sensuous material. Any creature may engage the aesthetic,

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19 See for example Dewey’s “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy”, in which he writes, “Doubtless the greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods, new intentions, new problems, is the one effected by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the *Origin of Species*” (19).
which inheres not only in art, but in social relations as well. Such an experience is aesthetic to the extent that the barrier between subject and object dissolves and there is conscious perception and appreciation (Ibid. 249). In his work, the imagination plays a central role in conscious perception, which can be traced in the gap between the past and the immediate experience, a gap that enhances the perception and prevents it from being purely mechanical (Dewey, “The Artistic-Aesthetic in Experience” 995). An aesthetic act arises where the imagination enhances immediate experience; it is an “imaginative vision addressed to imaginative experience…that contrasts with actual conditions” (Ibid. 998-999). The imaginative experience is distinguished from automatic reactions or stock judgments. To subject experience to the intervention of the imagination is to take part in an ethical act since the imagination exposes actual conditions in life that can be limiting. Because the imagination references novel possibilities for being, any aesthetic act is thus infused with its own ethics (so Dewey’s theory goes). His aesthetic philosophy may have suggested to Bishop a way to connect lived experience to aesthetic experience, to understand how imaginative work is temporally charged, ethically significant, and involved in perception, and to bridge Darwinian thought to a poetics.

Like other critics, I read the Darwin Letter as significant in defining Bishop’s ars poetica and mode of optical, intellectual, and creative inquiry. Her poetics, so significantly informed by Darwin and Dewey, are premised upon the observation of the organic processes of life and the ability to recognize a continuity of
experience in the lives of animals and humans, which involves the imaginative and ethical insight that I have sketched out above.

Bishop, whose political affiliations shifted throughout her life, sustained a radical political vision, an ideal of politics that extrapolates from both an aesthetic order and from animal life. As a reader of Dewey, she would have been familiar with the idea of the interconnectedness of these traditionally distinct domains. Affirming human and animal commonality, Dewey posits that one must study the animal world and the organism’s engagement with its environment in order to theorize an aesthetic product or experience. An aesthetic experience is consummated when an organism shares in a relationship with its environment in such a way that it fully integrates its being with its external world and comes to feel and enjoy its own vitality.

Dewey’s aesthetics is co-extensive with his political philosophy. His language of vitalism runs through his political vision. Democracy, he argues, embodies the social organism, as the vote of the individual is representative of the social body. In such a politics, sovereignty resides with the many; the citizen “embodies and realizes within himself the spirit and the will of the whole organism” (Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy” 192). As such, democracy is an ideal or a spirit, not a government that imposes its own autonomous will upon the people in order to follow a certain jural telos. Rather than will, Dewey turns to personality as the universal basis for democracy. Equality is founded on the principle that personality is a universal condition of humanity and democracy is the means by which personality is involved in its own realization (Ibid 204). The social
organism produces a democracy at the moment of its own praxis. He rejects the theory of the social contract as constitutive of social relations and a common will, opposing the argument that a contract precedes the realization of social relations among beings. Instead, his philosophy favors the idea that promissory relations need not be engineered, but that humans are a priori social beings who instinctively form aesthetic and social relations with one another. Similarly, the Man-Moth, susceptible to cross-species relations and entering into a relationship with its environment that is characterized by solicitude and full bodily engagement, can offer a clue about forms of relation that are instinctive and politically charged.

Counter-intuitively, there is quite an anarchist ring to the liberal thinker’s philosophy. Although their names are not often pronounced together, both Dewey and the anarchist Russian Prince Peter Kropotkin were responding to Darwin and finding a continuity of experience in the lives of both animals and humans to imagine an alternative politics. I do not wish to confuse, however, the significant differences between Dewey and Kropotkin. Simply put: Dewey was a democrat; Kropotkin an anarchist. However, in the thirties Dewey developed a radical ideal of a politics premised on an inborn social instinct, which could be developed through education and social arrangements.

Although Peter Kropotkin is not to my knowledge placed in conversation with Elizabeth Bishop, it is not surprising that she was reading his work given his connection to Darwin, his social consciousness, and his wide-ranging social, political, and scientific pursuits, which led to significant contributions in
geography, zoology, literary criticism, and political thought (VC Box 111).

Kropotkin furnished the groundwork for an alternative community by way of “mutual aid,” an evolutionary principle founded on cooperation rather than competition among animals. Reviving aspects of Darwin’s ideas that many of his followers missed, Kropotkin’s mutual aid has close affinities with Darwin’s conceptualization of ”the social instincts of animals”:

...The social instincts, which no doubt were acquired by man, as by the lower animals for the good of the community, will have from the first given him some wish to aid his fellows, and some feeling of sympathy...The first foundation or origin of the moral sense lies in the social instincts, including sympathy; and these instincts no doubt were primarily gained, as in the case of the lower animals, through natural selection. (Darwin, Evolutionary Writings 253, 325)

Bishop would have encountered the concept of mutual aid—if not via Kropotkin directly—through her other readings, including the works of Mumford and Woodcock (VC Box 111). Her close acquaintance with Aldous Huxley, the grandson of T.H. Huxley, would have also introduced her to the concept of mutual aid, which as Kropotkin argued in an ongoing debate with the elder Huxley was the natural state of a species, and thus made the state obsolete. Kropotkin wrote his book Mutual Aid (1902) in response to Huxley’s claim that society was maintained in opposition to our social instincts, which he promulgated in his “The Struggle for Existence in Modern Society” (1888). For his contributions, Kropotkin was a well-recognized figure in British and American politics during Bishop’s early years.
Mutual aid provides the creative and ethical cornerstone for anarchist thought, the natural world providing a model of cooperation and community that might influence political thought and action. As Kropotkin writes, “the Anarchist movement was renewed each time it received an impression from some great practical lesson: it derived its origin from the teachings of life itself” (Kropotkin, *Evolution and Environment* 57). The social instincts and the capacity for altruism, according to both Darwin and Kropotkin, are inborn. In support of the abolition of the state, Kropotkin believed that the basis for community is not passed down from above and does not derive from outside of life. Instead, the prime instinct for cooperation, not competition, is suffused throughout animal and human life. Like Kropotkin and Darwin, Bishop extrapolated from animal life in her own work, and saw it as a possible basis for ethical and aesthetic insight.

Having anarchist leanings and an interest in Dewey’s philosophy, Bishop would have been invested in a vision of life as spontaneous, rather than automated. Instead of a single law that supplants life’s spontaneity with automatism, she would have shared with Dewey and Kropotkin a similar political ideal premised on organic relation. For Dewey, as for Bishop, art is tied to social connection; it as an event that interrupts the isolation of the individual and makes unimpeded association among beings possible. According to him, where art is in jeopardy, so too are politics (Dewey, *Art as Experience* 344). An aesthetic potential abides wherever beings can appreciate the beautiful, which is immanent within and outside of the aesthetic sphere, extending even to relationships (Ibid.). Aesthetic experiences are integrally related to how humans conduct political
action. Bishop’s poetics, grounded in experience, are concerned with the chiasmatic movement by which insights gleaned from aesthetic experience cross into politics. Salutary for a queer posthumanist politics, her poetics, which I have mapped out by examining her own readings and analyzing an exemplary posthumanist poem, felicitously trouble the destructive reifications of categorical boundaries. Animal life, aesthetics, and politics are transversely related in her work; they are not exclusive domains.

Ultimately, Bishop’s representation of the Man-Moth’s subjectivity is described in terms of singularity and hybridity, rather than identity alone. Tellingly, in her journals written between 1934 and 1935, Bishop meditated on the challenge of representing homosexual identity: “...the chief trouble with writing novels, etc., about homosexuals seems to be the difficulty of handling the pronouns: One always runs into things like, He took him in his arms & he…” (Bishop as qtd by Millier 66). It is possible to read this passage as glib, but it also indicates a frustration with the language of identity and the ways in which it constricts articulations of intimacy. Her musings also suggest an ambivalence about normative codes for addressing sameness and difference. With an inherently ethical, creative, and revolutionary potentiality, Darwinian evolution, with its accent on the interdependency of diverse life forms, may have offered Bishop a powerful new mode of queer articulation.
Queer Sociality in ‘Late’ Marianne Moore

“In trying to reveal the clash of elements that we are—the intellectual, the animal; the blunt, the ingenious; the impudent, the imaginative—one dare not be dogmatic. We are a many-foliaged tree against the moon; a wave penetrated by the sun.”

-Marianne Moore, “Archaically New”

I. Moore’s Formidable Paraphernalia

The epigraph above models Marianne Moore’s philosophy of the human, which is constituted in part by its organic connection to the non-human. Elizabeth Bishop shared with Moore a fascination with nonhuman animals, and both writers’ bestiaries include an ethics of care for the marginalized and the oppressed. As practitioners of a queer posthumanist poetics, both Moore and Bishop challenge the discursive constructs that do injury to the other in the name of stabilizing the boundary between the human and animal.

However, Moore is not traditionally read as a posthumanist thinker or one whose legendary eclecticism is continuous with her holistic vision of life. These qualities she shared with Bishop, and yet Moore’s holism helped her to develop a non-normative vision of sociality with queer posthumanist and literary elements. Her poetic strategies that combine a measure of both explicitness and concealment are key to understanding the queerness of her brand of sociality.

Concealment (as opposed to repression) and eroticism exist in a tensile relation in her poetics. In a letter addressed to H.D. in 1921, Moore discussed her ambivalence about her first published volume Poems, which H.D., along with her
lover Winifred Ellerman (also known as Bryher), had brought to print without her prior knowledge, although both had intended the surprise to be a friendly gesture. By Moore’s account, her mother Mary Warner Moore, arguably the most important critic of her life, referred to her daughter’s first volume as a “veiled Mohammedan woman” and thus associated her poetics with a masked sexuality and an “othered” female subjectivity (Moore, Selected Letters 172). The notion that her poetics were withholding or prudish, as well as subject to an objectifying gaze, is both problematic and prescient in light of early and event recent criticism about her work.

Indeed, the daunting question of Marianne Moore’s sexuality has generated varied and often discordant interpretations. For some critics, she still retains an asexual cast, while for others she bears a queer, slippery erotics, one for which we lack an appropriate language. Richard Howard acknowledges his own ambivalence in reference to her sexuality in the following passage:

There is a sense in which the history of Modernism is precisely the history of those figures whom we initially read as if they had no erotic charge—like Henry James, like Virginia Woolf, like Santayana—and whom we ultimately, learning to read better, come to find suffused with erotic life. After all, the use of language itself is a manifestation, an expression of eros. And Marianne Moore is not only no exception to this law…she is a thrilling example of a writer charged with erotic energy, sometimes with specifically sexual energy… I am uneasy, of course, in discussing the eroticism or the lack of it in Marianne Moore. I think we all are. As with Dickinson or O’Keefe, I feel that in talking about women artists…we have not yet devised or developed a vocabulary in which we can readily express or understand the erotics of withdrawal or recessiveness or obliquity, or the refusal of the explicit sexual gesture. (10)
The limitations of present vocabularies for addressing lesbian erotics and for slantwise coquetries are dramatized in much Moore scholarship. In recent years, her refusal to be explicit has provoked a diverse range of readings among queer scholars. John Vincent posits that her poems, which he reads as lyrics, rearrange Eliot’s schematics of the lyric structure, in which the figure for lyric climax is ejaculation, positioned at the poem’s close (109). Eliot’s schema has prescribed a traditional lyric structure, yet her lyrics offer multiple sites of pleasure and release that do not abide by Eliot’s virile orgasmics, according to Vincent. Moore’s lyric impulse, by his account, abides in the movement of her poems, which rejects shapeliness and instead plays an “erotic hide and seek” in which she conceals and discloses her presence throughout the body of her poems (93). Alternatively, Benjamin Kahan posits that Moore opts for a brand of celibacy that he conceptualizes as an alternative, non-repressive sexual identity, while noting that other critics have read her as a lesbian or as one “occupying a queer non-identity” (520). However, despite her apparent celibacy, Moore, I would argue, is situated upon what Adrienne Rich defines as a “lesbian continuum that includes forms of primary intensity between and among women” (51). There is room on this continuum for intimacies among women that include woman-identified experience, collaboration against male tyranny, political and practical support, and the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality. Moore can be placed on this continuum for a number of reasons, not least among them are her critique of the institution of heterosexual marriage in her poem “Marriage (1923),” her activism during the suffrage movement, and her enduring friendships with other female
poets. Many of her most important relationships during her life were with women; her mother, Elizabeth Bishop, and Bryher were among her closest companions.

My own study seeks to offer an alternative interpretation of her erotics as residing in the potentiality of a queer sociality that is played out in her associational and assemblage poetics. Queer theory’s deconstructionist impulses have long been invested in desire’s transformative power to reinvent social lives. I read Moore’s queerness as inhering in the social nature of her work, which is performed via the outward-turning gesture of quotation or allusion. Coalescing widely heterogeneous subjects and privileging antithetical structures, she configures profoundly intersectional, intertextual, and cross-historical relationalities among various texts and their subjects: sentient and insentient agents, various species, and the living and the dead. Despite the formal idiosyncrasies and the difficulty of her poems, they are not estranged from the social world or privilege what is often read as a hermetic propensity typical of much modernist literature. Indeed, in recent years, modernist studies have sought to recover texts from the thesis that they are removed from the socio-political world.20

Many—although not all—of her allusions are archived in her corollary notes, which she prefaces in her “Note on Notes.” In it, she writes, “in anything I have written, there have been lines in which the chief interest is borrowed, and I have not yet been able to outgrow this hybrid method of composition, acknowledgements seem only honest” (Moore, Complete Poems 262). Her

practice of “borrowing” the materials of other writers is complex, and her own justification for her poetics is both suggestive and limited in its formulation, especially given the fact that there are occasions when she does not acknowledge her outside sources. While many of her borrowed lines have yet to be attributed to their sources, her quotations serve multiple purposes that are not tied solely to accurate documentation of their original occurrences, as I will address in time. Poesis, for her, has a direct relationship to processes of accretion and the at once communitarian, ironic, and tributary potentialities of pastiche. Moreover, the recursive nature of her notations challenges a reading of the poet as autonomous author and indexes the multitude of voices that comprise her poetics. The idiosyncrasies of her own personality are recorded in her archival sensibility, which is playful, even hilarious, in its enthrallment with elaboration.

Throughout her work, she employs quotation, attributed and unattributed tributes to other writers, intentional anticlimax, deferral, antithetical arrangements, prose-like rhythms, “concealed rhyme and interiorized climax” and “climax [that] preced[es] out of climax, which is the mark of feeling” (Moore, The Complete Prose 399). In her turn to structures and strategies of elocation, an antiquated term that means both a departure from a usual state and an ecstasy, she posits an ecstasy not predicated upon apotheosis, but rather one that comes into florescence via the horizontal dimensions of sociality, its forms of association among peoples, texts, objects, and animals.

Sociality, as a playful form of association with a corresponding erotic form, is enacted on a meta and a local level in Moore’s work, in relationship to content,
form, and the collection as a whole. Her poems are often composed of incongruous subjects and various quotations that are assembled in new contexts to forge surprising relations.\footnote{As Bonnie Costello notes, she shared Henry James’ “instinct to amass,” suggesting an “omnivorous perspicacity” or a tendency to take all in context (\textit{Imaginary Possessions} 250). However, Moore’s and James’ “omnivorous” appetite for diverse subjects should not be confused with a tendency towards rapacity. Freedom, for her, correlated with the power to lay aside what one would otherwise keep (Ibid. 250). James, according to Moore, was the “characteristic American,” whose influence on American letters she championed in her prose. As Costello writes, her wide range of poetic and non-poetic registers and expansive use of quotation bear a democratic thrust, constituting what she reads as the Americanness of Moore’s poetry (Ibid).}

I argue that Moore’s assemblage poetics are implicitly queer in their capacity to transverse traditional categories of identity, and so refuse representational practices that would inscribe a monolithic subject, meaning, or heteronormative approach to her work. Her poetics are grounded in precepts of antithesis, which preserves relations among quiddities, rather than synthesis. A complex textual preoccupation with relatedness has a correspondent social dimension. Queer sociality, as theorists Joshua Weiner and Damon Young discuss, involves two critical trajectories, both of which play a role in Moore’s poetics. Weiner and Young trace the history of queer theory through its two alternating genealogical impulses: a negativity that pulls away from sociality (as in the antisocial thesis first presaged in Guy Hocquenghem’s \textit{Homosexual Desire} and developed by such theorists as Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman) and a spirit of “inventive” sociality that is constituted by queerness itself (Weiner and Young 224). On the one hand, to be queer is to rupture the social-symbolic, while on the other hand, sexuality also “forges sociabilities in this space of rupture” (Ibid 226). Moore’s sociality, queerly constituted by the same double movement, calls into question the “social” at the moment of its own praxis. Namely, there is an antisocial thrust, a negation
of normative social bonds (or in Judith Butler’s words, a “sociality that is not always sociable”) and the deployment of semi-private allusions that can be traced in her poetics, even while her later work is poised to offer itself to a popular audience (Butler, “Remarks on Queer Bonds” 382). The formulation of queer sociality furnished by Weiner and Young can be placed in conversation with Moore’s poetics to conceptualize her brand of eros, which must exclude in order to be intimate, and which rewrites authorship by embracing polyvocality.

The locus of my critical attention will be her last collection of poetry, *Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel, and Other Topics*, which has received scant critical attention. Published in 1966, *Tell Me, Tell Me* was released to the public during a period when Moore sought to cultivate a public persona and achieved a cultural currency among fans who championed her personality and poetics (Molesworth 420). The poet who had once been celebrated by Pound for her erudition and hermeticism began in her final decades to produce poems that had great appeal for popular audiences, including occasional poems, homages to baseball players, and poems about popular causes.

It would be a mistake, however, to read her later work as less critically interesting, accomplished, or complex than her earlier work. Elizabeth Gregory notes that Moore began publishing her poems in “middlebrow venues” during her later years, such as the *New York Herald Tribune* (Gregory 213). However, Gregory also notes that she was profiled in the *New Yorker*, which by 1957 was nostalgic for the “intellectual exuberance” of the *Dial*, for which Moore was a
formal editor (Gregory 218). Ultimately, she posits that unlike most modernist middlebrow poets, Moore is a “mixed-brow” poet who mixed high and low art in such a way as to engage readers “in the work of thinking through their own assumptions about how the high/low divide operates” (Gregory 220). In a similar vein, I argue that her final collection marked her emergence into a popular realm, yet many of her allusions are targeted for a limited readership. Queer poetry is generally associated with textual difficulty to the extent that it suspends meanings and interpretative practices forged by a heterosexist culture. Moore’s trademark strategies of obliquity and indirection, occurring at the level of allusion and affecting in material ways the audience’s ability to penetrate meaning are similarly queer.

To understand allusion as sociality’s literary proxy and to conceptualize Moore’s investment in the social world, one must consider the time in which she was writing. Events in the sixties, from the Civil Rights Movement to the Women’s Movement to the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, encouraged new ways of thinking about the person and the political, and brought to fruition a movement predicated on individual expression as a mode of political agency. Following Sara Evans’ formulation of a personal politics, the Women’s Movement was strengthened by the assertion of the personal voice as a mode of social and political intervention. The idea of the person as self-authorizing and capable of representing a collective consciousness had a strong hold in the literary movements of the decade (particularly among the Beats).

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22 Opposed to mass entertainment and lowbrow venues, the New Yorker championed Moore as representative of the journal’s intellectual mission and demonstrative of its highbrow status, comparable to the mission of the Dial.
Writing at a time when the New American poetry was gaining popularity, Moore may have been more keenly committed to preserving her own modernism in the face of poetic and activist movements that were re-imagining the social role of the poet. This counterculture movement reacted against the conservatism of the poetry endorsed by New Criticism. The New American poetry, “allied to modern jazz and expressionist painting,” was introduced as a new poetic movement to the American public with the publication of Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (Allen as qtd by Moore *The Complete Prose* 535). Moore took interest in the movement, yet her review of the anthology reveals her ambivalence about its practitioners, particularly in their handling of form.23 In addition to her contention against the formal principles of the movement, she was troubled by the content of many of the poems, which she refers to as “exhibitionist” and “invaded by the diction of drug-vendors and victims, sex addicts, and civic parasites” (Ibid 539). She writes that such content is “poetically inoperative” (Ibid). Her letters suggest a hesitation about the younger generation of postwar poets too, and she writes that the older generation of poets must have “compassion” on their “malaise” (Moore, *Selected Letters* 502). It is important to note that the movement reacted against the impersonal poetics formulated by T.S. Eliot and carried on by the New Criticism, and opted instead to test the authority of the personal poetic voice so as to establish agency and intervene within the social and political world. Moreover, it paved the way

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23 Noting that many of the poets of the collection were influenced by Charles Olson’s poetics, Moore criticizes his conceptualization of projective verse as an improvement over “inherited” form, arguing that formal verse can in fact be projective and suggesting that projective verse is merely derivative (Moore, *The Complete Prose* 536).
for gay poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan to claim their sexuality much more explicitly in their writing than Moore ever did. Although she wrote that she had “a burning desire to be explicit” (which is also the title of her short essay published in 1966), Moore’s explicitness is a term of quality or degree, in tension always with the exigencies of restraint in matters of intense emotion. Why must passion be associated with naked self-disclosure? Passion, she seems to suggest, may be conceived as pressurized and oblique, articulated in a slantwise fashion. Passion—indeed arousal—seems inconceivable without tension, without some tincture of its opposite (such as restraint or reserve).

She also would not have been satisfied with the burgeoning influence of the Confessional movement, emerging in the late fifties and sixties with the publication of works by Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and their counterparts. These poets made personal experience, including their thoughts, feelings, and past traumas the material of their work in an era marked by emotional repression. Little distance separated speaker from poet. By “confessing,” in the sense of making public their personal lives, confessional poets challenged a cultural climate that valued decorum over self-disclosure.

In contrast, Moore, in her early career, approved of T.S. Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry (Molesworth 74), in which the poet “surrenders” herself and enacts a “continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” in the service of the poem (Eliot 40). However, while a disciple of Eliot, Moore, according to her literary biographer Charles Molesworth, propounded in her early

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24 In her essay, Moore cites Pound as an authority on the matter: “Ezra Pound indicates passion as at the root of the matter: no ’addled mosses dank”: “say nothing—nothing—that you couldn’t in some circumstances, under stress of emotion, actually say” (Moore, The Complete Prose 607).
essay “The Accented Syllable” (1916) and her later “Idiosyncrasy and Technique” (1956) a notion of art as “impersonally pursued, yet at the same time it is the fullest expression of one’s personality” (Molesworth 74). In her essay “Idiosyncrasy and Technique,” she posits that the idiosyncrasies of the poet can never be evacuated fully from the work. She quotes F.O. Matthiessen approvingly: “style means that the author has fused his material and his technique with the distinctive quality of his personality” (Moore, Complete Prose 514).

Moore offers a queered version of personhood in her own poetics, in which rhythm, image, and logic transcribe the personality of the poet rather than subjective disclosure. In her mind, rhythm and personhood are inextricably linked. “Rhythm is the person,” she writes (Moore, Selected Letters 538). Moreover, she is at her most personable when she withdraws the first person voice and instead reveals her own personality through the gridwork of others’ voices, her discursive engagement and ordering of these voices framing the idiosyncracies of her own personality. As Lyn Hejinian reminds us, personality, which develops through relationships, is not a concept bound to the self alone; it is relational, rather than essential (Hejinian 202). I would also suggest that the recognition of personality as a relational dynamic helps to queer a conceptualization of identity as fixed or singular. Rather than referring to the narrow scope of an independent “I,” queer subjecthood is engaged in the social processes by which an “I” is constituted over time.

Disposed to digression and complex associations, Moore’s personality takes shape while under the rhetorical pressure of axioms. Performing the frenetic
activities of the imagination, pointing to its velocity and vitalism, she draws upon a self-reflexive mode given to conversational discourse, which becomes a salubrious challenge to her penchant for aphorism. Through rhythm and the extensive use of quotation, her personality emerges, describing a fastidiousness in concert with a great humility, a penchant for the peculiar and overlooked, and an exaltation in play with a careful precision. Ultimately, she reveals the processes of metaphorical cognition. Bonnie Costello refers to Moore as a “kleptomaniac of the mind,” a figuration that begins to tap into the extensive reservoir of voices and materials that ground Moore’s project (Costello, Imaginary Possessions 5).

Relation is the keynote of the final collection. Where there are sustained tropes of displacement and doubt (perhaps in part about the future of poetry) in her collection, there is also a sustained tributary spirit and a dialogic sensibility among texts within the collection and without. For example, her late poem “The Mind, Intractable Thing” glosses and revises her early poem, “The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing.” Indeed, in an early review of her collection entitled “A Crystal for the Metaphysical” (1966), Muriel Rukeyser recognizes the principle of antithesis or, more specifically, development through opposition that informs Moore’s poetics. She posits that “objects appear to face each other; forms that had seemed crystals, twin crystals, take on a further growth” (Rukeyser 52). Poems in this collection correspond with one another, as well as double back and expand upon each other on an architectonic level. They are intimately related, made to signify through coupling with other poems, rather than advancing a meaning confined to the traditional autonomy of a single poem. Given its principles for
organization and presentation, the collection enacts its preoccupation with sociality and relatedness on a structural level.

Her final collection may be read as engaged in the process of preserving the ethos of past and contemporary modernists with whom she associated, such as Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop, all of whom are among the progenitors of a lyric modernism. Throughout the collection, she alludes to, celebrates, or stylizes their work, yet she does not identify them in her corollary notes. This is certainly a peculiar practice for an exacting writer and editor who is otherwise hyper-conscious of issues of attribution and notation, including—as mentioned previously—a “Note on Notes” to accompany her collected works. However, as the epigraph of her complete poems announces, “Omissions are not accidents.” The intentional omission of attributive notes suggests that she wished her allusions to be identified without the ancillary support of notes.

In a conventional sense, allusion is often an economical signpost to a canon shared by author and reader. In Moore’s case, however, allusion is fastened to an initiatory hermeneutics and the fashioning of a modernist literary community that occurs in the reading of her poems themselves. It is possible to read her idiosyncratic decisions about what attributions she omitted in her notations as a mode of refusal, as though archiving her references would ultimately detract from the intimacy of her in-group relations. As such, her sociality is not an a priori condition, but a performative process with related contingencies.

Ultimately, she develops a communal ethos, yet one that is only fully accessible to those readers intimately familiar with the work of her
contemporaries and near-contemporaries. Making unattributed allusions to a select group of poets, her sociality is often oblique and understated. The allusions are not recondite in the way of Pound or Eliot, but they do presuppose an intimate knowledge of the modernists I have mentioned.

In a passage seemingly self-reflexive, Moore applauds Henry James’ “formidable paraphernalia,” quoting his statement that “it is in the waste of time, of passion, of curiosity, of contact—that true initiation resides” (James as qtd by Moore, Complete Prose 319). For her, initiation does not hinge on the leveraging of power, but rather it resides in passion, contact, and curiosity. A celebration of her world’s pluralistic possibilities, the quotations are founded on an ascetic principle, as the speaker restrains the personal voice in the service of the relational precepts of quotation. Disavowing the authority of a univocal speaker, she instead seeks out the potentialities of a queer polyvocality. Identity and ego are transcended in a poetics that withholds the “I” so as to carve out a space for the preservation of a particular poetic coterie. Indeed, the poem that also serves as the title of the collection asks the question:

Tell Me, Tell Me
where might there be a refuge for me
from egocentricity
and its propensity to bisect,
mi-state, misunderstand
and obliterate continuity? (Moore, Complete Poems 231)

Through pastiche, her final collection proposes a response to the question of egocentricity by providing a vision of organic relation among materials, people, objects, and animals. That relation is not confined to a human realm in her poetics is significant: the human exists only in a larger context in Moore’s poetics.
She establishes a cross-temporal, cross-species community charged by passion and accessed through initiation into a queer logic that forges relations among traditional binaries while preserving their quiddity. The appeal of James’ “formidable paraphernalia,” which mirrors her own, is connected to its erotic claims (ie: passion, contact, and curiosity).

II. The Pleasures of Queer Reading/ The Hazards of Reading Queerness

The queer transversals across identitarian categories that appear in Tell Me, Tell Me are prefigured in such earlier poems as “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle,” a poem from her collection What Are Years (1941). This same text provides a cautionary rubric for the essentializing impulses involved in queer crossings. Destabilizing binary systems, the poem embraces hybridity and may be read as anticipating a readerly orientation that would short-circuit a queer interpretation.

A reductive reading of the poem would extract metonyms from the poem as signifiers of queerness, subjecting the poem’s semantic import to the metonymic dispersal that Lee Edelman warns against in Homographesis. Homographesis is a double-valenced neologism introduced by Edelman to describe both a disciplinary practice against homosexuals and a form of resistance against the codification of identity. He theorizes the signifying practice whereby a conservative order ascribes legible signs of homosexuality to the queer body. He identifies a cultural “tropolological imperative” that would conceptualize sexuality metonymically or metaphorically and interpret it as constitutive of identity (Edelman 8). As he
posits, the queer body has historically been read under the classificatory logic of metaphor, which in turn has helped to naturalize heterosexuality and heterosexism and to ossify homosexuality as a rigid, stable category of identity. Moreover, Edelman writes, “As soon as homosexuality is localized, and consequently can be read within a social landscape, it becomes subject to a metonymic dispersal that allows it to be read into almost anything” (6). The spectator that misreads the body is an ideological presence that misinterprets the metonymic as the metaphorical, ultimately misconstruing the incidental for the essential. In addition to referring to the codification of identity, with its oppressive designs, homographesis also connotes the opposition to such signification, involving the “de-scribing” of identity (Ibid 10).

Moore’s poem anticipates the reader who has a spectacular orientation towards her work and who might subject her body to an ideological (mis)reading that involves a slippage between textuality and the homosexual body. As Edelman posits, the spectator wields the greatest power, able to commodify and violate the queer body as it becomes the receptacle of the spectator’s desire. She pre-empts this potential misreading and instead affirms the activities of ontological and textual queer-crossing, occurring at the level of allusion.

While based literally on a decorative hatbox, the poem draws from many different sources and subjects. In her second stanza, she embraces the rich potentialities of misprision and references the bulbul, proposing that it is the “true nightingale” of Persia, providing an alternative version of the bird made famous
in an English Romantic tradition. The poem continues to track the risks and pleasures of identity confusion:

…The cardinal –
bird that is usually a
pair, looks somewhat odd, like
“the ambassadorial
Inverness
worn by one who dresses
in New York but dreams of
London” …
An aspect may deceive; as the
elephant’s columbine-tubed trunk
held waveringly out—
an at will heavy thing—is delicate.
Art is unfortunate.

One may be a blameless
bachelor, and it is but a step
to Congreve. A Rosalindless
redbird comes where people are, knowing they
have not made a point of
being where he is—this bird
which says not sings, “without
loneliness I should be more
lonely, so I keep it”—half in
Japanese. (Moore, Complete Poems 103)

In the service of Moore’s metonymic, associative logic, queer crossings occur at the level of language (“half in Japanese”), dress (a kind of cross-dressing occurs in the cardinal that resembles an inverness), genre (allusions to drama abound, including the named Congreve and unnamed Shakespeare), and species (“Rosalindless redbird”). At the site of this queer sociality, instances of identity interchange become patent. Her poetics are suggestive of Eve Sedgwick’s account of a “figure of a person who can be ‘halfway between’ male and female”
in an event that occasions the “pleasure of [gender] amalgamation” (Sedgwick *Between Men* 47, 38). Images of gender play are not uncommon in Moore’s work. Subjectivity is articulated at the point of queer desire, which occurs between species, as in the “Rosalindless rebird who comes where people are.” The bird articulates its loneliness at the borderland where languages are coupled—commingled—as though language itself becomes as amalgamated as identity, and therefore both are deconstructed. In this composite linguistic zone, the bird expresses itself by proxy of another’s words, as it quotes Yone Nuguchi, a gay Japanese poet. Moore would have come across his work in Eunice Titjen’s article in *Poetry* in 1920, and she came to admire his writing, featuring it in *The Dial* repeatedly (“Moore: Poetry”). Noguchi was the first Japanese writer to publish poetry in English (Ibid).

These transversals of identity and language are depicted as transgressive. A form of anxiety overlays the anticipated reception of a text or—by extension—a queer body as it is normatively read (which Edelman writes against). Moore alludes to Congreve’s short-lived career, and the fact that homosexuality is an implicit concern in his play (“One may be a blameless/ bachelor, and it is a step/ to Congreve”). His Restoration plays, such as *The Old Bachelor* (1693), were published during an age when the public’s interest in the sexual comedy of

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25 In “The Jerboa,” for example, Moore embraces gender play and cross-dressing:

...Princes
clad in queen’s dresses
calla or petunia
white that trembled at the edge, and queens in a
king’s undershirt of fine-twilled thread like silk-worm gut, as been man and milk-//
maid, kept divine cows
and bees. (Moore, *The Complete Poems* 78-85)
manners was in decline, a trend that quickly ended his career. Her poem may be read as concerned with the contingencies and conditions of relationality and the precarious position of the artist who addresses homoeroticism. Concerned with a mode of relation that enters into the fabric of identity, discourse, and genre, “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” points both outwards, past self-containment, and inwards, as though such desire is privatizing, making the bird cling to its loneliness. The redbird forges a relation with its loneliness so as to avoid being more lonely and thus models the double trajectory of queer sociality as theorized by Weiner and Young, which disrupts the social symbolic and forms new social bonds within a space of rupture. Its speech, which marries Japanese and English together, is at once lyrical and prosaic, yet as speech, it does not signal the traditional lyric mode of the poet. Moore overthrows a Keatsian tradition in which the poet positions herself as privileged listener of the nightingale, her vehicle for transcendence. The hybrid utterance of the “Rosalindless redbird,” by contrast, is ex-centric, somber, and wistful, seeming to long for a new linguistic mode by which it may articulate subjectivity and desire.

It is possible to read the poem as pushing beyond a reductive reading and developing a queer ethos that rejects categorical identity altogether. Performing rhetorical moves that at once bridge and make legible the boundaries between art and life, “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” pivots between aesthetic and empirical observations, while drawing a space of difference between the two: “One may be a blameless/ bachelor, and it is but a step/ to Congreve.” The poem cautions against a universalizing reading that would conflate the body with the text and
reduce both to a single representation. Instead, the poem unveils a praxis of non-dualistic “crossing” and a poesis grounded in a desire for sociality: the redbird is without his Rosalind (referencing a figure that would have engaged in transgender crossing for the theatrical performance) and the cardinal that is usually paired longs for London society.

III. Moore as Auditor to Crane and Stevens

The same sort of dialogic relationality between audience and the redbird figured in “Smooth Gnarled Cape Myrtle” has a corresponding logic in Tell Me. Tell Me. It is possible to read Moore’s collection as dialogic both formally and expressively, as the poet positions herself as receptive listener to the legacies of Crane, Bishop, and Stevens. This collection, however, is pressured by a radically changing literary climate and by the exigencies of time itself.

It is important to note that Moore’s health began to deteriorate in the sixties while she was writing Tell Me, Tell Me (Molesworth 421). Written towards the end of a career and a life, the collection is a retrospective text characterized by both a tributary spirit and a tincture of doubt about her own legacy and the future business of poetry. With the newfound emphasis on the personal, self-authorizing voice of the poet, many Beat and Confessional poets offered new directions for poetry. Alternatively, Moore’s final collection opts for a different kind of personal poetic voice. Its polyvocal, heteroglossic quality offers possibilities for a queer sociality, even while tropes of dispossession and displacement abound. A
sense of fallibility seems to occur at the moment when—to borrow a phrase from “The Old Amusement Park: Before It Became La Guardia Airport,” a poem collected in Tell Me, Tell Me—she is positioned at “the exhilarating peak/ when the triumph is reflective/and confusion, retroactive” (Moore, Complete Poems 211).

The volume’s retrospective temporality is reinforced by, as Kahan argues, a “reverse chronology” that is the ordering principle for the poems (Kahan 524). Arranged in a reverse order according to original publication dates, the collection opens with “Granite and Steel,” published in 1966, and closes with “Sun,” published in 1957. Extrapolating from Moore’s notes on the retrospective arrangement of her poems and her line, a “told-backward biography,” Kahan posits that the collection follows a backwards trajectory and encourages a backwards reading strategy, in which poems derive greater sense from the poems that follow them (Ibid).

Backwardness and displacement carve open a space for a consideration of Moore’s handling of community across the collection’s retrospective temporalities. Heather Love, in her text Feeling Backward, examines a tradition among queer authors of “turning backwards” to the negative affects, the failures, and past histories of those marginalized or overlooked in their time. Love is not interested in “overcoming” identity, recognizing that in looking to the past, one is looking for resemblances and images of oneself (Love 45). Rather, she approaches history as a process that may reveal the discontinuities of identity; historical identification may offer a critique of identity. “Feeling backward” is a
figuration for the “longing for community across time,” which is “a crucial feature of queer historical experience” (37).

Allusion, for Moore, is tied to both the past and future; it involves the synchronous enactment of antipodal temporalities, a process of looking forward while also looking backwards. This tension marks the collection as invested in both the past- and future-oriented processes of establishing a tradition among a select group of poets, while it also engages a poetic praxis that has an initiatory function for readers who share a similar sensibility. The notes, allusions, and non-attributed culling of other sources serve both an aesthetic and ethical function: an admission that all must be taken in context in her poetics.

For Moore, the retrospective gaze is trained upon the central founders of a lyric modernism, including Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens, as well as second-generation modernists such as Elizabeth Bishop. Moore’s manner of tribute to these lyric poets occurs through allusion, but by turning to strategies of invocation and apostrophe as well, she attempts to call upon subjectivities in place of her own. These strategies suggest a mode of displacement or dispossession, which is a recurring trope in this collection. The subjects of her poems include refugees, an old amusement park “before it became LaGuardia Airport,” and Carnegie Hall, which is threatened by “the cannibal of real estate” (Moore, Complete Poems 229). Dispossession, with its multiplicity of drives and affects, precipitates both the anxieties of abandoning ownership and the pleasures of disavowing self-possession. In Tell Me, Tell Me, dispossession seems to encompass states of both pleasure and anxiety, just as Moore’s poetics involve the evacuation of ego.
Quotation might be read as her mode of refuge from egocentricity. Indeed, her quotations may be read as humble gestures, as Costello argues, as well as an accommodating practice that makes room for a plurality of voices (Costello, *Imaginary Possessions* 184).

As Judith Butler argues, sexuality and gender are themselves modes of dispossession, of being purely in a state of relation. She writes, “As a mode of relation, neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but rather is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being for another by virtue of another” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 24). Dispossession may be imagined as a charged space that is destabilizing, fracturing, yet also potentially exultant. Furthermore, it is something to be learned through a praxis of total engagement with the voices and language of others. This praxis becomes more important to Moore than the issue of attribution, which would ascribe meaning to another rather than accentuate the interplay among subjectivities. Similarly, eros and sociality necessitate a willingness to make oneself susceptible to the resubjectifying processes of being in pure relation “for another by virtue of another.” It requires the relinquishment of identity and a receptivity to feeling queerly, strangely, and as if anew.

Hart Crane is arguably one of the greatest exemplars of the queer modern lyric. The twentieth century poetic imagination, like his own, often found in the lyric—with its accent on affective experience as a source of meaning-making—an enabling form to engage with the social world. Moore’s collection responds directly to Crane in her opening poem. Interlocutor to *The Bridge* (1930), *Tell Me, Tell Me* refashions a “romantic passageway,” opening where Crane’s poem
ends. The epic poem sought to synthesize the myth and history of America and to advance a more optimistic vision of American society than T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” In an interview, Moore referred to The Bridge as a “grand theme,” but like many of its critics, she also cited it as a poem that could have been improved (Moore, Women Writers at Work 26). One wonders to what extent she intended to revise Crane’s poem (as she had done to his poem “The Wine Menagerie,” which she had re-written before publishing it in The Dial to his later consternation). However, myth is by its very nature a social resource, and The Bridge in many ways invites poetic response and anticipates future realization in the tradition of Walt Whitman’s poetics.

Her opening poem, “Granite and Steel” (1966), is derived from Crane’s “Atlantis,” the last poem in his epic, The Bridge: “Up the index of night, granite and steel—/ Transparent meshes—fleckless the gleaming staves— … “(my italics) (Crane 5-6). However, she does not attribute the line to him in her corollary notes. His sensibility, however, permeates the poem, as she stylizes and places in quotes several Crane-like lines that do not faithfully replicate any of the passages in The Bridge, yet conjures their ecstatic mode: " ‘O path amid the stars /crossed by the seagull's wing!,’” “‘O catenary curve’," and "O radiance that doth inherit me!" (Moore, Complete Poems 205). The collection opens with the same mythic-historical register as Crane’s epic poem, yet it is also firmly rooted in the empirical world. Tell Me, Tell Me is based in the city of New York, yet it also reaches beyond the local to a more international scope, celebrating not only the city’s status as an emblem of the nation, but also an ideal of international
cooperation that originates with a form of sociality at home.

In “Granite and Steel,” pastiche may serve an elegiac function. The tribute to Crane and his legacy of an ecstatic lyricism functions as a counterweight to the poem’s celebration of the actual. A multipronged monument to John A. Roebling (the architect of the Brooklyn Bridge), to human ingenuity and international cooperation, and to Hart Crane, her poem’s final stanza reads:

Untried expedient, untried; then tried;
Way out; way in; romantic passageway
First seen by the eye of the mind,
Then by the eye. O steel! O stone!
Climactic ornament, a double rainbow,
As if inverted by French perspicacity,
John Roebling’s monument,
German tenacity’s also;
Composite span—an actuality. (Ibid).

The stanza opens with the language of hypnosis, which is reminiscent of Moore’s allusion to Kenneth Burke in her essay “Feeling and Precision”: “the hypnotist has a way in and a way out” (Moore, Complete Prose 399). In her reading, the poet functions as a kind of hypnotist in her handling of a poem’s sonance, in particular the sonic climax, which is not merely a device, but “a mark of strong feeling” (Ibid). Sonic feeling is at the root of Moore’s queer logic, as she mimics the hypnotist’s spell while simultaneously invoking Crane’s apostrophizing voice and shifting to the subjunctive mood. Where the reader is made susceptible to suggestion, in the manner of the subject of hypnosis (or poetry), and where disparate modes of discourse are made contiguous to one another, there is the possibility of feeling afresh, even feeling strongly, romantically, queerly. One

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26 The literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke, associated with the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, was a significant influence on Moore.
might even feel for the insentient and adamantine structures of steel and stone. The reader thus engages in the intersubjective zone of feeling with the poet and—as Eric Keenaghan suggests—submits to the initiatory processes of re-subjectification alongside her (interview). Moreover, feeling in this poem becomes consonant with a sensibility for a particular kind of workmanship, which is at once Roebling’s, Crane’s, and Moore’s. They share an affinity for the conjunction of opposite forces: the romantic and the mundane, the sublime and the pedestrian.

As a memorial to Crane, the poem celebrates and participates in ecstatic utterance. As Judith Butler points out, ecstasy “means, literally, to be outside oneself, and thus can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be beyond oneself with rage or grief” (Butler, Precarious Life 24). As mentioned earlier, the definitions of elocation also capture the outside-of-one self quality of ecstasy. The occasion of being outside oneself is to be in a state of pure relationality; ecstasy liberates the self from identity and, much like being under a state of hypnosis, frees the mind from self-consciousness. This memorial—tributary, ecstatic, and invested in forms of being that are ex-centric to identity—participates in a queer logic that blurs the traditional categories of selfhood, author, and genre. Furthermore, it is engaged in articulating desire for an apostrophized other, which need not necessarily be human or circumscribed by sex or gender. What affords passion is the contiguous placement of Crane’s ecstatic mode, his use of apostrophe, and logic of metaphor
alongside a tributary narration of the bridge’s conception. 27

The reprisal of his voice and the invocation of his poetics in Moore’s poem introduces a complication of composition. As Muriel Rukeyser points out in her review of Tell Me, Tell Me, Moore’s method of composition is at once deeply personal and excentric to her own personhood. There is indeed a rewriting of the person and——by extension—the author at the heart of Moore’s project. In a highly insightful reading of Moore’s work, Rukeyser writes, “The poet who believes in the materials of the world—written materials—in such a way that his desire to include drives him to use them selectively, but in their [sic] own voice, is at once faced with questions. How to claim, to make the material one’s own, and still leave it to walk among its origins?” (Rukeyser 53). Moore’s meditations are grounded in questions of literature and sociality: how does one navigate “desire” in such a way that it does not slip into a form of rapacity, which results in the mastery of the other? How does one speak through the voice of the other, while preserving a space of distinction?

One possible reason for Moore’s less-than-exacting documentation (nowhere does she directly cite Crane or mention his name in her “Notes”) may have been

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27 Ultimately, Moore reprises Crane’s invocatory voice, but not verbatim. Following “Granite and Steel” in the collection is “In Lieu of the Lyre,” the poem that again refers to Brooklyn Bridge and Roebling’s cable, as if expanding upon or serving as a companion piece to “Granite and Steel.” “In Lieu of the Lyre” was occasioned by Moore’s address at Harvard in 1969 when the institution gave her an honorary degree. She notes in the poem that she once would have been barred from Harvard because of her gender and veils her critique of the masculinist tradition of the institution in a posture of self-deprecation. Interestingly, the poem also addresses issues of quotation and mis-attribution. Citing her male hosts, she names a Professor Levin who she writes, “was proffered redress/ by the Lowell House Press—/ Vermont Stinehour Press, rather. (No careless statements/ to Kirkland House; least of all inexactness in quoting a fact.)” (Moore, Collected Poems 206). She draws attention to the speaker’s lack of authority and, by extension, performs the self-qualifying maneuvers that suggest a self-consciousness in play at the moment of the poem’s own praxis. It is possible to read her mis-attribution as an admission that her poetics privilege the pleasures of imaginative revision over principles of classification.
born of her desire to distinguish her work from the troubling elitism of Ezra Pound’s poetics. Although Pound exerted an influence upon her writing and was a friend of hers, she was vocal about her dislike of his politics. In one letter written around 1955, she writes, “EZRA, when a philosopher’s speech is unsavory, indeed foul, of what use has philosophy been to him. This needs no date—no question mark. It is for all time” (Moore, Selected Letters 521). While Pound was concerned that he could “not make it cohere,” she may have opted for some degree of laxity in her documentary practices to distance herself from Pound’s authoritarianism (Keenaghan interview).

The same (seemingly intentional) omission of the poet’s name occurs in the poem that I read as a tribute to Wallace Stevens. The question of the role of imagination in perception is taken up in her poem “The Mind, Intractable Thing (1965),” which revisits her earlier poem “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing (1943).” “The former poem tropes on the central figure in Stevens’ poem “Metaphor of a Magnifico (1923).” While both poems are invested topically in questions of the imagination and consciousness, “The Mind, Intractable Thing” employs elements of apostrophe and quotation, as well as a reliance on metonymy rather than one central metaphor. Like Stevens’ work, her poetics often investigate the phenomenal activities of the poetic observer, although she employs a discursive mode to track the speaker’s shifting perceptions.

Stevens’ philosophical lyric is engaged in the processes of imaginative interpretation that charge an image with meaning by performing the impossibility of objective vision. His “Metaphors of a Magnifico” begins as an attempt at
objective description that becomes stymied given the fact that subjective experience mediates any perception, and thus makes objectivity a pretense. As such, the lines “Twenty men crossing a bridge / Into a village” could interpret the bridge and the village in twenty different ways, according to the different perceptions of the twenty men or the speaker could impose his own single perception of the image.

Unlike Stevens’ rather linear poem, Moore’s approach is more oblique, as is typical of her poetics. The meandering, prose-like structures of her poems suggest a garrulousness that is in play with an incisive wit, as she seeks accuracy through a discursive and allusive mode. The magnifico that appears in her poem is an apostrophized wizard of words, a poet, and a magnifico of the imagination—a “magnifico”—called upon to help the speaker’s intractable mind. The poem traces the imagination’s associative logic, as the “glen” that the magnifico refracts on the eye undergoes a series of imagined transformations, presenting a train of images:

O magnifico…
Weren’t you refracting just now
on my eye’s half-closed triptych
the image, enhanced, of a glen---
the foxgrape festoon as sere leaves fell
on the sand-pale dark byroad, one leaf adrift
from the thin-twigged persimmon; again,

a bird—Arizona
caught up with, uncatchable cuckoo
after two hours pursuit, zigzagging
roadrunner, stenciled in black
stripes all over, the tail
windmilling up to defy me? (Moore, Complete Poems 208).
The poem follows the imagination’s swift permutations, telescoping in and out, as when an imagined perception of a thin-twigged persimmon conjures the image of a thin-legged roadrunner. In the poem’s series of revisions, additions, and enlargements of the initial image, the imagination constructs a set of relations that are not mediated by the rational mind. “The Mind, Intractable Thing” offers an impression of the imagination as free, lively, and discursive, and the rational agent who is the speaker of the poem is outpaced by the imagination’s rapid swerves. The dynamism of the poem builds from the incoherencies of the imagination—not the coherent subject. Nothing is stabilized or identified for long before the mind is caught in the ravishment of its own mechanisms. Similarly, in a statement that could be read as self-reflexive, she applauds Bishop’s translation of Helena Morley’s diary for its performance of the imagination’s dynamism: “Being able to observe the imagination in action…is like opening a watch and studying the continuous uninterfering operation of wheels amid wheels” (Moore, Complete Prose 526). As a transcription of the kinesthetic imagination, Moore’s poem is also absorbed with the praxis of an imaginative poetics and in observing and recording the innerworkings of the mind.

Even while the speaker of the poem wishes to possess the image, to assimilate it, the poem’s ethical force arises from the imagination’s non-totalizing character. The free interplay of images suggests an independence from the rational mind that would demand synthesis of these images and a consequent unified representation. The non-essentializing character of the imagination is distinct from the nature of
the integrated “I” of the poem. Addressing the imaginifico, the poem’s speaker associates the imagination with resilience: “You understand terror, know how to deal/ with pent-up emotion, a ballad, witchcraft. I don’t… [You are] as near a thing as we have to a king—/craft with which I don’t know how to deal.” (Moore, Complete Poems 18-20, 28-29). Craft here reads as both an art, inflecting Prospero’s double sense of the word “art” (both witchcraft and aesthetic) in the final monologue at the end of The Tempest, and a skill one needs to cope in life. Like Tell Me, Tell Me, The Tempest is a tract on the imagination and an end-of-career text (Keenaghan interview). The imagination presents an exemplary manner of relating discordant parts, as though the imagination can teach the subject something about relationality. Non-totalizing and free, the imagination becomes a site of instruction or initiation for the subject of the poem and perhaps the poet herself. The poet may be engaged in a project of initiating herself alongside the reader into a queer logic that blurs categorical identity and holds out the promise of non-essentializing relationality (Ibid).

Moreover, if one reads the imaginifico as a stand-in for Wallace Stevens, this poem, much like “Granite and Steel,” may be read as another tribute poem to her contemporary. Throughout “The Mind, Intractable Thing” and “Granite and Steel,” she re-imagines the work of Crane and Stevens, whether through a performance of the imagination’s free play or through ecstatic utterance. Interestingly, in both poems, Moore uncharacteristically employs a classical style of invocation, as though seeking to conjure these poets. In reanimating them, her poems suggest a stubborn enchantment with the past and a queer performance of
arousal in which the arousal of the self and the dead are pleasure-giving and braided together.

IV. Queer Extimacies

The question of how to characterize the relationship between Moore and Elizabeth Bishop has animated the work of many feminist and queer scholars over the years. The intensity of the literary friendship between the two poets is well-documented. Moore’s poetics provided both a model and counter-model for her younger mentee, and Bishop too influenced her work. In her early years as a writer, she looked to Moore as an authority figure and mentor, and Moore in turn provided criticism and praise for her work, while introducing her to the literary scene. Despite their enduring friendship, the younger poet was careful to preserve her poetic autonomy when Moore’s influence threatened to become overly directive or constrictive. She had an occasionally ambivalent relationship to her mentor’s moral codes and the extent to which she attempted to exert her influence over her, particularly in matters of art.28

Joanne Feit Diehl draws upon object relations theory and argues for a psychodynamic reading of Moore as a literary mother to Elizabeth Bishop. She posits that the younger poet, to come to terms with her forbearer’s power, developed a myth of originality about Moore (Diehl 29). Moore’s “poems

28 While Bishop was something of an apprentice to Moore, her rejection of Moore’s revisions to her poem “Roosters” in 1940 marked her growing artistic autonomy from the older poet. Moore had made drastic revisions to the work, tempering the younger poet’s critique of militarism. Ultimately, she politely but decidedly rejected her revisions.
showed a mind not much like anyone else’s,” according to Bishop (Bishop, *Collected Prose* 139). The older poet was herself, however, a practitioner of a poetics of derivation, her brand of sociality being premised on the assemblage and collocation of other’s voices. The quality of her originality, then, may be said to be predicated on a form of un-originality, deconstructing the fiction of authorial originality. Indeed, in a lecture delivered to Sarah Lawrence College in 1940, she states as much: “What does seem to me important—that one must overcome a reluctance to be unoriginal and not be worried too much about possible comparisons and coincidences” (Moore as qtd by Slatin 211). In an anti-Romantic gesture, she overthrows the myth of originality that is associated with the poet’s efforts. Her methods of appropriation, as well as her feints at appropriation (as when she re-imagines quotations or stylizes the voices of others) seem to invite comparisons and considerations of shifting vantage points, just as her poems’ assemblage raises questions of relatedness and difference.

While Diehl reads their relationship as analogical to a mother and daughter, the analogue is limited. It is important to note that Moore, like Bishop, never bore children, and motherhood was a charged subject for both. The elder poet lived with and cared for her mother throughout most of her adulthood; in a sense, she was the most significant companion in Moore’s life. Bishop, whose mother resided in a psychiatric hospital when she was a child, was in need of motherly support and happened to meet Moore during the year of her own mother’s death. As her memorial to Moore, “Efforts at Affection,” reveals, Bishop considered the elder poet to be a kind of mother figure: “I am seeing…that initial letter again
and again: Marianne’s monogram; mother, manners, morals…” (Bishop, *Collected Prose* 124). The semaphoric moment, poised in the interstices of linguistic repetition, makes the complex valences of her relationship to Moore public. She, in turn, reciprocated those feelings, treating Bishop as more than just her protégé, to whom she offered both writerly and personal nourishment. As Bonnie Costello points out, while it would be reductive to place their relationship too neatly within a mother and daughter paradigm, to overlook the nurturing aspect of Moore’s relationship to Bishop would also be problematic (Costello, “Friendship and Influence” 130).

If the term “intimate” signifies a symbolically legible relationship, the relationship between Moore and Bishop does not quite read as intimate, but something else. In their articulation of queer sociality, Weiner and Young invoke the Lacanian term “extimacy” to characterize those relationships that—like Moore’s and Bishop’s—are not premised on a common identity, but rather on “the coexistence of a radical abyss of foreignness and a form of closeness that remains strange, unassimilable, and not reducible to identity” (Weiner and Young 231). Extimacy can be conceptualized not as entirely antithetical to intimacy, but as contained within and without territories of intimacy. The relationship between Moore and Bishop slips outside of the normative symbolic order, their bonds being forged in the interstices of traditionally sanctioned symbolic commonalities.

In this sense, their relationship has a queer dimension. Significantly, Bishop’s first impression of Moore was of her temporal queerness. In “Efforts at Affection,” she writes that the atmosphere of 260 Cumberland Street, Moore’s
home of thirty seven years, was “old fashioned, but even more, otherworldly—as if one were living in a diving bell from a different world, let alone through the crass atmosphere of the twentieth century” (Bishop, Collected Prose 137). A queer Moore emerges in Bishop’s interpretation of her mentor’s backwardness, signaling both her orientation towards the past and her asynchronous relationship to her own generation. The anti-social thrust of the image of the diving bell, connoting the absolute autonomy of the artist, is complicated by the fact that Bishop forged her relationship with her mentor within its hermetic zone. Indeed, Bishop was attracted initially to Moore’s temporal dissonance with the ideologies and codes of the twentieth century, noting for example that her dress was dated and cross-gendered. She wore a “man’s polo shirt,” and her style, according to Bishop, was “quaint,” yet “stylish,” and “vaguely Bryn Mawr 1909” (Bishop, Collected Prose 124). Alluring to Bishop were Moore’s temporal incongruencies, her queer identification with the past. 29 As a kind of anachronism, Moore signifies for her an attachment to a former time that reads as both queer and “otherworldly.”

The two poets often exchanged gifts, which include both objects and dedicatory poems, and the penultimate poem of Moore’s final collection, “Saint Valentine” (1960), may be read as one. It is her second valentine poem, following her earlier “For February 14th” (1959). “Saint Valentine” queers the

29 Moreover, as one of her reviews reveals, Moore recognized that fashion could provide a liberating opportunity for women to cross-dress: “Woman is more nearly at liberty to assume man’s dress than man is able to avail himself of the opportunities for self expression afforded by the variations in color and fabric which a woman may use” (Moore, Prose 61). While critics have addressed Moore’s passion for fashion in sidenotes, there is more at stake in dress for Moore than has been acknowledged.
genre of the valentine; not a love poem in the romantic sense, it traces not reproductive ties, but imaginary filial ones instead. This poem was not the first Moore wrote with Bishop in mind. “The Paper Nautilus” (1940) was written for her after the younger poet gifted Moore with an actual paper nautilus. In her poem, the creature functions as a symbol for motherhood, as it provides nurturance and protection to its eggs. It is also a symbol of protective love, which—the speaker asserts—“is the only fortress strong enough to trust to” (Moore, The Complete Poems 34-5). As Bonnie Costello points out, it is also possible to read the poem as symbolic of the relations between mentor and protégé (Costello, “Friendship and Influence” 131).

Filial themes reappear in “Saint Valentine.” The central allusions in “Saint Valentine” are of El Greco and a daughter that Moore imagines for him, Vera, which also is Latin for truth. As such, the poem raises the question of the place of imaginative truth in relation to biography. Indeed, no biographical evidence verifies that El Greco had a daughter (Wilson 203). In a parenthetical aside, Moore qualifies her assertion that Vera is El Greco’s daughter, writing of “Vera, El Greco’s only/ daughter (though it has never been/ proved that he had one)” (Moore, Complete Poems 233). As a theoretical daughter then, Vera occupies an equivocal presence in the poem. According to Elizabeth Wilson, Moore’s description of Vera bears a resemblance to the painting Lady with a Fur, El Greco’s portrait ostensibly of Jeronima de las Cuevas, his partner and mother of his son (Wilson 203). Wilson writes, “In foregrounding the role of daughter, Moore knowingly sublimates the ‘other’ that is erotic love figured by Jeronima.
Daughter is ‘confused’ with lover so that the image of Vera both asserts and unsettles the filial” (Ibid). The confusion of the filial and the erotic queers the regulatory boundaries that are interposed between parent and child. Erotic energy, however, is more diffuse and pervasive in human bonds than the heteronormative imaginary traditionally permits. Given the queer context of the poem’s central misidentification, Bishop’s presence in this poem is complex. The poem outlines the contours of a relationship that ruptures the social-symbolic and cannot be readily assimilated into a hegemonic order that would demand coherent identities of its subjects.

As the speaker contemplates issues of gifting that are occasioned by love on Valentine’s Day, she settles on verse as an appropriate gift, although she considers the prospect of giving several tokens beginning with the letter “v,” such as a vignette and a violet. In the poem’s concluding stanza, Moore writes the following:

Verse—unabashedly bold—is appropriate;
    and always it should be as neat
    as the most careful writer’s ‘8’
Any valentine that is written
    is as the vendage to the vine.
Might verse not best confuse itself with fate? (Moore, Complete Poems 233)

The second “confusion” in this poem occurs between the written and spoken word. The speaker asks whether verse, which is written, might “not best confuse itself with fate.” The notion that verse may assume an agency akin to fate, or that
the poet may serve as a magus and the poem as a mode of both invocation and evocation, is a trope that is sustained throughout the collection.

The love poem indeed may be “bold” in revealing private sentiments, but it is also oblique in the case of this poem, as Moore makes a rather obscure reference to Elizabeth Bishop’s memoir piece “Primer Class,” in which she writes of her aesthetic enthrallment with rendering the number eight as a child. The young poet is “the most careful writer” of Moore’s poem. Moreover, as Vera is to El Greco an imagined daughter, it is possible to read Bishop as bearing the same relationship to Moore. Indeed, “Saint Valentine” may be read as an expression of a kind of queer love, not fitting neatly into a paradigm of romantic or filial love. Non-biological, the form of kinship that Moore represents productively problematizes reproductive parenthood and offers an alternative form of commonality, one that is both related to “extimate” social relations and artistic legacy. Moore—nearing the end of her career—naturally would have been concerned about passing on a particular ethos to her protégé. In Rukeyser’s review of the collection, she writes that Moore named Bishop as one of the many “good poets” of the time (Rukeyser 53). Bishop represented for her a promising direction for the future of North American poetry.

V. The Queer Animal

Elizabeth Bishop once suggested that any full reading of Moore’s sociality in her poetics must take on her relationship to the animal. According to Bishop,
Moore’s representations of animals are “democratic,” ultimately offering a model of “reciprocal” relationality with those who have been historically marginalized or othered (Bishop, Prose 259). There has been a critical tradition of reading her animal poems in relationship to issues of gender dynamics, but to my knowledge there has yet to be a reading of the queerness of her animal poems. Alicia Ostriker interprets her animal poems, which often celebrate those animals that rely on camouflage and protective armor, as self-portraits or disguises for her to address female gender roles (Ostriker 52). In a similar vein, foundational critics of Moore, such as T.S. Eliot and Donald Hall, have read Moore’s poetry as “impersonal” and designed to encode deep personal emotion.\(^{30}\) In a more contemporary reading, Robin Schulze argues that her animal poems are influenced by Darwinian theory (she was a close reader and champion of Darwin) and Victorian conceptions of male and female “fitness” that were pressurized and undermined by the domesticating forces of society (Schulze 76). As such, Moore’s generation no longer could realize their “natural” condition or ideal “fitness” in contemporary society. For Schulze, her animal poems accent, rather than encrypt, issues of gender and situate them in relationship to questions of nature and culture (Ibid 86). Others, such as Rachel DuPlessis and Jeanne Heuving argue for feminist readings of Moore’s animal poems, the latter positing that her early animal poems deconstruct representational practices that reinforce differences between genders that are culturally inscribed (Heuving 164).

However, Moore’s animal poems in her final collection, including “Blue Bug,”

\(^{30}\) See Hall’s “The Cage and the Animal” and Eliot’s introduction to Moore’s 1935 Selected Poems.
“To a Giraffe,” and “To Victor Hugo of my Crow Pluto,” are written from a genderless perspective, and do not seem to inflect a gendered reading as her earlier poems do. Although she does not address any of the animal poems in *Tell Me, Tell Me*, Heuving characterizes Moore’s later animal poems as “overstated” and reads them as minor poems compared to her earlier work. She accuses Moore of sacrificing her personal vision and “technical virtuosity” to communicate with a broader audience (Heuving 164, 167). Her interpretation reflects a trend in Moore scholarship to not only read the later poems as lesser than her earlier works, but to in fact overlook the final collection altogether. Identifying Moore’s later work as those poems written between the 1930’s and the 1950’s (thus essentially neglecting those written in the sixties), Heuving posits that her later animal poems promote “feminine” attributes and “develops an aesthetic and morality of maternal care,” in which her works are “circumscribed by the need to establish coherent forms of identity, unlike the earlier poetry” (Heuving 150-1). However, Moore’s need to communicate with a popular audience is not at odds with the deconstructionist impulses and complexities of a queer poetics, which unsettles identitiarian precepts that would preemptively determine and codify principles of being, often at the expense of the ‘other.’ In an age when poetry was equated with public performance and the poet was claiming for himself a strong social identity, Moore opted for a less egoistic poetic voice that performed its own social investments, rather than declaiming them.

As in “Saint Valentine,” her poem “Blue Bug” (1962) extends her meditation
on the limits of identity. Again, Bishop occupies a queer presence in the poem, and the question of the extent of her influence on Moore is raised. The poem takes up the question of the ethical position of the observer in relation to the animal other. “Blue Bug” was occasioned by a photograph in *Sports Illustrated* of Dr. Raworth Williams’ ponies, including the one that she used to title the poem. In a conversational mode typical of her later poems, “Blue Bug” charts optical engagements with the animal and the photograph itself, re-visiting the themes addressed in her poem “When I Buy Pictures” (1921). In her earlier poem, the speaker who regards herself as an “imaginary possessor” of the picture imposes an ethical boundary between herself and the art that she refuses to appropriate, thus resisting the logic of consumerism. The same reluctance to appropriate the object appears in “Blue Bug”; this time, in relationship to the animal within the camera shot: “I don’t know how you got your name/ and don’t like to inquire./ Nothing more punitive than the pest/ who says ‘I’m trespassing’, and/ does it just the same” (Moore, *Collected Poems* 218). In the case of her later poem, her speaker who recognizes in Blue Bug a “recognizing eye” relinquishes an acquisitive relationship to the other, which also means suspending her inquiry at the threshold between perception and naming.

In “Blue Bug,” sociality, the form of relations constructed by the speaker of the poem and the animal other, refers to the act of withdrawing an overly subjective claim to an object. As a misnomer, Blue Bug, who signals a transversal across species boundaries, is a queered name, one that the speaker refuses to interpellate or at least discuss the origin of with her readers. “I’ve
guessed, I think,” she writes, being disposed to withhold information from the reader as readily as she supplies it (Ibid). Here she enacts her own morals; the concern for preserving the animal’s alterity prevails. Hers is a text of silences, absences, withdrawals, and swift discursions; in refusing to hail Blue Bug, the speaker joins the ranks of Moore’s other curious, but non-predatory observers in her animal poems.

In her next line, referring to Blue Bug, she writes, “I like a face that seems a nest,/ a ‘mere container for the eye’ ” (Moore, Complete Poems 15). The image of the face as familial, a space of optical habitation for the other, is unexpected in this stanza about self-imposed boundaries. It is possible that Bishop’s early work may have influenced Moore’s lines. Among her juvenilia are the baroque Hopkins-esque lyrics “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” published in Vassar’s journal Con Spirito, a possible source of Moore’s allusion. In the third and final sonnet, the one that ultimately appeared in The Complete Poems 1927-1979, Bishop writes the following, the last line in the passage being the possible source of Moore’s image of the face as a nest for the eye:

Thy senses are too different to please me –
Touch I might touch; whole the split difference
On twenty finger’s tips. But hearing’s thence
Long leagues of thee, where wilderesses increase... See
Flesh-forests, nerve-veined, pain-star-blossom full,
Trackless to where trembles th’ears’eremite.
And where from there a stranger turns to sight?
Thine eyes nest, say, soft shining birds in the skull? (Bishop, Complete Poems 224)

The metaphysical inflection of the eye operates as the central conceit throughout
the poem as the speaker addresses the beloved and contends with the question of her own identity. Margaret Dickie interprets the sonnets as addressing both the anxiety of exposure and possibilities of mutual recognition in regard to covert, tacitly lesbian love. She writes, “This fascination with eyes in Bishop’s love poems expresses the double desire to recognize love and shield it from the dull eyes of the unprivileged viewer” (Dickie 89). Her poem, concerned with the risks of claiming identity in relationship to personal desire and the role of spectatorship in identity formation, may have been an appealing source for Moore’s own meditation on the risks of social hailing.

As Dickie points out, when these poems appeared in book form alongside “The Map” and “The Reprimand,” Moore approved of Bishop’s wish to guard her privacy, writing in a note to accompany the publication, “Mere mysteriousness is useless; the enigma must be clear to the author, not necessarily to us” (Dickie 89-90). She clearly applied this approach to her own works, often drawing upon a private vocabulary or offering semi-private allusions in her own poetics. The queer subtext of “Three Sonnets for the Eyes” may not have been lost on Moore, who approvingly quotes her line “Sure of my love, and Love; uncertain of identity” in her review (Dickie 89-90). Moore’s withdrawal of information about the source of Blue Bug’s cross-species name in her later poem is also a rejection of the coherence of identity and a pragmatic accommodation of the limitations of knowledge. The image of the face as a nest for the eye, occurring in both Moore’s and Bishop’s respective poems, at once denaturalizes and reiterates the integral role of spectatorship in inventing identity.
Animality accents issues of alterity that are raised in relationship to spectatorship. In “Blue Bug,” the speaker refuses to adopt an Adamic position to the animal, whereby to name is to assert dominion over nonhuman subjectivities. The animal, as an entity that is both familiar and foreign, related to the human and yet reaching beyond the borders of complete understanding, presents an ontological paradox to the speaker. In addition to its familial connotations, the face “that seems a nest/ a mere container for the eye” is distinctively the subject position of the animal other. Subject to the human gaze, the animal is bound within a visual economy that presents opportunities both for mutual identification and alienation. As Marcus Bullock writes, “There is no part of an animal that does not look back at us. There is no part that does not remind us that there is something, a life, an existence that in some way echoes our own, but remains always behind what meets our gaze, elusive, impossible, unimaginable” (Bullock 102). This quality of likeness-in-difference that characterizes the human and animal relationship is evoked in Moore’s visual exchange. In her poem, it is not the imperializing eye that contains, restricts, comprehends, or subsumes the other, but rather the eye is contained. Moreover, the eye here, remaining unidentified, could be that of self or other. This poem sets into relief the posthuman ethos of her project, in which human-animal relations are not bound by human precepts, including classificatory barriers between species.

In the next line, Blug Bug is compared to the “bug brother to an Arthur/ Mitchell dragonfly,” an allusion anticipating her following poem in the collection, which is an homage to Arthur Mitchell, the first African American to dance with
the New York City Ballet in 1955. The poem “Arthur Mitchell” is an extended metaphor that celebrates Mitchell’s athleticism, likening his dynamism to that of a dragonfly and miming balletic movement through the shapes and lengths of the stanzas. Both poems model the intertextual quality of the collection that Rukeyser discusses in her review and Kahan mentions in his essay, as “Blue Bug” appears before “Arthur Mitchell” in the collection and yet could be read after “Arthur Mitchell” if one is to follow Kahan’s backwards approach to reading the collection. Like “Blue Bug,” the homage to Mitchell refers to the possibility of optical violation; in the case of “Arthur Mitchell,” dynamism is a form of resistance to the totalizing character of vision, the dragonfly being “too rapid for the eye to cage” (Moore, *Collected Poems* 220). The transgressive drive of the gaze is countered by the dramatization and performance of a phenomenology that is linked to kinesthesia and flux, which are also both ethical and aesthetic values in her poetics. Observing the dragonfly is contingent on a form of optical recalibration, signaling a pragmatic stance in relation to the other, a process that Moore shares in tandem with the reader.

In the discursive manner that is typical of her poetics, “Blue Bug” performs the propulsion and light-footedness that Moore identifies as characteristic of the horse:

…bug brother to an Arthur Mitchell dragonfly, speeding to left, speeding to right; reversible, like “turns in an ancient Chinese melody, a thirteen twisted silk-string three-finger solo.”
There they are, Yellow River-
scroll accuracies
of your version
of something similar—polo.

Restating it:
pelo, I turn,
on polos, a pivot (Moore, Complete Poems 218-9).

Resisting cognitive or figurative inertia, “Blue Bug” enacts the divagations of the imagination, performing swift torques in meaning through a series of metonymic displacements. As Eric Keenaghan notes, indicators of race in this poem (such as Mitchell, Yellow River, and Chinese melody) are not treated merely as metaphors. They work within a transitive economy of metonymy that resists the essentializing impulse of metaphor. Connie Eble points out that metonymy, which constructs an associative link between form and meaning, is closely related to slang, often producing slang, which is accessible to those who are able to infer the contingent meaning (Eble 63). Likewise, metonymy may be said to take form within the social borders of an inner-circle, those who have access to an insider language. To extract meaning from metonymy often hinges on familiarity with the allusions being made. In this way, it bears a relationship to a particular form of sociality, one consonant with Moore’s queer sociality, consisting of semi-private allusions to those within her coterie. As such, metonymy may be said to be closely related to social feeling. This poem too suggests a kind of social extimacy, in which forms of relation are not prescribed by existing symbolic

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31 There is also a strong international scope in this poem, which is consistent with the collection’s investment in international cooperation. Given the fact that the war in Vietnam was unfolding as Moore wrote and published the collection, it is perhaps not surprising that the manuscript inflected a hope for global fraternity.
regimes, but are rather articulated via the non-essentializing dynamism of the imagination.

Metonymy serves as an apt figure for the imagination, insofar as Moore’s metonymic associations do not remain inert. Just as the polo pony must be maneuverable and nimble, the poem itself performs a linguistic agility through the shifting nature of the metonymic associations with Blue Bug. The passage’s turns are multiple and various as it accrues semantic shifts. The pony’s fleet-footedness calls to mind the agility of Arthur Mitchell, who is metaphorized as a dragonfly. In turn, the dragonfly’s rapid, zig-zag motions conjure the turns in a Chinese melody, which is then likened to the deviating path of the Yellow River. After the progression of metonymic permutations, the speaker returns to the topic of polo. When the poem becomes self-reflexive, the speaker employs macaronic language, and the bilingual context of the stanza suggests a lexical suppleness: “Restating it:/ pelo, I turn,/ on polos, a pivot”. The sonic interplay between the English and Spanish words also contributes to the queering of language or denaturalization of normative semantic frameworks. The marriage of different languages recalls the speech of “Rosalindless redbird” in her earlier poem “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle.” Both poems, moreover, share an idea of organic life as best realized in a poetics of process, rather than essence.

In the poem’s concluding stanzas, Moore draws associative connections between Blue Bug and the French symbolist painter and lithographer Redon Odilon and the Chinese acrobat Li Siau Than. Than is celebrated for his limberness and ingenuity, while Odilon is invoked for his renderings of eyes. As
in many of her earlier animal poems, aesthetic concerns and ethical relations with the other are blended ideals interwoven throughout “Blue Bug”. She writes, “If a little elaborate, Redon (Odilon) brought it to mind, his thought of the eye,/ of revolving—combined somehow with pastime--/ pastime that is work,/ muscular docility,/ also mentality…” (Moore, Complete Poems 219). Redon is well-known for his images of disembodied eyes, as in his “The Eye like a Strange Balloon” and “The Vision,” which are hallucinatory representations of floating eyes. Given the poem’s absorption with spectatorship, the allusion to Redon is consistent with its themes, although his images are noirs associated with the unconscious and the fantastic, foreshadowing the surrealists.

Interestingly, she does not associate Redon with the morbid or irrational themes of his work, but rather with the revolving orbit of his eyes and his own unexplained connection to pastime. His solitary, oversized eyes, darkened by the technique of chiaroscuro, are suggestive of the subjective conditions of vision. Ascending or directed heavenward, they are synechochal, evoking the mysterious nature of consciousness. For Moore, it is possible that they represent immanence and the potential to shift among various angles of vision. In regard to the notion of Redon’s work as a pastime, her association suggests a conception of art as play or, rather, art achieves its fullest realization as both vocation and play. Her poem dramatizes sociality as the metonymic connections to Blue Bug resist totalization and are retained in their plurality.

Moore’s sociality, forged through intertextuality and allusion and connected to the deterritorialization of symbolic regimes, queers normative social identities that
reinforce hegemonic relational structures. Queer sociality does not require that the subjects be human or that the relations be even sociable. I read the critical trend in which Moore scholars denigrate her later work as lesser-than her earlier poems as deeply ideological and related to questions of genre and gender. In a patriarchal literary tradition that ranks the occasional poem as an inferior form, one that has been commonly adopted by female writers, it is perhaps not surprising that her embrace of the genre in her later work continues to confound contemporary critics. The reception of her later work is in itself indicative of the limits of existing social realities. Her poetics instead seems to invite its readers to challenge normative hermeneutic and social practices, and to opt for a relational stance that legitimates otherness. A dominantly non-queer culture relies on an essentialist position to categorize sexual identities, preserving distinct domains of sexuality so as to distance itself from queer sexuality and culture. However, Moore provides in her final collection a “romantic passageway” to both a queer sociality and genderless ontology: “You are not male or female, but a plan/ deep-set within the heart of man” (Moore, Complete Poems 205, 234).
I have an incurable attachment to lost things. Words, for example. The word I have been thinking about lately is in the process of being lost to history. Although obscure, the word suggests a philosophy of feeling connected to the animal. The word I happened upon is mansuetude, which is etymologically related to hands and handling. The prefix man-, the root of words like manual, manage, and manufacture, relates to hands—to being handy. The suffix –suetude, according to the OED, conveys the idea of custom. The term roughly translates as a state of becoming accustomed to the hand and subsequently becoming milder in the process. Think of a feral cat grazing near a back door. Then think of that door opening to reveal a glass of water, a dish of food. Then, a few days later, a soft voice and an extended hand. And by small but measurable degrees, the human comes to mind the animal, and a mutual regard develops between the two.

The OED defines mansuetude as a Middle English term, meaning mildness, gentleness, and tameness, yet in our contemporary lexicon, there is no exact equivalent for the word. The words that come closest— taming, domesticating, breaking in, and training— all suggest dimensions of power and control: the idea of forcing an animal to human submission. My interest in mansuetude is that it inflects reciprocity rather than domination, and has been applied both to the human and animal. It refers to a process of mutual subjectivation, pointing back to a history when the human hand was not associated with “breaking” the other, but rather with a potential for positive, reciprocal interaction. This is a kind of
conditional form of feeling: not attributive or possessive, but rather a relational term connected to self-affection through handling of the other. By this definition, touch is sensitive, immanent, powerful, and transformative.

I have always felt that the human form is a limited baseline for being and for understanding others. Binocular vision has its limits, and uprightness distances us from the earth. What would it mean, for example, to imagine oneself in the place of the worm? To be not just the tiny dash beneath our feet, but to be in tempo with the pure vibrations of the earth? What is it to be coterminous with the rhythms of the rain and the hideaways below the topsoil? And what would it mean to create conditions more hospitable for life to flourish, as worms do when they digest the earth’s materials and produce vegetable matter?

I want to suggest that living with animals is in many ways a project of the imagination and of making language suppler, more physicalized, and more in touch with its origins. To confound our humanness, to find within ourselves our animality, which surface in dreamwork and poetry, atavistic memories and in our most naked desire, we recover the materials needed for our own survival. For every discovery that makes us less human, we are also becoming queerer—more at home with our own otherness.

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In writing this, I am pursuing spaces of rupture and binding. I write in collage, which is not only my mode of composition but also a theoretical proposition, a spatial and temporal intervention, and an investment in a mode of relation. It involves the making of contact zones where different forms and ideas touch,
brushing up against each other and overlapping, infecting each other or jimmying
open new possibilities for thinking through animality and poetics, as well as the
queer contours of their convergence. In using principles of juxtaposition and
contiguity to create concurrences or asymmetries, I intend to put pressure on my
ideas about queer feeling, the animal, and lyric poetry.

Collage is a heuristic mode different than narrative; it wanders and meanders,
building its own internal necessity even while disturbing its profluence. As a
genre, it introduces discontinuity into discourse. As a process of accretion, it is
comprehensive, yet fractured: based on the gathering together of various and
diverse materials, styles, and genres. As a mode of relation, it embraces in-
betweenness and resists resolution or closure. Embedded in its own texture and
form is its queering potential. In opting for collage, I am undertaking an
engagement with multiple threads of inquiry without knowing in advance what
form the essay will take or what meanings it will arrive at: a particularly queer
orientation. I write myself into this medium because I wish to get folded into its
own process of meaning-making.

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The personal dimension of this collage is in part occasioned by my reading of
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thesis that “there are important senses in which
‘queer’ can signify only when attached to the first person ... all it takes – to make
the description “queer” a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person”
(Sedgwick Tendencies 9, original emphasis). The first person that I use in this
essay is undergirded by a sense of the “I” as an intrinsically relational
construction. As Lyn Hejinian reminds us, personality, which develops through relationships, is not a concept bound to the self alone; it is relational, rather than essential (Hejinian 202). Recognizing personality as a relational dynamic enables a more comprehensive appreciation of lyric possibility. In my own poetry, I am pursuing an “I” that deconstructs its own humanness in its adoption of animal masks, which also has important implications for thinking through queerness and lyricism. The affective intensity of the lyric can be productive in shattering the delusion of coherent subjecthood and introducing other forms of experience that are and are not human. As such, the “I” that writes this essay is also writing through and beyond the “I;” it interpellates all of the others (the humans and animals, the living and dead, the imaginary beings, the singers and poets, the characters and the ghosts) who gave shape to a “me.” Queer lyricism is poised to offer a critique of the person and the language of personhood, which hinges traditionally on the rationalist injunction to make coherent or transparent meaning.

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Animating this essay is the question: what is a poetics of the animal? Is it a play of surfaces, sounds, moments of contact? Is it of the unconscious, the marshy realm of dreamwork? And must it be mediated by allegory, symbol, and metaphor, or might there be a non-figural, semiotic, or animistic mode of approaching animal thought?

Inevitably it is physical, gestural, of the body. The texture of my cat’s damp fur in my hand, her reflection in a minnow pool, her trills in the early dawn: these
encounters and gestures I reformulate into meaning. I draw upon them to imagine my cat’s world, even while interior meaning is opaque and the work that I do is suppositional. And ineluctably, like the play of light upon the clean surfaces of a prism, my cat, looking back at me, refracts a litany of selves: my being, my world, my culture, my sex, my race, my radical otherness. As Jacques Derrida notes about himself, I too am both a cultural animal and a radical foreigner in my own body. I feel that familiar careening sensation of being held at the threshold of language as I try to describe myself through her eyes and her through my eyes.

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When language has failed me or I have failed it (I am neither master nor prisoner to it, and yet the vocabulary of futility creeps in and the syntax of subject and objecthood become confused, slippery), I am drawn to an animal language. In Western traditions, animals have been identified as lesser because of their absent linguistic capacity. If humans assert their subjectivity through speech, it has been argued that animals lack the capacity to perform their subjectivity through language. The “failure” to speak has been traditionally read as an ontological failure, which is used to re-inscribe the border between the animal and human. Martin Heidegger, for example, denies language to animals, writing, “Where there is no language, as in the being of stone, plant, and animal, there is also no openness of what is” (Heidegger 73). However, tribal cultures have long understood that all life, including plant, animal, and stone, has the capacity to speak and be intelligible. This is not an anthropocentric projection, but rather a
broader and more spiritual vision of reality, running counter to models of human
exceptionalism.

Denied subjectivity, the animal in a Western tradition was historically cast adrift
from a community premised on human fraternity. The same can be said of those
relegated to the fringes of society: the criminal, homosexual, or racial “other” also
exist within a zone of dehumanization. Legitimating state racism and
homophobia, biopolitics rests on a model of sovereign power that founds itself on
its capacity to mark off this “othered” space. How might we then conceive of a
non-sovereign power that emerges in the conjunction between the human and
animal and that grounds itself in language and communication?

For Jacques Derrida, the trace of the animal, of the radical other, exists within
the very structure of speech, and yet it would seem that being without speech,
animals enter an aporia in which they are both of and beyond human language
(Lippit 15). Thinking though of the “trace, of iterability, of differance,” without
which language would not exist, Derrida argues that these concepts or
possibilities are themselves “not only human,” thereby carving open a space in
which both animal and human being are mutually bound to the constitution of the
other and to language itself (Derrida 116).

And if we can think beyond human speech, we may find that while animal
language may seem to be limited semantically or representationally, it is in fact
inherently powerful for the reason that it is not a codified system and therefore
cannot be passively exchanged. Instead, it is gestural, based on an organic
principle connected to attention. The survival of social animals hinges on their
ability to read and respond to others. Animal signaling is occasioned when there is mutual attention between the signaler and the recipient of the signal. Both have a significant stake in observing one another when their own survival may depend upon it. Based on the consciousness, such communication is immediate, variable, and corporeal.

According to the evolutionary biologist Amotz Zahavi, animal signaling is also costly. Extrapolating from Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection, Zahavi sought to explain what Darwin could not: the waste or excess that an individual incurs in displaying its sexual fitness for potential suitors. While for Darwin natural selection is premised on the species’ elimination of unfavorable traits over time as a mechanism for survival, Zahavi developed the concept of the honest signal and the “handicap principle” to explain the phenomenon whereby individuals possess characteristics or behave in such a way as to communicate “honestly,” even at the cost of making themselves vulnerable to attack (Zahavi 1-11). According to Zahavi, these handicaps are signals to other individuals. Extrapolating from sexual selection, he applied his theory of signaling to all realms in which individuals communicate. As he reminds us, where human language often “fails” its expressive function, the nonverbal, vocalized language of animals is generally able to convey intensity and degree of feeling relatively accurately.

Think of a baby bird, crying for its mother to return to the nest. This signal, the baby’s cry—in its repetitive cast—conveys the intensity of its need for contact, operating as a gauge of quality. With this persistent cry, the infant bird risks the
detection of a predator, and yet because its cry is risky, the mother knows that it is “honest” and that her infant needs her attention. This form of signaling involves a testing of bonds; it is a kind of communication authenticated by the cost that the individual incurs in exposing its need.

In my own case, I have often felt a frustration with the capacity of symbolic language to express gradations of difference: to convey degree and quality of feeling. There is always a social dilemma inherent in the structure of language and—by extrapolation—the text: that of trying to capture in words one’s affective experience, particularly the degree of feeling one experiences, to the “other.” That dilemma I associate with both wounding and desire, or the wound that lies at the heart of language. This wound is in many ways a human burden. What one wants is the accuracy of the honest signal. And this desire for affective accuracy and reciprocity, I believe, is what bridges the connection between the animal and poetic thought.

It is that lonely, fertile zone between desire and “honesty” as I have here defined it that is the terrain of the poet. And in that space, we create metaphor and innovate new forms to temporarily stabilize the chaos of feeling. What might poetry learn from a modality of language that in its economy of sacrifice is authenticated by the other?

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It is that desire for an animal language that hijacks this poetics. Being swept up by this desire, I am also writing about eros in its broadest sense: eros not exclusively in its sexual sense, but rather in its relation to creation and to the
sensuality of life and work. Audre Lorde defines the erotic as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feeling” (Lorde 54). I love Lorde’s definition of the erotic as a measure between identity and its undoing: the re-imagining of the self after coming up against or alongside strong feeling. And I love this suggestion of the erotic as a lifelong shuttling between our identities and the slapdash messiness of our feelings. If patriarchy robs women of this more expansive conception of eros, reducing it to a form of “pornography,” Lorde considers the erotic as invested in a recovery of the fullness of our feelings, a striving after “excellence” (Lorde 54-55). In my poem “Eros,” I think of the concept as a verb or dynamism that puts in play a form of thinking-feeling that moves through and beyond personhood and identity:

Eros:

the well-kissed fold in the belly;
love
(the verb)
bouncy in its parentheses;
the giant squid’s foot-wide eye mostly veiled from us,
and the idea of its eighth arm twining with another;
the thrill of restraint against desire,
the anonymity of the caretaker who will anoint us in our final bath;
the blindfold
and the lightness of the hand on the small of our back.

*
In conceptualizing my impulsion towards a queer animal poetics, I must also address my own very human identities and consider the ways they bring into relief the limits of language. The moment that I name each social group to which I belong, I confront both the constraints of prose and the prosiness of my own life. For example, while I can say that I am white and a black ally, a feminist and a lesbian, these categories risk inflecting a particular typology or a form of binarized thinking, in which my identity is conceptualized in opposition to masculinity and heterosexuality (of course, sex, gender, and sexual orientation are not so neat and binary).

Conceptually, it is useful to recognize that my identities are socio-culturally rooted and contingent upon a system that is gendered, classed, and racialized, yet they are also limited. The moment that I name them, I exclude all the other subject positions I inhabit, transverse, evolve through, trouble, depend on, and imagine for myself. Often my identities escape by their own complexity any label or categorical determination.

By a queer logic, how I relate to the nonhuman world and to other racial, classed, gendered, and sexual experiences are as related to my own being as those identities that I claim for myself. Queerness, which I also claim for myself, offers tension against the principles of identity, which can impose strictures on not only on sexuality, but also humanness itself. When struggling through the impingements of my own human identities, I have turned to animals and poetry for answers about myself. These have been important queering resources throughout my life insofar as they complicate my own subjectivity. It seems
significant now that as a child, before I could call myself a lesbian, I intuited myself as queer—that is, unable to master or integrate into my being the identities that the world assigned to me.

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Lyric poetry, which inflects the realm of metaphor and imagination, makes room for a plurality of selves and the chaos of feeling. Like queer theory, it enables me to think through the complexities of being in a way that an identity-based language does not. It accommodates what does not lay down to prose. It greets paradox and antithesis.

However, in times of crisis, it seems that we as poets are especially pressured to defend the relevance of our craft (of course the question of relevance is an anxious one that permeates the whole of humanities today). The questions handed to the poet often relate to potential: What is the power of poetry in a time of emergency? What is the role of poetry in anguished times? And given recent developments in our ecosystem and our political life, how can poetry “act” in a fragile world? Lyric time moves at a different clockpace than the temporal exigencies of ecological and political crisis. How and when can it intervene?

What are needed are new metaphors (as well as more refined conceptualizations of the structure of metaphor) that prepare us for practical action. I am interested in the power of metaphors that emerge from the combination of imaginative projection and empirical observation of organic lives different than our own. How we relate to those lives and how we imagine their worlds and their sensoriums can provide practical knowledge about ourselves,
others, and the world that we share. Metaphor is more than mere ornament and figurative representation; it is vital and deeply connected to our own cognitive and affective processes. We make meaning through metaphor and through neural tricks that confound the boundaries between the literal and figurative. We use metaphor to test and expand the boundaries of the physical world, just as we use collage to test the medium in its materiality. Metaphor too is material in its effects; it infects our behavior and rewrites our existing reality.

And I cannot say with total authority that what I am doing in writing poetry is representing the world around me. Being of nature, am I not in some sense presenting it, acting as a conduit of it, even while I recognize that “Nature” (with a capital N) is an unstable cultural and historical construct? Native American poetics are interesting to me for the reason that they often reveal an ontology in which the “I” is equivalent to a “we” that extends beyond the human realm. To be an “I” is to be of the sky, the earth, and the animal.

* 

Poetry is always en route to an elsewhere. I wish sometimes it were a shady place with cocktails and big, affectionate animals. But lyric poetry takes me to difficult places: to war, to a lonely world where a hermit’s voice echoes and echoes across the standing water, to an airtight apartment where the laundry is rumpled or in piles and a woman counts some change. I feel lost sometimes in these worlds, but being lost has its advantages. There is a thin and porous line between being lost and losing myself, in which I am the proper object of lostness.
Losing myself, I enter worlds where the conditions for subjectness and objectness collapse, where I am no longer a locatable “I.”

Queer lyricism can serve as a social intervention that calls upon a praxis of relating, a temporary blurring of subject positions, and even a feeling of lostness. One of the tasks compatible with a queer lyric poetics seems to be the imagining of forms of sociality that are not humanist, that trouble identitarian discourse, and that instead recognize in embodiment, a shared condition of all life forms, the grounding for a politics.

Human understandings of embodiment are of course limited. For example, I cannot know how a whale processes the world around it, although I can speculate about some of its faculties and behaviors based on a handful of facts. I have read that the whale perceives the ocean as black rather than blue and has broadside eyes that may allow it to look at two prospects from different angles at the same time. The implications are significant since perspective effects how an individual filters sensory data, creates memories, and makes meaning about the world around it. As a poet, I can hypothesize about its phenomenology and imagine the different forms its attentiveness might take. Through informed, imaginative projection, I can try to represent the quality of light the creatures around it reflect or its physiological reaction to the sight of a predator, yet the phenomenology of the animal will always remain opaque for me. Ultimately there can never be complete transparency between two consciousnesses, animal or otherwise. The introduction of doubt, however, is useful in that it sets into relief the negative
space around the whale; it teaches me about restraint and alterity, and the ethical and temporal import of the imagination. Empirically, we understand animals provisionally—in a series of moments, not necessarily in a continuous present. Sometimes though we each experience flashes of insight, moments of mutual understanding, and through the accumulation of these instances and our own imaginative powers, we form connections, queer intimacies.

Lyric poetry facilitates these connections by shuttling between subjectivities different from our own, enhancing personal and social experience, accenting the borders of our epistemologies, and calling upon the imagination to expose the actual conditions in life that stultify and impoverish us. For John Dewey, the imaginative experience is morally charged and distinguished from automatic actions or stock judgments that occur in life. To subject experience to the intervention of the imagination is to take part in an ethical act, as the imagination exposes actual conditions in life that can be limiting and references novel possibilities for being (Dewey, *Art as Experience* 342). The imaginative projection that undergirds lyric poetry enables us to inhabit bodies other than our own, to transverse the identities that we cling to or reject in life. The poetic imagination, a source of resilience and immanence, is a particularly useful queer resource. Given its plasticity and non-totalizing character, it is poised to give us back novel possibilities for being. I am interested in a lyric poetry that is metaphor-enlarging, that enhances and deepens the mysteries of life, that sensitizes us to sensation itself.
Lack of empathy has always seemed to me to be connected to a failure of the imagination. The denigration or disregard of animals and marginalized beings signals in some ways a bankruptcy of imagination. For many, animals are disturbing because of what they reveal about us: they push us to the edge of thought and dramatize the limitations of our own vocabularies for relating to others.

Language does not provide transparency; it can ever only approximate meaning, just as our lexicon for relating to difference is lacking. For example, I am forced to choose between words like train or domesticate to discuss how I relate to my cat and to conceptualize how we have come to inhabit the same space, to live together. The better word, the one that suggests intimacy and mutual transformation—mansuetude—is a linguistic artifact without the cultural currency that it once had. Often, today’s animal representations—whether in biology, poetry, or prose—set into relief the borders of our own understanding and the insufficiencies of language to approach those we deem other.

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I imagine queer feeling to be based upon a kind of surrender of habitual modes of perception and cognition and an openness to the intervention of the imagination. The queer lyric solicits from reader and writer a different form of sensibility that does not circumscribe or limit sense (in its corporeal and psychic valences), but rather makes feeling (with all of its vagaries and contingencies, its weird and non-linear time-patterns, and transformative capacities) a site of
activity that disturbs sense so as to return it back to a common vocabulary. Queer lyricism may test received meanings by freeing the senses of their traditionally formalizing roles and opening us up to the consciousness-heightening experience of feeling oneself feel and—in turn—feeling the self’s own otherness. With its affectively rooted forms of sense-making, queerness seems closely related to touch. The touch that I invoke is erotic and charged with the capacity to disrupt the coherent subject and to undermine the senses that we refer to as common.

In the lyric, there is an immediate subjective re-positioning; as readers, we participate in meaning-making, we inhabit the position of the speaker, and—by extension— we deconstruct and re-write ourselves. Potentially, lyric poetry invites us to feel oneself as an organism—to feel the tensile and tenuous thread between a “common” sense and a brand of sense that does not submit to rational or deterministic discourse. In many ways vertiginous and visceral, it dramatizes the incoherence of pre-conceived psychic, rational, and corporeal definitions of sense. And in dislodging sense, a queer lyric may unhinge established meanings. To inhabit a state in which there is the play of contradictory meanings is to be receptive to the paradoxes and volatility immanent within feeling itself.

How else to describe our feelings to our animal companions? Those with whom we work, live, and play. How do we take account of the pleasure we have in our connections with our animals, even while we impose an ontological border? How to explain the repulsion and splendor of the sublime animal, like the deep sea creature blinking its soul through walls of darkness? Or the fear and
attraction of that dense thicket where the animals go when a storm or death approaches? It is a queer kind of love.

* 

If difference can be conceived as a basis for relation, and the nonhuman world can be imagined as a site of queer intimacies, and if mystery can be tolerated in the place of human mastery, what kind of community would we (human and animal) enter? What are the risks and rewards of constituting such a community?

* 

In my dreams, I slide into new forms, an elephant body and a pregnant mother that gives birth to a hybrid animal morphology. These beings have found their way into my poems. In dreams, there is little friction in my contact with creatures. I participate in a new style of bonding with others, without the demand for coherence or rationalism or a priori understanding. I am naturally of them, not beyond or above them. The animal that therefore I am emerges as a fluent student in Wonderland logics. Do these dreams describe an animal becoming that is also a returning? There is something consoling and immanently powerful in the uncertain time signature of dreams. Lyric time too misbehaves. Not merely a discrete moment in time, lyric time may enter the realm of pure metaphor, casting doubt upon the narratives that we formulate in our waking worlds.

* 

I am interested in a poetics that is aware of the peril of writing when writing involves an objectification of the world around us. I am riveted by a poetics that points back to itself (sometimes giddily, sometimes soberly, sometimes guiltily),
that embraces irony, equivocation, punning, deliberate artfulness, whimsy, and poetic excess. When we enter into lyric worlds, we are often taking incursions into perilous cognitive and affective zones. This is the price of feeling.

* 

I remember once in elementary school sitting beneath a sputtering fluorescent bulb while the teacher tried to teach us about long subtraction. Everyone could see the windows peripherally when a crow—glossy and magnificent—collided with an unsmudged window. Bang! The sound was like a gunshot. I remember the crow’s head, cratered inwards and flush with the glass, sliding down the window in slow motion. The teacher screamed. Someone else started to cry. When the class emerged from the school, the crow lay dead on the spring earth, the wind ruffling the feathers of a buckled wing. It was inexplicable, mysterious. We were all affected.

The memory is as perfect in my mind as the day it happened. Since then, I have thought about misprision as something costly and violent and wondrous. Having experienced involuntary hallucinations, I too have learned to trust only halfway my eyes and to be suspicious of claims of transparency. All of us at some point in our lives have come across a far-flung *something* in the distance that could be anything: a being or object, a boundary or the weather.

I am enthralled by the idea of a poetics that situates itself in this space of indeterminacy, that understands meaning not as something handed over, but something to discover at a time we cannot know beforehand. I associate visual acuity in poetry with not merely precision, but a meta-awareness of the body and
the fragility of our own formalizing or regulatory faculties. Writing that underlines the imaginary, constructed character of the poem’s reality can become apertures into the text’s guiding authorial presence. Modernism gave birth to a lyric intensity occasioned by the stripped-down mechanics of representation, rather than the representation itself. I think of Elizabeth Bishop’s self-monitoring speakers who employ and discard similes, Djuna Barnes’ alphabet bestiary that accents the linguistic constructedness of animal representation, and Marianne Moore’s animal/ ars poetica poems. These lyrics can offer a route out of imperializing notions of normative or “coherent meaning” that are often declaimed as such at the expense of the other’s mode of experiencing and interpreting the world. Animals experience the queerest of worlds— one with such impermeable boundaries: windows and superhighways and strong fences. And because we cannot wait for the world to set itself right, we must write.
Queer Fish
Every Little Elegy I Finish 195
When the Horseshoe Crab Grieves 196
The Ruse of Melancholy 197
The Venus Girdle 198
Domestic Tortoise 199
Nursery Web Spider 200
When the Outdoor Cats Come In 201
King of Saxony Bird of Paradise 202
The Queer Creatures that Rise at Dusk 203
Dream of the Mid-Wife 204
The Fish Beneath the Portuguese Man of War 205
I.

“Without the example provided by animals before our eyes, we as a species might be unable to imagine a state beyond the constantly re-created series of delusions in which our existence consists.”

-Marcus Bullock, “Watching Eyes, Seeing Dreams, Knowing Lives”
To the Meerkat

This rapt, bandit-eyed mother,
scorpion-diner and foe to cobras,
is not a marauder, but rather
the obverse: upright and slightly simian
on her miniature mongoose legs.

Love is like the sole lookout,
the one who reconnoiters the desert
to keep her clan unharmed. Dear totem,
she telegraphs her cry across the wasteland
if any slinking or winged thing nears,

although her clamant alarm
gives her away. Love’s swift and costly here,
and she, banisher of loneliness,
leans in close— dainty nose grazing ear—
to groom another’s fur just so.
Lullaby for Cat

I miss you when you are cat
    and I am human,
when you are dreaming
    and I am peeping.

        If I could paddle backwards
        across the wide channel of your sleeping,
I would poke a peephole
        into the bark of your dreaming.

What a relief then to meet
        creature to creature!

We stretch and stray
        with the day. We nose around in the roses
    and sprawl below the bird’s eye sheet
        half-flying from the laundry line.

Later we rise and ramble
        through the bird-thickened brambles
    or we tremble against the copper birdbath
        where watery,
        overhead
        birds swim.

In that inverse mirror
        we kiss our shoulders,
    knead our claws on stone,
        and rub at tender wings.

We lap at the bowl of our visions
        and pass the long isthmus of night
    watching the birds hook up
        across fields of telephone wires,
        calling and calling to each other,

while inside the tenants
hang up the landline
    or wade into the static air.

        I do not miss being human in dreaming,
when you come to me, trilling.
The Decorator Crab,

bedecked with seaweed, polyps, knobs, and buds of algae, wheels around the shore on legs like mossy branches while it looks around for fringe or sponge to hook upon its back. Its eye for slough is matchless, though the jazz it wears is mismatched: rosette webs with sand-encrusted seaweed, scraps of dross and fish tissue, and hodgepodge bits to hide beneath. The guise is custom-made, arrayed in such a way to con and keep its foes away. There’s nothing paltry on its zigzag route, and every slight anemone or snarl of string may be desired and conjoined with it. Eclectic crab, collector flecked with others, nothing can be drab so long as objects hold allure as intimates.
What I Mean When I Say I Knew You Long Before We Met

Our storylines were the same.
As girls, we bucked through screen doors
and vaulted out of windows. We galloped away
from our mothers, knocking our hooves through ice
to feel our power. Our bodies, then, were porous
and promiscuous. We were woodland creatures,
hardly people, and we felt no shame
in small indiscretions. Even being a boy was easy,
nothing more than moulting off a shirt
and uncovering our flat chests.

Our passion grew from our patience.
We tracked the snail in the loam:
we watched it spasm, squinch, and unspool
its wet iridescence across the roots,
muscling its soft body across the hard earth.

We had seen the face of the snail
in the public undulations of its flesh
against the flesh of its mate: a she: a he,
the slurring tongue of its body
sliding across the hermaphroditic soul
of love. They genuflected and leaned back
against their helix shells before they rose,
bodies rhyming, rubbing up against each other,
so tensile and swanlike in their stretch
that we could not look away.
Their bodies grew slick in the vertigo
of their vertical dance, and swiveling,
they looked and looked with the stalks
of their periscope eyes, little divining rods
electric with meaning.

Years later, with my tongue tracing
the areolas of your breasts, I follow the whorl
of the helix shell. I breathe the dank earth.
My earliest fancies rise within me,
and you take me back to the woods.
Eros:

the well-kissed fold in the belly;
love
    (the verb)
    bouncy in its parentheses;
the giant squid’s foot-wide eye
    mostly veiled from us,
    and the idea of its eighth arm
twining with another;
    the thrill of restraint
    against desire,
the anonymity of the caretaker
    who will anoint us
    in our final bath;
the blindfold
    and the lightness of the hand
    on the small of our back.
The Anglerfish Finds her Muse

Tonight I wake as an anglerfish,
ringing my world with light,
prowling the window sill, gutted of flies,
the bedroom's shadowed amalgams and rifts,
its submarine and faceless blooms of mouths
and stomachs, waving tentacles and threads
that go trawling above the lure-light
that sprouts from my head,
the fatal charm that obscures me.
In a room of nose-diving lamps,
little twitching schools of fish, and you,
my broadside eyes obvert and roll inwards,
indrawn to a sleeping language,
where I am not a fish or a woman,
but the nocturnal verb
that brushes up between you and me,
legible in the curve of our dreaming.
The Glass Squid

Nearly unseen, so limpid
as to be lost, the glass squid
is a genius of minimalism;
even its outthrust eyes conceal their long shadows,
their undersides casting forth light as from street lamps
and effacing their structures.

The glass squid never outgrows
its competent transparence,
although I wonder if it feels quite safe
when it passes its predators: moire chambers
with electric lures and waving, tentacled things
that shiver against seaweeds

or medusa heads, trawling
or still. Night is a fiction
below, yet the darkness that the diver
cought on camera could be in a Caravaggio.
There’s a cost to see the squid’s eyes tricked into sight;
it’s dark, broadside world was lit

for an instant not by light
of its design. Was it scared?
Did it flee to seek a veil of seaweed?
And did the diver, armored and as riveted
as a lover, follow? The two would have traveled
to the deepest dark, where masked

eyes look as through a glass seal.
Those below survive with minds
that are semaphores of alarm, while some
must cope with a force—violent and vestigial—
that nests in neural readiness, quick to transmit
its misprision, as in love.
Zoo Dream

Below a vertical zoo, at the edge
of waking, I dream up a vast body
with a domed head, skin tougher than a tortoise’s,
and I—in the new tenancy of my elephantness—
test my trunk, a casual pendulum

as precise as a dragonfly’s landing,
and fan my ears like a lady shaking
out drapery. Propulsion begins, as it must,
with the idea of mother; my own—I know—is away,
lost or exiled from this place of exile

and I must find her (laws of early love
transpose us). Beneath the crush of my legs,
the stairs sway and buckle, and each landing carries
a mewling and baying. Still I tramp for miles, searching.
Soon I am a pure tug, a handler’s dream.
Lonesome George:
the last member of the Chelonoidis abingdoni species
(circa 1912-2012)

Probably the God of Tortoises,
with his bacteria-rich kiss
and his shell as wide as a barouche,
loves you, George.
He will be magisterial but clement,
welcoming; he will scoop his neck
across the vault of heaven and take you in,
his ponderous face upon yours.
He will jest with you,
take you for a lope across the shaded lawns.
Light will play on the intricate scutes
of his shell when he reminds you
that no animal goes unmolested on this earth,
and to be the last is to suffer idolatry
or worse, this mortal irony:
the zoo plans to embalm you
(because preservation, though tardy
at this juncture in your lineage,
is pressing for posterity’s sake).
Someone will suture you,
mammoth and sloe-eyed,
with dust deep in the crevices of your skin
and the ancient minerals of the earth,
for the last time, cemented in.
The Last Animal

When we kill, we do it well.
I have paid to see their bones
encased in glass: rib cage,
incisors, broken femurs
suspended by wires. Skeletons
require care. Stuntwork. I’ve stroked
the memory of tortoise
in concrete parks, and loitered in halls
of heads and thrusting torsos.

When we kill, we do it well.
We strip the trees of music,
we miss the flowers, we forget
that metaphor is molecular.

When no one notes again
the inner tension of the crouching fox
before it vaults over the fence
or the hungry cat that enters a room,
tail swishing, to assert a mood,
who will notice the first signs of the suicidal?

Do not mistake me,
killer, friend.
Family Circus

*Here they come!* we cry as one
when the handlers roll their cages up
from the stables in the basement.
A kid, sucking at his bars, wears a wig
of wool like a real goat,
and another licks and licks and licks
down her last fur until the ham of her leg
glistens pinkly.

But she can be stitched up
with a darning needle. Here live
the fables of mammals;
the pleasure of the lie is better
than companions. Better
than the accounting of the spirit.

An infant bird wheezes an anthem
across the sequined air,
and the redundant cannons do
what they do, and soon the kids
clamber in and play dumb
at the ringmaster’s order.
He keeps them squinched in the butt end
of his universe, where they spoon his ramrod
until the countdown. And shot up
from the barrel, blood echoing in their ears,
they climb the sky like flares across a stolen sea.

Openly, the ringmaster loves his kids;
he tells us about love through the brass and whistles.
We love them too: hunchbacked or stunted,
broken in and funny looking.
They are cute or they are strange,
they make us laugh or tremble,
but now we must eat or piss,
and the ringmaster points us to the exit.
Sword Swallowing

To me, the work’s consoling when they watch:
   I tilt my head and thread the saber down
my throat until--from hilt to point--the shaft’s
delivered deep inside the pharynx, tight
within the gullet. Edging close, the crowd
   regards my sternum, craving more: the live
and pendent-still taste of steel, the slit-eyed
devourer’s want, the sight of the blade
in darkness, pinned within the organs’ coil
   of passageways and funnels. Art betrays
this need for intimate exchange; it thins
   the line between us, freaks and patrons all.
Agape, I ventilate the void inside:
   I body forth our wish to bypass flesh.
Mummified Baboon, Unburied

When they come for me, they come with shovels, augers and picks. A cloth still holds dermis to bone, but barely, and when they raise me from an oven of hot sands to daylight, I'm a dazzlement of husk. They lay out my face, my hips, the undeveloped strip of my spine, all turned to anthracite hues. Their catalogue—bone by bone—deems me whole, and, amassed and outlined against the earth, I’m turned from corn doll to brittle city. They map and flag my parts, then break me up to store me. And later, I am encased and placed on display. What is this devotion?

A child peers inside the glass and strains to find—beneath some bindings—fellowship in death. But my face is in tatters. Someone says, *It was preserved so its soul would live on after death.* The formula's miscarried, though; it's a far more cryptic sapience that saves me now. It’s unguent and heat, and years of subsoil basking that keeps me. It is for these all too precious splinters that I’m not received, but not forsaken.
The Condor

Why carp about its appetite?
Post-feast, it reels around the corpse
still inflected with flies and the ship-like,
collapsing ribs inverted in the sand.

And while it considers lift off
with its phalanx of dissectors
and feasters, it drowses, anchored—stranded—
by its own belly. Still, one admires

the homely extemporizer,
its dinosaur face and bald crown,
playing at the sinews of its chow,
which is considerable (an entire cow),

and bayoneting with its beak
the hide so as to scoop the pulp
and heart. Its vast hunger is not absurd,
but serviceable; living off its meal

for days, it’s free of self-offense,
alert not to the guilt that trails
great need, but to the angles of its wings
and the winds that fan its collar of fringe.
Apropos a Tortoise

I.

Notes on a tortoise:
slumberous step, darting eye,
crown cross-hatched with age.

II.

He loses balance
and capsizes into wet
leaves; he’s frond-flooded.

III.

Retreating, his head
backs into a chamber dark
with soft coiled flesh.

IV.

Hibernation starts
with fraying skin and spoiled
fruit; the days darken.

V.

The reptilian frame
bears the cracks of grandmother’s
old cameo brooch.

VI.

I raise the emblem
of age to my face; the dark
inlaid mirror shifts.
Word Problem #3

A pair of tuataras play
*I spy with my parietal eye*
on the banks of a silt-lined river.
One, the mother, ogles
a winking firefly at twelve o’clock
with the vestige of its third eye,
while her kid lifts its baggy-neck
to the moon. They are content;
the weather is fine and no one cannibalizes
the other (an evolutionary faux pas
still passed down to the lucky few).
Nonplussed as teenagers,
they wallow at the shallow’s edge
and swish their little tails,
their scales catching the lights
of the universe like ancient mosaic tiles.

After millennia, their kind
is as inoculated against time
as angels. They have earned
the casual lives of golfers, and yet one day
man and his Maker arrive on the scene
to transport the two across the river.
The Maker, a kayaker (not much of a life-guard), is without illusions:
he can bring only one at a time
and if he leaves man alone
with either mother or kid,
man may kill one or the other.
Meanwhile, the Maker, without design,
cries, *How will they cross the river?*
All at Sea

I am not blameless
living off of my mother’s belly.
I know my thirst and I know my crimes.
I know yours.

But do you remember—in your dreams—
our emergent bodies ghosting below the sea line?
Remember how we learned from the stinging flowers,
the viruses, the cetacean songs
that echoed below the ice-sheeted earth?
I miss those songs still,
how we thrilled in somatic reply
from body to body, to wave after wave.

Do you remember the coastlines
and their riches before we branched forth limbs
and stood ashore, our infant knees trembling forth?
And can you dream her up as she was then
before our fatal bloom across her giving breast?

They say the sea is a mirror.
Look, and there we are:
a fluke, a dying kind. And our mother now?
She is there, shrunken, sagging,
shocked by our overhandling
and the banquet we hold across the spine
of her back.

Like you, I am a monster of desire,
and when I drink her in, I taste my grave.
I have maimed her to the core.
But her logic of mercy is neat:
when I thirst for the last time,
mother will be a yielding desert,
and I shall suck her bones dry.
II.

“[Representation] means that the real animal can disappear...The dog is a representation of the human; it is not, paradoxically, a dog.”

-Erica Fudge, “A Left-Handed Blow”
Observations on the Ostrich: An Anti-Parable

Like a funerary fop,
the ostrich is bustle-plumed
and clergyman-hued, its raked up feathers
evicing couture, its pinched head setting
its saucer eyes in relief. In panic,

the ostrich flops to the earth
and flattens its sand-colored
head against the land to hide. Farther off,
the lion beholds stretches of desert
and a shrub or shadow rooted against

the landscape. Man, distant too,
sees an artless bird. He says,
*That is the attitude of fear: the bulk
forgotten to save the head, stashed in sand.*
Meanwhile, the poet, intent to capture

the beast, retreats in simile
and costumery to bare
the ostrich to the man, while the lion,
in the service of the poet’s mission,
lies in the glimmer of her misprision.
Colossal Squid in Combat

They say the monster wrestles whales;
   clamping its tentacles around
one’s back, its musculature pressed
   against the blubber in grand sprawls
of suckers, teeth, and whirling hooks,
   its mass contorting in darkness,
it grants this compact of bodies
   recorded in Atlantic foam.
They’ve been glimpsed off Newfoundland’s coast
   grappling in slick embrace, although
(here an annotation’s fastened
to the tale) rarely do the pair
make of their tryst, meat.  More often,
   interlinked (think of a chokehold’s
precise architecture), they die
   before victory, together,
and drift across the floor, the way
   furniture glides around a room
during a lifetime.  In the end,
   the long-tottering leg will break
off the chair, the squid will dangle,
   then drop away from its purchase,
lacy with decay.  Its endnote
   will scuttle along the bottom

of the page, pedantic and vain.
On Becoming Literate

I. The Student

The year she practiced how to make a fist around a pencil, print her name, and read a face, the guest arrived to dictate lines inside her head. He came with drills and knife and nicely sliced her brain in half. That fall, he moved in. Godly, mean, he trained her well, and made her wash her hands each time he tongued a scary thought along the seam. At five, she played at hide and seek each time she wrote her name and failed, her script imperfect, smeared. She tried and tried, and crossed out letters, words, and structures lost to her, until the lines unraveled, leaving less than paper: pith too soft for handling—flower-thin, obscured.

II. The Schoolmaster

He kept her tied up, halved against her will part time and—schooled in ways of being split—she grew to love halfway the tenant’s hold within her head. Often, she slipped up, missed a line the way her mind would skip a stair when roused to some internal sequence rife with guilt. She met him there, and though they vied for rule, the master thrilled at error. Go, he’d say, repeat again each lapse in thought or will. Exacting, real or not, he hid among her books or any place where doubt could not be left untouched, where thought could not be tamed or dropped, aborted. Fixed in loops and kept enthralled by print, she yielded, his.
Leda

Afterwards, pregnant,
she moved into a third floor apartment
and spent her cash on reprints.
And in them, the men,
the mythmakers, who heard her story
told in the bird’s words,
turned her—in picture after picture—
into tragic furniture or
a doll-body draped
around the roundness of the god
of gods, whose extended neck
lanced across her belly
and pinned her under
a mountain of feathers.

While the creatures grew and dabbled
within her, she drew portraits of herself
not as woman or beast,
but as machine—
a windmill with lines as hard
as her jaw and blades spotlighted
with wind lines.
To be efficient, quotidian, intact—
not Dutch nor quixotic:
this was her wish.
Flowerless, her landscapes were filled
with fissures in the earth, outlines
of cliffs as broad as giant’s legs,
and a narrow pass between them.

Forty days later, a twitching
and bustling inside the eggs
broke the spell of her sleep,
and she watched the creatures peck
and head-poke the encasings,
their progress slow,
more excruciating than exquisite.
She imagined all of them into existence:
chicks within a close-quartered mine,
tapping at the veins
where any light is a surprise
to newborn eyes and the slightest glint
might be the first sighting
of gold or an opening.
Ars Poetica

On the upbeat of her wings,
the damselfly lifts off and tacks,
her aerial dip and swerve

curving her towards the scrub
flanking the glinting river.
You close in, the camera eye

jutting forth, fixed on the blade
of a sedge plant where she rests,
her lateral wings stilled

for an instant while you stand
over her, the birdwatcher’s
insect, the most photogenic

and challenging to catch
on camera. Sharpening
the focus, you view the complex

crossveins traced along her wings
and the globes of her eyes
bisected with bands of sky

and steel blue. Before you snap
the shot, she, milling her wings,
skitters and darts to the cleft

of a rock, the water moss,
the knob of an upended root,
the papery veil of a lily.

You step forth to intercept her,
but she—in her acrobatics—resists
your freezing eye, flourishing

her gift for evasion.
Obstare

Armor clanks within.
   An acceder to the anterior,
ingrown, incubates
   in the iconic brow.
Somehow, a hammering
   sounds and strengthens
within the great swallower,
   the god of gods.
Host or daughter,
   his handiwork hunches,
leaden against his lobes,
   her lidless eyes
are trained towards his.
   Taking watch from behind
the ocular glass—
   offscreen, but omniscient—
she fathoms the visions
   of her father; they’re inverted,
of course, seen
   sub rosa, from inside.
The headaches grow.
   When she hacks out of her hold,
splits head-first,
   she— sage—will sound
her birth-cry;
   bearing down to bear herself,
she’ll broach not babyhood,
   but her bare-knuckled self
and her father’s brain;
   her future will be a fight
to right and refocus
   that pre-filial film.
The Apocalypse Comes to Bodega Bay

It’s the end of the world,
  Tippi Hendren is smoking a cigarette,
and from the schoolhouse the children are singing,
  *The butter came out a grizzle-y-grey*
  *Ristle-tee, rostle-tee, Now, now, now!*

And while the crows file along the steel poles
  of the playground by twos, then tens,
the song circles and crests without reason,
  growing as grating and absurd
as Tippi’s mink-coated complacency.

When they flee, the glossy bodies cling to their collars,
  aiming for the napes of their necks, their earlobes.
They clot the skies and rap through the walls:
  mechanical gulls, seabirds riveted to wires,
sparrows in hundreds shattering the laws of nature.

Never doubt the terror of a collective intelligence.
  In every apocalypse, the prophet is the local drunk,
and the girl is too beautiful and wild.
  Coppery Mitch with his bullet head is hankering
to tame her, then war against the omniscient birds.
The Display

I.
Gone: the lilac dive,  
the glitter of pollen. Gone  
too are the cosmos.

II.
Bestowed on a tack,  
below the thorax, the name  
Papilio hovers.

III.
The grave enclosure  
frames the line-up: they’re tagged now,  
stiff in their lockup.

IV.
Mounted, splayed like cards,  
the Pieridae are flightless;  
just cut up play-hearts.

V.
Moths, their negatives,  
are over-exposed, their scales  
like gauze in bulbed light.

VI.
The voyeur eye frets  
at their flourished laterals,  
their backs gripped by pins.

V.
Not stomped on, nor swept  
away, these bugs, with pupil-  
patterned wings, stare back.
For a Frog

Caged, at home in a glassed country,
you, basker, take to the walls,
balled into the angle of penitence:
eyes lidded, asparagus-limbs tucked in,
pointillist belly on display—
just a thumbnail thing mosaicked
and edged with larvae eggs, planets,
and marbled fleas. I could mistake
the belly for map, the frog for token
or decor: a pellucid brooch, maybe,
or worse: a captive of my need,
a prince tricked into compression
or cipher for all overlooked
and misperceived things. You’re equal
to my mishandled love, my delicate
and hard-to-keep creature, whose mood matches
all the species of forest green
and swaps their shades to stay intact.

Your belly though is a worry;
the fine, visible tracery
of your tract seems to be a debacle
of translucence. When you misread your leap
and land, little filament-legs readied,
I dive and clutch, scaring you
into zones beyond human reach.
What Joan Crawford Really Did When Schmaltzy Ran Away

“The family consists of Joan, Franchot, and three dachshunds. Joan has Baby, her dog, and Franchot has Bubchen. Their other, Schmaltzy, got away”
-a caption for a family portrait

When Schmaltzy ran away,
Baby and I applauded his good sense.
Joan Crawford’s glass world wobbles
on its axis like a spinning top too tightly wound,
stuttering across the rough floorboards.
The trail out of MGM is long
and littered with flops and broads,
but just beyond the shaded lawns
of her gated estate there is an exit.
Schmaltzy made a dash for it
and headed out for that field
where all animals go to nurse their slights
and grievances alone.

At first, when she dressed
like the Mrs. Joan Crawford,
(wide ruffle sleeves, a fur swinging
from a shoulder, and a Panama hat
as vast as a hot air balloon)
we knew we were going out.
Now the mask is pressed on
long past the shoots, and she is always out.

Baby says Joan Crawford will always keep us fed
and well-scrubbed, our fur
as shellacked as her hair, but it is hard on us.
The endless tangles of her legginess!
I trip during every promenade.
Still, she is gorgeous, the way an inverted Cubist
vase is gorgeous. She’s all shoulder pads and eyes,
and a waist like a wasp.

Each day, magnetized to the mirror,
Joan Crawford rehearses with herself
in cool tones: Where is your decency?
In what garbage dump did you toss it?
Or she plays the wreck of a star
washed up on a beach with a caretaker
dressed like a lunatic doll.

When Schmaltzy left,
Joan Crawford had one taut cry,
then jump-cut to her window seat.
She turned her face to Schmaltzy’s toy
nestled in the dew-beaded lawn,
then she lost it as she did when Bette Davis
served her a rat smuggled up on a silver dish,
and she, stranded in her wheelchair, wanted out.
She cried and reeled in circles to the music
of the long-barking hunger inside her belly
while we watched re-runs in the next room.
Classifieds:
*Missed Connections*

I.

At every estuary I ask for you.
We had a laugh wading near the mangroves,
waiting for the sun to come up.
You were a pink lamp in the dawn,
a rococo pink, with a body contoured like a heron
and feathers bunched up
like flounce on a flamenco dress.
In our stretch of swamp, silhouetted tortoises
slid past us, a speck of regret in their eyes,
and you found a little knot of fish
to spoon up with your spatula bill,
trilling a riff of bullfrog-grunts
and surfacing with your mouth
fringed with fronds.
In spring, I will be skimming
across the lower latitudes,
looking out for you. Let’s not worry
about probability or the weather.
If you read this, what is the weather to us?

II.

With the eggshell tiling of your belly draped in mud
and your immaculate scales glinting like ceramic in the sun,
you lolled (strategically?) near me, your tail,
articulate and comely, sweeping half moons
along the swamp bank. You smelled of dropworth
and mouldering larvae, and I blew networks of clinging,
bottle green bubbles across your cheeks.
You showed off your snout and curled your forelimbs
around mine; for a full minute, you and I were entwined.

III.

I saw you blinking your wings
against the marine green finish
of a gas pressure lantern.
Pheromones and kerosene spiked
the air, and I flitted above your thorax,
stuttering against your sparked
fury (you had browned your wings
from the light, usually a yucca white).
We found dusty moth wings
pressed like flower petals
along the lantern rim, and we bolted,
returning to the moon as our frame of reference,
and beating wings as thin as confetti
against the night. Although for you,
I would balance astride the flame’s eye
and meet a night swelling with lanterns.
Word of the Day: Mutt [muht]

Noun Slang
1. a mongrel dog; cur
2. a stupid, ignorant, or foolish person
3. an ugly, disliked girl
4. a term of contempt for a biracial person

Word Origin and History: A Personal Account

1992, mother-“The Richardson’s dog is a mutt, half terrier, half beagle.”

1993, a beanpole neighbor kid with a mean face- “Your cousin is a mutt.”

1993, mutt- a word that does not fit, that makes mother angry; a feeling of falling, my body helicoptoring down and down and down like a seedpod streaking off its hook; a livid red flush on my face; my cousin’s voice in the next room, and my mother’s whispered voice: “a bad word.”

2013, mutt- a memory of my cousin standing before the amaryllis bush, laughing before our race, when race meant a run from the front porch to the very edge of our yard and back; a semaphoric shock from the ear to the chest, when our blood sluices through the arteries to gird our hearts, their pump slackening to a thin sob.
The Monster Underfoot,

the one concealed like a secret
calcified below the sea
with its doughy face blanched
and flecked with bruise- pinks,
studded with mossy warts,
and razor-spines stocked with venom,
is not a monster, but a stonefish.

But it is monstrous
to be like stone, they say,
if you are not a stone.

There is the fringed underlip
frilled with seaweed,
the guts as lumpy as a busted tire
and the body that is like stone,
but not.

I am not the stone or the monster,
or even the fish underfoot,
the one darting in and out of the stones,
half-glimpsed beneath the wharf abloom
with rough-petaled barnacles,
but the slippage in sight,
the flash of the current
between fish and stone.
III.

“In trying to reveal the clash of elements that we are—the intellectual, the animal; the blunt, the ingenious; the impudent, the imaginative—one dare not be dogmatic. We are a many-foliaged tree against the moon; a wave penetrated by the sun.”

-Marianne Moore, Prose
The Seals off the Coast of Manomet

We came upon the colloquy of seals, effusive in their idiom of barks and coughs. Some speak with an inquisitive inflection as if to ask, How does this relate to what we were talking about?

And how do we respond in turn to these creatures draped and lolling along the razor-edged rocks, their skin lustrous in the damp air, while others stipple the distance with their bobbing heads? They shimmy off the ledges when they see us or are phlegmatic and sloe-eyed, like a Degas nude in her chaise lounge. One bull heaves a belly as big as a kettle drum up onto a slab, his neck receding into the wrinkles of his scarved fat as he bellows to us, probing our reasoning:

How could these marvels be refuted?
The Mimic Octopus,

Merceau-like, flaunts the exact art
    of mirroring one’s match. Part mime,
part ham (though not to predators),
    it can approximate the state

of a curled sea anemone
    if an enemy gives it chase,
extending its faux tentacles
    coquettishly, as if to tease

or transfuse poison. Down below,
    relation is forged in instants,
and it must shed the self swiftly
    to become a foe: an army

of flowering snakes or a ray’s
    alter ego. With its body
embodying the other,
    it finds itself safest in acts

of correspondence: the traffic
    in identity, the sudden
incipience of encounter,
    when a signal gives birth to form.
The Man Born with a Snake Heart

“Atavism is the rare reappearance, in a modern organism, of a trait from a distant evolutionary ancestor. We describe an apparent case of atavism involving a 59-year-old man with chest pain whose coronary circulation and myocardial architecture resembled those of the reptilian heart.”

-“A Case of Atavism in a Human Being”: Abstract

Before the twinge and pain in his chest, there were the dreams: scenes of wetlands flooded with milkweed and cattail, sulfur rank in the air, and mudflats where he thrilled in secret at the sight of a frog, wall-eyed and refugent beneath a sheen of bog water.

And he dreamed of his wraparound self, bound around the bough of a hemlock before shuddering off a ribbon of skin, moulting a thin ghost of himself to be lost in the rustle of leaves. He drowses under a copse or tests the wiry alacrity of his body, fluent as a fist.

Later, with his chest tricked out with electrodes and jelly-slick with a robin blue luster, he watches the shivery green pulsation of his heart on the monitor, while the echo gives voice to its liquid beating, and belly-up, he hears with his whole being the oblique, blubberly throb of god’s ruse.
Questions for an Ornate Wobbegong

On some nights, in a fugue,
you feel a sudden glassiness
obtrude upon the objects of your world.
You thumb the avocado spine
of a book or the pulp of berries
in their square bowl. Then you glance
in the mirror, and the dog
you don’t own
gives you bunny ears from behind.

What about the ornate wobbegong,
a carpet shark with a blunt jacquard snout
and a slightly toadish face
abloom with seaweed-like stalks,
whose body so matches her world
that divers mistake her for coral and fronds
tangled on the floor of the western Pacific?

Does she ever glimpse her whiskered mug
in the reflection of a diver’s mask
and wonder if she is observing flora and reef,
and then— with creeping horror—
see a self, secreted in a crevice?
The Lioness

After the attackers leave, the lioness finds her cub, splayed and half-gone. She laps at his face, his breast, his haunches with the shivery pink tip of her tongue, mouths the crown in the O of her jaws. She works her tongue through the lush jungle of his veins, plucks at the muscle, thin as violin strings, swills the blood, grinds the fat, sucks from the wreck of his bones until they glint like stars, until she eases him back into her. Above, the vultures wait then flag, thwarted. In the economies of death, let there be no waste, and if there is a witness overhead, let my body’s strange devotions deter him.
Every Little Elegy I Finish

steers me farther away from you.
Now I write about the aggravated gulls
and the whales, imprisoned in their bulk,

who have been beached ashore
and cannot shy away from our ministrations
while the tide is pulled out.

Soon the moon is cleared away like a dish,
and the tide goes out with the whales’ song;
it carries past the dunes and soda joint,

and past a set of shapeless curtains
behind which a lady sloshes into a bath’s hot froth.
The vibrations begin against the porcelain,

and channel up her spine
to the ear canal. Her brain picks up
the accent of a dying tongue,

amplified by the tub’s dimensions,
but far too distant
and visceral for translation.
When the Horseshoe Crab Grieves

Dying, I confide in starfish and lightening.
The stones, twittering distantly, speak to me.
The rain in our open graves is a temporary relief, and from underneath the echo chamber of my shell I hear a soft moaning and dream of the new moon I cannot see.
We speak of the flung-togetherness of our lives: how the slapping tide can turn us like dice and the fish nets frilled with carrion-strings bind us: translucent lobes of jellyfish, dangling crabs, and twisted cordage of seaweed.
All of us know the swift feedback of pain, even the armored ones like me.

Now the gulls that would knock all day against the steel pan of my carapace hesitate and watch from their priestly angle.
We are all poison and poisoned, slick with oil and its rings of dark pearl.
I wear a black veil of seaweed.
Only flies, those thieves of blood, do not know to stay away.
Everywhere along the shore we cry for love and the battering arms of a green sea.
The Ruse of Melancholy

is that it is without defenses,
like the wet dog turned back outdoors
or the tender parts of the soft shell turtle
with its back as exposed as a soft belly.
I want to think that the dry underbelly of the deck
or the riverbank sludge provides a permanent mantle.
Beneath the shed of you, I am happy,
afraid to look out.
The Venus Girdle

When passion was the plaything of the gods,
the epithet spelled Eros,
the girdle magicking love among mortals.
In desire, though, we need no devices
to remake ourselves.
Desire is the creature below:
it has no hook or eye closures
nor was en vogue with the winged bicycle,
but is instead alive, an aquatic hermaphrodite
that has no need to cinch its waist
as it winds snakelike around seals and eels below.
Slight, almost immaterial,
it could be mistaken for a crimp
in the mid-Atlantic, a secret seen slantwise
that turns luminous at night
and ribbons through the waters
close to the surface.
Tricked out with rows of combs,
it is the queen of jellies;
it teaches us the etiquette of love—
all the customs by which we are riven.
Domestic Tortoise

I can intuit now the initial stutter forward
towards the sunlit carpet, the rest and rapt attention,
the pebbled back glinting beneath the window.
Do you like my world, what it yields?
The morning bowl of blueberries, the music,
the scum-lined aquarium, the curtained moonlight,
the plastic water dish? Despite this safety,
I cannot excise the rhythms of fear and retreat in your step.
And the earth may miss you, your darting eye,
your adorable fastidiousness around carrots,
and the slant of your neck,
your face turned away from mine.
Nursery Web Spider

My mother ferries me in her fangs, 
then in her palps, until hatching time.  
In an otherworld, tucked away  
in a tumbledown room,  
she begins her involved labor;  
from her spinnerets she invents  
arcane glyphs, reticulate and comely,  
and entwines a nursery tent in the skeins  
of her web. The outer loops, edged with flies, 
do not distract her: she slips the egg sacs  
into a silk cradle, then stands as sentry  
until the day I emerge as a spiderling  
and—drawn forth as if by an invisible bell—  
I leave. I do not linger at the chink in the lintel.  
I do not look back.

When I rappel off my dragline thread,  
catch the first air draft, and balloon away,  
I give over to the wind  
and fly for months, miles  
beyond her eight eyes  
and the world of her making.

I could land anywhere, and I do:  
far out at sea on a tall ship,  
caught within a wide apron of sail.  
My threads string across the atmosphere:  
they lead me back to her.
When the Outdoor Cats Come In

Inside, we comment on her set
of leek green eyes
transfixed at a point,
her whiskery intelligence,
and her ears curving
like satellite dishes.
And when we miss
our male cat’s mute entry,
she smells the day
imported on his coat:
the tinned fish
that was his breakfast
and the bird heart
that pulsed two beats
in his throat. She knows
he drowsed among the leaves
raked against the wattle fence,
atop the woolen socks
drying in the mud room,
and in the lap of my lover,
whose scent, I know,
has a splash of lavender,
a hint of coffee, and something else
I can’t name that fills me
each time with a rush
of cardinal reds,
the musk of an underwing,
then a flock of colors hotter
than the reddest planet.
Canary-chested,
with the black cape
of my back feathers raked up,
I raise from my brow
two plumes
colored enamel blue,
ribbon-thin and ridged
with queer, serial flags,
and swerve them
towards you,

so far away,

and I—in the riot of my outflung love—
dance along the coiled vines,

swinging

as if on the surface of the sun
and singing so as to relay
across radio frequencies
and migration routes
my whirring call
to you.
The Queer Creatures that Rise at Dusk

Out of her burrow,
    the long-eared hedgehog girl,
to get her girl, comes at dusk,
    wobbling along the cooling sands
to find her lover,

compact and flac-soled,
    with a pinprick mole
on her chin. With others, she pulls herself
    in like a drawstring, but the long-eared girl
draws her out,

and her back, once quilled
    and bristling, the size
of an enlarged heart,
    relaxes, growing as soft-textured
as a doll’s brush.

When they meet,
    their foreplay is gentle;
each takes turns sliding
    their back beneath the belly
of the other;

they nip at their spines
    and rub their snouts
along their warm fur,
    anointed in musk
and sweet tufted grass.
Dream of the Mid-Wife

You come to me in confinement, bearing sponge and pail and a sliced-open pomegranate that spills down your hand. I am naked, and my lungs are being wrung like wet laundry. You tell me to breathe with you, and I do. The pail’s left beneath me, To catch the blood, you say, while you soap your hands then squeeze the fruit down my gullet. I lap at the juice. You lift me closer and I fan open like a touch-me-not, while you, laughing, fold your hands inside, soft moth wings probing, and, reaching deeper, thumb the cervix, palming the tender, entwined life inside. Come, cross-over, you murmur. My lungs relax, and the globe you rotate is righted. Then, a creature with an oyster-luster, as slippery as a fish, crowns, cries, and pulls away. She lurches outside, then—finding her legs—takes off, bucking through the yard. You take my arm, and lured, we follow; she might take us back to that land of florid beasts who have no baseline for love or what forms love brings forth.
The Fish beneath the Portuguese Man of War

Although the inverted crown
squirting snarls of tentacles laced with poison
trawl for prey and goes winding, winding
down into the gloom like Escher stairs,

I flutter beneath the curtain
of stingers, riskless to me.

Tide-thrust polyps propel me forward,
like stewards of my will,

and I trail their colony— not a self—
that balloons an amethyst bladder above the sea line

while the tentacled clan goes fishing,
hovering like fringe around my fins.

In sleep, safe in the perimeter of their reach,
I drift eastwards, following a gas-filled moon.

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