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CONSTRUCTING TRANSGRESSION: CRIMINALITY IN EXPERIMENTAL LITERATURE

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CONSTRUCTING TRANSGRESSION: CRIMINALITY IN
EXPERIMENTAL LITERATURE

BY

CHARLES KELL

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines integral, challenging contemporary poetry and fiction, and its relationship to notions of the criminal in multiple guises. The present focus on “criminal” excavates not only its literal meaning—the nature of crime, and its specific relation to penal law—but also brings to light how the “criminal” affects the construction of fiction and poetry, and the lives of various individuals (speakers) within the chosen texts. Intricately tied with the criminal are practices that transgress, and this study will also locate specific creations where poets and novelists construct transgressions that challenge contemporary ideas of narrative and poetic modes. This study argues that expanding the term “criminal” opens up not only the current field of “criminal studies,” but also examines contemporary poetry and prose. This dissertation argues that a new formulation of the criminal proliferates practices of subjectivities that are forced upon individuals and taken for granted, and that the “criminal” is intricately tied to works that transgress and experiment.

The criminal, at its most basic, involves the nature of crime; it relates to the penal law; guilty; characteristic of a criminal. Most studies of “criminality” fall under the term “prison literature,” which focuses on individuals who have been incarcerated, and subsequently chronicled their lives in writing. Other studies and novels focus specifically on the struggle of individuals in prison. This dissertation looks to make a distinct break between “prison” writing and “criminal” writing, moving the focus from incarceration to other social boundaries; however, “prison” and “criminal” are two terms that often intersect and overlap. “Criminal” writing does not take incarceration as its jumping off point, though incarceration may play a role; instead, the “criminal” is a spatial way of

being in the world that either marks one off from contemporary society, or borders on notions which denote one as outsider. This project looks to expand the field from literatures focusing primarily on incarceration to studies depicting acts of transgression and deviance that may not necessarily land an individual behind bars, but mark one as separate from societal norms, as an outsider. This study envisions the “criminal” as branching out from its basic definition to include a variety of ways individuals “transgress” from their present predicament. This includes but is not limited to illegal acts one partakes in but is not caught, and acts that jeopardize one’s place in society. As such, the “criminal” is opaque, nebulous, harder to pin down; it works from the periphery, the margins, interstitial spaces; whereas “prison” writing already denotes the given fact that one is or has been incarcerated, calling to mind a fixed location and trajectory.

Both poetry and fiction illustrate this branching out in similar and disparate ways, and the focus on both showcases the plurality and broad reach of these genres. The central objects of study will be a range of contemporary American poetry and fiction: James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956); Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction* (2010); Joanna Scott’s *Arrogance* (1990); and C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007). These texts give voice to the myriad, opaque notions of the “criminal,” while at the same time blurring the lines of how poetry and prose function; each text, as well, marks off distinct breaks in the artists’ bodies of work. These texts transgress on multiple levels, in turn, mirroring and mimicking the slippery, proliferating term—“criminal.”

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Introduction

Constructing the Criminal

To be marked or recognized as criminal is to be on the margins of society, in a different space; to be a criminal is to be considered an outsider. Criminality defines both an individual and acts that “transgress”¹ the mores, codes, and laws of a given time. One definition of criminal is a person who has committed a crime; relating to crime, or something (or someone) disgraceful or shocking. Criminal relates both to the individual and the acts the individual practices, manifesting in multiple ways that are far-reaching and can have lasting, permanent effects on the person and those around him or her. For example, once an individual is arrested, placed before court, convicted of a crime, he or she is forever part of the system, which from this point on has a mark of control over the individual. More covert ideas of the criminal involve transgressive behaviors² that set one in a different space from what is acceptable. Traditional literary constructions of the criminal follow a trajectory that falls under the term “prison literature,” which focuses on those who have been incarcerated, and subsequently chronicled their lives in writing. These texts take incarceration as the primary focus. My study looks to make a distinct break between “prison” writing and “criminal” writing, moving the focus from incarceration to other social boundaries that are “transgressed,” but not always punished through prison. Specific examples from this study include David’s homosexuality in 1950s United States and Paris in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), and Egon

¹ To go beyond the limits of what is morally, socially, or legally acceptable. I will also add creatively to this definition as well.

² These behaviors may include different sexual practices, not fitting into societal norms, communities, and various other actions that mark an individual as “other.”

Schiele's portraits of nude women in *fin-de-siècle* Austria in Joanna Scott's *Arrogance* (1990).

Prison and criminal, regarding literature, are two terms that often overlap and intersect, however. Criminal writing, I contend, does not take as its jumping off point concentrations on incarceration, though incarceration may play a role; instead, the “criminal” is a spatial and temporal way of being in the world that either marks one off from contemporary society, or borders on notions which denote one as outside, or aside. Moreover, this study envisions the criminal as branching out from its basic definition to include a variety of ways individuals “transgress” from their present predicament. This includes but is not limited to illegal acts one partakes in but is not caught, and acts jeopardizing one's place in society. Traditionally, these figures might fall under the term “outsider”; however, this moniker does not take the various levels of transgression and their subsequent repercussions far enough. As such, the “criminal” is opaque, nebulous, harder to pin down; it works from the periphery, the margins, interstitial spaces; whereas “prison” writing already denotes the given fact that one is, has been, or will soon be incarcerated, such narratives illustrate fixed boundaries. One way to describe the individuals in this project is through Homi Bhabha's use of “liminal spaces.”³ Traditionally used in conjunction with postcolonial studies, the current use of Bhabha's liminal spaces is apt for pushing and expanding the notion of the criminal, and also various modes of formal creation within a given artist's oeuvre.

³ Liminal refers to a transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change. Early in *The Location of Culture* (2004) Bhabha contends: “What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives or originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2).

This study argues that focusing, excavating, and expanding the term “criminal” opens up not only the current field of “criminal studies,” but also enables and examines the expanding notions of contemporary poetry and prose. I argue that my formulation of the criminal proliferates practices of subjectivities that are both forced upon, taken upon, and embraced by individuals, and that the “criminal” is intricately tied to works that transgress and experiment. The chosen texts in this study fall under the auspices of experimental literature that seek to transgress, and this focus not only looks at individuals within the texts, but offers a creative break and turn in each writer’s oeuvre as well. This break occurs as a distinct turn in each artist’s mode of writing up to that point, and specifically locates this turn formally and thematically. These texts experiment and push boundaries not only within the writer’s practice but in each genre respectively. The central objects of study are a disparate range of groundbreaking contemporary American poetry and fiction: James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956); Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction* (2010); Joanna Scott’s *Arrogance* (1990); and C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007). These texts illustrate the myriad, liminal notions of the criminal, while at the same time blurring the lines of how poetry and prose function, marking off distinct breaks in the artists’ bodies of work.

This project extends the scholarly work done on criminal studies—a field that has risen to prominence in recent decades, centering around Michel Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish* (1975) as a point of departure to investigate how power is constructed within the penal system, and how individuals are turned into subjects. Power is not just a negative force in a prisoner’s existence,⁴ but it can also be used in an attempt to reclaim agency.

⁴ “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality;

This factor has been at the forefront of most important studies of criminality, studies, I argue, which fall under the term “prison literature.” Similarly to Foucault’s use of power, I argue criminality proliferates in a much broader fashion. Not only does the criminal connote individuals who have been incarcerated, as well as the “governmentality” of individuals, but also men and women marked as “criminal” because of certain behaviors, transgressions, or ways of being in the world. This work not only recognizes those who have suffered through prison, but also individuals struggling under societal constraints, whether racial, heteronormative, or economic: these people are both ostracized and condemned; tortured physically, emotionally, and mentally. Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction* (2010) looks at the way individuals deal with the criminal aspects of war, of the United States’ occupation and involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. An example that takes incarceration as its jumping off point, but branches out, is C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation*, ostensibly a book about prisoners, yet a text that locates these individuals in different spaces of being, whether through their writing, speech, and construction of myriad thoughts, not simply through the lens of incarceration. The notion of the criminal includes those who have resisted through reading / writing, acquiring knowledge in non-traditional ways, balanced difficult themes / subjects without drawing a clear line or stance, as well as other practices such as running, hiding, and various transgressive acts that enable individual’s moments of creativity that can lead to new ways of being. Thus, not only does Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish* factor in, but, more importantly, his notion of “Heterotopias” as both “different places” and “counter-sites,”⁵

it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production” (194).

⁵ There are places that are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (3-4). Foucault

and spaces of deviation, “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (5). Granted, this is a broad range of themes; however, many of these themes are illustrated and at work in the chosen texts of this project, which at first glance appear incongruous, but overlap, talk, and play with one another formally and thematically.

Critical Legal Studies and Prison Literature

Critical Legal Studies (CLS), is a movement that developed in the late 1970s and proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s, and is committed to merging progressive ideologies with legal studies in both theory and practice. Literary studies have grown out of CLS, fostered by writers such as Robert W. Gordon, James Boyle, Peter Gabel, and Paul Harris.⁶ This work has been integral in shaping the current study and practice of criminality, and has brought about such excellent works as D. Quentin Miller’s *A Criminal Power: James Baldwin and the Law* (2012).⁷ However, most of these studies are narrowly defined (or confined) to various individuals within prison walls, the societal circumstances which placed them there, and the subsequent work done to overcome this environment. In many ways, this field follows the mode of the *Bildungsroman* or

further mentions places called “heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (5).

⁶ Gordon sees legal discourse as one of power, rationalizing an existing order because of how it attempts to uphold the status quo. Gordon notes that “For adherents to CLS, law is neither a ruling class game plan nor a repository of noble if perverted principles. It is a plastic medium of discourse that subtly conditions how we experience social life” (191). James Boyle’s *Critical Legal Studies* (1992), and Peter Gabel’s and Paul Harris’s “Building Power and Breaking Images: Critical Legal Theory and the Practice of Law” are also integral in the development and thought of CLS.

⁷ Miller sets out to examine “Baldwin’s life and virtually all of his works in the context of law. I am defining “the law” broadly to include two of its main connotations: (1) jurisprudence, or the official history of policies and legal decisions that compromise the American legal system, and (2) the common perception of the law as a potentially menacing regulatory force represented by police, corrections officers, juries, and prisons” (3).

Künstlerroman, and could be labeled “*Verbrecherroman*,” or “maturation of the criminal,” because of its clear trajectory, sole focus on the criminal specific, and the penal system.

H. Bruce Franklin’s *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978) does much to establish this genre. Franklin’s paradigmatic study draws attention to the difference between races during and after incarceration.⁸ Franklin traces prisoners from the slave narratives of Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs to Malcolm X and Chester Himes, noting that “the main lines of American literature can be traced from the plantation to the penitentiary” (xxxii). In a different vein, David Guest’s *Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment* (1997), focuses primarily on capital punishment in what the author deems “execution novels.” Looking at works such as Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), Norman Mailer’s *Executioner’s Song* (1979), as well as others, Guest argues that these texts “address a capital crime in which the identity of the killer is known and in which the central question is thus not guilt or innocence but criminal responsibility” (xvii). What these two studies attempt to do is locate a moral outrage through their subjects. Franklin draws attention to the extreme disparity between African Americans and whites housed in prisons. Guest, in his intense examination of Mailer’s execution and later dismemberment of Gary Gilmore’s body,⁹ brings to light the abject horror of closed-

⁸ “Most of the nonwhites recognize that they are in prison not for what they have done as individuals but for what they are collectively...” (xv). Franklin notes that “White convicts are threatened with the stick of being reduced to the level of nonwhites while being offered the carrot of reintegration into the dominant white society—represented immediately by the prison officials, ultimately by the hierarchy outside—if they only acknowledge that the problem lies within them, that they themselves are responsible for their living in cages” (xv).

⁹ “Mailer’s obsession with detail seems to increase as the narrative approaches the moment of death. The account of Gilmore’s final forty-eight hours and the disposal of his body, at 157 pages, is as long as a good-

door executions, regardless of the criminal's crimes. Moreover, Mailer, in his essay, "The White Negro," argues that criminal transgression and pathology are effective strategies for resisting society's efforts to police the normal and to force each citizen toward conformity. Studies such as Franklin's and Guest's are extremely important for mapping the landscape of prison literature, illustrating the main tenets of Critical Legal Studies.¹⁰ Mailer's views, though singular in descriptive horrors, seem to both fetishize and aestheticize the prisoner.

A romantic notion of criminal / prisoner is a common literary trope. There appears to be a simultaneous dichotomy of attraction coupled with repulsion, illustrated by what Michel Leiris discusses as an "instinctive fear of criminal types, an ambiguous fear that includes a certain attraction," and, Leiris continues, "insurmountable repugnance, on the one hand, for their pale, criminal faces; pity and sympathy, on the other, because of their misfortune and because I immediately imagined myself as one of them" (21). Other famous literary examples include Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* (1860-62), Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), Oscar Wilde's long poetic text, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), Antonio Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935), the experience of Monsieur Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), and the many illustrations throughout Jean Genet's oeuvre, to name only a select few.¹¹ The reader of these texts often feels a simultaneous draw, or voyeur's

sized novel. More than ten pages are devoted to the few minutes that Gilmore spends strapped in the execution chair" (132).

¹⁰ To expose the contradictions in established institutions and to reveal the power dynamics under the surface of these institutions.

¹¹ Many of these writers / texts have been examined in a variety of different scholarly studies, as well as other texts: *Crime Culture: Figuring Criminality in Fiction and Film* (2012), Brian Nicol, Eugene McNulty, Patricia Pulham; *Crime in Literature: Sociology of Deviance and Fiction* (2003), Vincenzo Ruggiero: the former focuses on writers such as J.G. Ballard, Kazuo Ishiguro, Margaret Atwood, while the latter looks at Dostoevsky, Cervantes, and Camus.

look at an alternative life, albeit from a safe distance. Other texts representing prison life are often straight-forward accounts of the horrors behind bars.¹² This fact prompted Alexandra Alter, in a review of Curtis Dawkins's new short story collection, *The Graybar Hotel* (2017), to exclaim,

It's surprising how little contemporary fiction has emerged from American prisons. More than two million people in the United States are incarcerated, and many prisons have writing programs. PEN America runs a writing program that reaches more than 20,000 prisoners. But very little contemporary prison literature is released by major publishing houses, which seldom consider writers who are not represented by agents and which may be wary of logistical and ethical pitfalls of working with convicts. (A13)¹³

A literary and sociological study extending scholarship on prison literature would be an important undertaking. Curtis Dawkins's new book will undoubtedly complicate and extend the conversation of prison literature. Other contemporary poets are perfect for this study as well: Etheridge Knight, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Reginald Dwayne Betts's *Bastards of the Reagan Era* (2015) come to mind. Again, though, despite the importance

¹² Jack Henry Abbott's *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981), Edward Bunker's *No Beast as Fierce* (1973), Wilbert Rideau's *In the Place of Justice* (2010), to name a few popular texts; women, not surprisingly, are underrepresented in this genre; a few works include Cristina Rathbone's *A World Apart* (2006), a collection of narratives, *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons* (2017), edited by Ayelett Waldman, Robin Levi, and Michelle Alexander. Angela Davis is one of the most well-known writers from prison, as well.

¹³ Curtis Dawkins, author of *The Graybar Hotel* (his first book), has an MFA from Southern Illinois University, and is serving a life sentence in Michigan for shooting and killing Thomas Bowman in 2004. The victim's mother, Sharon Hilton said that she was "happy that he's found a purpose through writing: 'I can't think of anything more horrific than having to spend your life in prison,' she said." The victim's brother, Kenneth Bowman, wished that Mr. Dawkins had received the death penalty: "I don't think he should have the right to publish anything" (A13). More recent novels include Mesha Maren's *Sugar Run* (2019) and Nico Walker's *Cherry* (2018).

of this field, it would seem to follow my notions of dichotomy and clear trajectory, constructed with the penal system and / or prison specifically in mind. I am much more interested in the nebulous, diffuse texts that jut in myriad directions, look at criminals and criminal behaviors, not just prisoners. The weird and experimental texts that operate and illustrate my idea of the criminal as not only one that examines an individual's journey in prison, but as a state of being in reaction to one's current predicament that can, in turn, enact new ways of being.

Constructing Transgression

One innovation that shifts away from Critical Legal Studies and traditional writing about criminality, is an emphasis on form. Previously, form is secondary to theme and setting. The texts in this study, on the other hand, foreground innovation and experimental form as a jumping off point for examination. This emphasis on form includes but is not limited to the construction of each text, and its relationship with the writer's previous and subsequent work. However, exploring this shift by no means is intended to "aestheticize" or "fetishize" the criminal, turning either the figure or mode of writing into something romantic. The criminal is only romantic to those who have never been in trouble. This exploration of form further situates these writers as integral practitioners in the landscape of contemporary literature, illustrating through construct not only transgression with subject matter, but also with form. The meaning of form, though, is both varied and overlapping. Form can be loosely described as the characteristics that distinguish one genre from another; it can also illustrate the intrinsic organization of the parts of a text, and its relation to its overall effect on the reader. Some

critics tend to combine form and structure, while others tend to separate these two aspects.¹⁴ At its most basic, form is “a term for the multiple systems that shape as well as convey information” (498). In this study, form subsumes these definitions and has a distinct relationship with transgression and criminality.

This study of form locates each writers’ turn as something experimental compared with their previous bodies of work. This experimentation is practiced in a number of ways: from breaks in point-of-view and complete ruptures in narrative storytelling that dislocate speakers from their settings, to fractured poetic sequences that employ white space and fragmented, frustrating thought processes and syntax. The practices in these texts also break the traditional conventions surrounding the study of criminality. A foregrounding in form and experimentation helps investigate the themes in each text, texts that falls under the designation “contemporary.” Experimental, however, is not defined by time period or literary movement, and despite the fact that modernist / high modernist, and postmodern literature practice experimentation, my goal is not to clearly demarcate these texts as avant-garde, postmodern, or even post-postmodern, but to configure their status and place within contemporary, experimental works that practice transgression. Instead of trying to fix them to a certain genre, I am more concerned with exploring their fluid, oft-changing effects. The very nature and practice of experimental, I contend, is to transgress the limits of what has come before. Something that transgresses is also something that disturbs. David Bergman describes reading something disturbing: “And then something odd happens. I can’t let this uneasiness release me,” he continues,

¹⁴ “Some theorists (such as those associated with New Criticism) have equated form and structure, whereas others (such as those associated with the Chicago School) have distinguished between the terms, arguing that form is the emotional force or shaping principle that gives rise to the mechanics of structure.... Most contemporary critics argue that form, structure, style, and content are intertwined” (188).

“and so by small increments, a certain intimacy develops between us as if it had discovered something in me I would rather have left alone, and I had discovered within it something it doesn’t seem aware that it possesses” (1). What disturbs me about the transgressive nature of my chosen texts is how they not only subvert and extend previous modes of writing, but also how they offer a distinct break in each writer’s body of work. This break mirrors the rupture I articulate from “prison literature” to “criminality,” and takes place because of some important, underlying factor at work in the writer’s practice. James Baldwin, for example, following *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), offers a sudden and distinct break in both form and content with *Giovanni’s Room*. Similarly, C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation*, is a startling turn in both form and content from her previous poetry.

To further articulate my theorization of constructing transgression, a brief description of some of the characteristics of contemporary fiction and poetry are necessary. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century an argument has hovered over the fiction world that is still relevant. In their famous back-and-forth, “A Debate on Fiction” (1979), William H. Gass and John Gardner argue the purpose of writing. Gass contends: “I am interested in transforming language, in disarming the almost insistent communicability of language,” with the aim of fiction, or a book, as “something that exists simply to be experienced” (26). Gardner, on the other hand, speaks of creating fiction that is “consciously moral, fiction which tries to understand important matters by means of the best tool human beings have” (25). Gardner aims to affirm the moral, the good, things that are “helpful to people, that makes it possible for individuals to live in society” (25). Gardner sees writers like John Barth, Stanley Elkin, and Gass as focusing

on “language for its own sake, more in love, on principle, with the sound of words—or with newfangledness—than with creating fictional worlds,” and Gardner continues, “But the fact remains that the search for opacity has little to do with the age-old search for understanding and affirmation” (26). At its plainest level, Gass is concerned with adding a strange, beautiful object, whereas Gardner’s goal is to assert goodness. Brian McHale states that “postmodernist fiction is ontological. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground post-cognitive questions: which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (10). Linda Hutcheon argues that “postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously,” she continues, “pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past” (180). Steven Connor sees postmodernism as embracing flux and chaos (rather than attempting to order or reign it in), symbolized through notions of multiplicity, proliferation, openness, and hybridity. These extended comments on postmodernist fiction are important to situating the fiction in my study, not to delineate the texts within this fold but to showcase some of their practices. Contemporary writers and critics are moving away from the term postmodern, locating the current milieu in something else.

Jeremy Green sees this move as evolving to include the rise of social media, and a transformation that can have a greater impact on culture and society. Fiction, Green posits, “can exploit, for reasons of cognitive power and affective intensity, the intimate relays of commodity, image, fantasy, and sociality that comprise public and private dimensions of experience” (216). Green’s view is open and encompassing, letting in

various new media and ways of thinking about genre. Other important studies show postmodernist fiction in its later stages engaging consciously with the past through form and content. Wendy Steiner extends this view, noting that experimental techniques have become available to writers not self-consciously attempting to follow modernism, notably women and minority authors. Steiner also denounces formal innovation with artistic importance, noting that a focus on mechanistic quality underestimates the complexity of any cultural moment. I argue, in turn, that these two elements blur and go hand-in-hand, and the stylized texts I will be talking about concentrate both on formal experimentation while being culturally cognizant as well. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* obviously fits this mode, but also Joanna Scott's *Arrogance*, which portrays the tortured Austrian artist Egon Schiele (1890-1918) through artistic creation, trial, and imprisonment. These various investigations and marking off of genres are important to a certain extent. Tracing the changes throughout fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is helpful and instructive; however, my project in labeling these chosen texts as "contemporary" aims to do something more than simply categorize them as belonging to either side or space of literature. I am concerned not so much with locating Baldwin, Scott, Rosmarie Waldrop, and C.D. Wright within a genre or milieu. Instead, what drives me about these individual texts are the disparate ways each takes elements of form and reconstructs to develop different ways of thinking about themes, particularly criminality, and how the criminal illustrates many moving parts at work and play within these texts.

An extension of my discussion on form is a contemporary echo of the William Gass / John Gardner argument. In a 2002 *New Yorker* essay, Jonathan Franzen describes two types of writers: the "Contract" and the "Status." The "Contract" Writer produces

fiction with the purpose to entertain the reader, “Contract stipulates that if a product is disagreeable to you the fault must be the product” (100); “Status,” on the other hand, portrays the author as “placing his selfish artistic imperatives or his present vanity ahead of the audience’s legitimate desire to be entertained—of being, in other words, an asshole” (100). Franzen sees William Gaddis, with his dense, labyrinthine texts, as the prototypical “Status Writer,” noting that difficult or experimental literature “operates as a smoke screen for an author who has nothing interesting, wise, or entertaining to say” (111). Franzen argues (like Gardner) fiction’s goal is to delight and instruct. If a text is difficult, experimental, or frustrates readers’ expectations of payoff in any way, it is detrimental, a sign of vanity, and breaks the supposed contract between writer and reader. Ben Marcus’s vehemently disagrees. A practicing proponent of experimental fiction, Marcus contends that “it is arguably sublime when a text creates in us desires without seeming desperate to please us,” he continues, “It’s a hunger for something unknown, the belief that the world and its doings have yet to be explored. If Gaddis can be exhausting, it’s because he’s relentless, and it takes energy to run alongside him. If Franzen finds him boring, fine. I want nothing more than to follow Gaddis wherever he goes, precisely because I’ve never been there before” (48). Marcus, clearly, sides with the experimental, noting its power to transform. In an interview, the poet Geoffrey Hill discusses this dichotomy at length:

One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most “intellectual” piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are? Why does music, why does poetry have to address us in simplified terms, when if

such simplification were applied to a description of our own inner selves we would find it demeaning? I think art has a right—not an obligation—to be difficult if it wishes. And, since people generally go on from this to talk about elitism versus democracy, I would add that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic. And that tyranny requires simplification. (276-277)

Marcus's notion of "never having been there" articulates the experimental spaces I explore in this study, spaces that are at work in each of the texts. Form, particularly experimental form, gives rise to strange, uncharted landscapes; one such text is Joanna Scott's *Arrogance*. In these arguments and back and forth about the role and project of literature, there again appears an either / or dichotomy: one is for simplicity or difficulty, a mass readership or the singular reader. Like Marcus, I prefer the unwieldy, difficult, heavy-as-a-brick doorstops that take multiple readings to engage; however, I also enjoy Franzen's fiction and care deeply for "traditional" plot, narrative, character. These two approaches and stylistic differences need not be mutually exclusive. One main focus of this study carves out a space for the experimental as a practice that deeply engages with the social.

Like the back-and-forth in contemporary fiction, there is an ongoing dichotomy in contemporary poetry as well. Contemporary poetry consists of disparate, dispersed communities practicing a wide range of tactics that both subsume past experimentation while pointing toward new modes of expression. Jennifer Ashton proclaims that the forms of oppositional poetry—between an avant-garde / language aesthetic and one focused on the lyric—has, "in the twenty-first century, begun to disappear and that, more controversially, in a certain sense, the lyric has won" (216). What Ashton posits does not

necessarily mean that poets no longer practice extreme opposites (conceptual poetry, Flarf, as opposed to narrative, post-confessional, for example), but these strict dichotomies have blurred and become much more fluid in practice. Ashton notes Juliana Spahr and Claudia Rankine's anthology, *American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002), showcases "a new generation of poets, drawing on the formal techniques of their Language movement predecessors, discover that these techniques are not inhospitable to the lyric after all" (218). In discussing Craig Dworkin, particularly his anthology (co-edited with Kenneth Goldsmith) *Against Expression* (2011), Ashton exclaims, "what Dworkin frequently manages to observe and yet also manages to treat as incidental is the extent to which these projects [conceptual] depend on reminding us, even in their absence, of the subjects that produced the data in the first place" (219). So, what remains, despite the attempt at an "author-less," "subject-less" text, is a distinct trace of both. Stephanie Burt, in another description of contemporary poetics, contends that most of "the new North American poets I've liked lately share a surface difficulty: they tease or demand or frustrate; they're hard or impossible to paraphrase; and they try not to tell stories" (6). Burt describes this group of poets as the "Ellipticals," who reject poems "written in order to demonstrate theories; scene painting and prettiness as its own end; slogans; authenticity and wholeheartedness; mysticism; straight-up narrative; and extended abstraction," Burt continues, "Ellipticals are uneasy about (less often, hostile to) inherited elites and privileges, but they are not populists, and won't write down to, or, connect the dots for their readers; their difficulty conveys respect" (353). Burt locates C.D. Wright within the "Ellipticals," and many of her practices exemplify this moniker; however, Wright, like Rosmarie Waldrop, does not

belong to any specific group of poetic practice. Cole Swensen has taken the moniker “Ellipticals” to task, arguing that it pigeonholes and attempts to prescribe a like group of gestures and ideals to a disparate group of writers.

Hank Lazer discusses these fluidities when he notes “a certain specific odd music of newly emergent lyricisms,” and contends, “it is possible now to incorporate philosophical or abstract language into the realm of the lyrical, to savor the collision of different discourses within a single poem” (40). This blurring and rupture are further illustrated in Gillian White’s study, *Lyric Shame*:

What *Lyric Shame* proposes is that these writers, conventionally thought to be “lyric” (whether defended or shamed for it) offer us new inroads through the problematic and interesting limit of the personal. They only awkwardly fit the “lyric” ideal abstracted and projected on them by both their fans and detractors, and they can even be read to foreground writing and discourse as these disrupt the figure of the poetic speaker that is often assumed as quintessentially “lyric.” (6)

This collapsing, melding, fluid practice has the reverse effect in Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction* (2010), where heretofore experimental practice gives way to a direct engagement through form and voice with the criminal in the investigative, probing questions of how one engages in the world around: what is the role of creator / artists during a time of war? And what does engagement even entail / produce? The characteristics of how individuals deal with trouble and the actual prison are further evident in the final chapter, on C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007), where the poet takes speech from incarcerated inmates in Louisiana state prisons and

situates them as “poetic sequences” that bear witness to the toll confinement takes on individuals. To better illustrate these criminal, transgressive spaces, a more focused examination of some theoretical apparatuses is in order.

Theorizing Transgression

This study focuses on three major elements that set my chosen texts apart and usher in a different way of reading: the criminal, transgression, and liminal spaces. These areas are not so much critically underexplored and interdependent as looked at and experienced differently. One of my goals in focusing on these three elements is to open other ways of experiencing these texts. Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (2015) argues not for the end of critical critique, but for an extension, a moving through and beyond. Felski argues that “we can expand our repertoire of critical moods while embracing a richer array of critical methods. Why—even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity—is the affective range of criticism so limited?” (13). I am not so much looking to infuse an extra layer of affect in my reading as seeking additional ways of looking. On the surface I have seemed to pigeonhole Critical Legal Studies’ scope and focus of prison literature as depicting subjects in and around the penal system. My project is not a tearing down, a critique of Critical Legal Studies, but one of building and seeking new experiences, manifested by the criminal, transgression, and liminal spaces, that create other ways of thinking, acting, and feeling.

As Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish* is an integral text to Critical Legal Studies and prison literature, the criminal moves away from the focus on penal incarceration. One underexplored moment and character from this important text has always struck me as

unique, an outlier: the young vagabond, Béasse. Foucault notes how Béasse has taken each form of restriction and seemingly flipped it around.¹⁵ After being sentenced by the judge for “vagabondage”—having no steady home, work, family—Béasse, “pulled an ugly face, then, recovering his good humour, remarked: ‘Two years, that’s never more than twenty-four months. Let’s be off, then’” (291). Foucault reads this reaction through a dichotomy: the judge represents “living legality, the spirit and letter of the law”—a discipline. Béasse, on the other hand, represents disorder. Foucault argues that “it is indiscipline, rather than the criminal offence, that causes the rupture. An indiscipline of language: incorrect grammar and the tone of the replies indicate a violent split between the accused and society...” (292). Béasse, after his reply, “disappears.” He is now part of the penal system, but it is his actions, mannerisms, that mark him off, away from. The reader does not follow him into incarceration; there is no tracking of the system’s effects on him. It is this aporia, unknown space, that has stuck with me, and serves as an interlocutor for seeking out other traces of transgression.

Georges Bataille’s various modes of thinking are integral to my theorization. Bataille’s “heterology” is thought that dwells at the limits and abides in the marginal, the outcast, and sees “excess” as an adjective of the abhorrent, a natural condition of the world. In *Eroticism* (1957), Bataille specifically articulates the co-dependence of transgression and taboo, that transgression is grounded in the setting of boundaries and structures in a given place and time. Prohibition and transgression work simultaneously because the laws, mores, or codes that are in place draw attention to which it controls and

¹⁵ “All the illegalities that the court defined as offences the accused reformulated as the affirmation of a living force: the lack of home as vagabondage, the lack of a master as independence, the lack of work as freedom, the lack of a time-table as the fullness of days and nights” (291)

the thing (behavior, thought, action) that is excluded becomes transformed by its exclusion. The ideas of heterology and excess are evident and will be examined at length in my reading of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, particularly through David's tortured views of himself and others from an ever-shifting queer lens. Despite the prevalence of transgression that Bataille theorizes, there is a distinct strain of conservation¹⁶ running through his work. According to Rebecca Roberts-Hughes, "The conservation I find in Bataille's human, then, is about the endurance of its very humanity.... Like other philosophers before and since him, Bataille describes a human being that forms, or defends, or conserves itself" (161). The "conservation," as well, is intricately tied to transgression and taboo, and is worked on and practiced through multiple modes of being brought about by the criminal.

Michel Serres's *The Parasite* (1980) overturns the thought of what a "parasite" is and how it functions.¹⁷ No longer an entity that merely exploits and uses its host, in this text the parasite is also one that disturbs and complicates various systems, collapsing and showing that relationships of "host" and "parasite" are fluid, interchanging, and interdependent on one another. Both, Serres argues, take something from one another without offering anything in return, and thus new relations and systems are formed and lived in. What was once viewed as destruction is now seen as integral to the continued

¹⁶ "Transgression is an experience that 'signifies' violation of the terms of our human world. In transgression, it is not annihilation that we experience (because we would be annihilated and unable to experience anything) but *threat*; we experience the anguish of own possible annihilation in that we challenge the taboo that is the boundary that helps to constitute our humanity. If we did experience annihilation, we would not exist to experience it. This is why Bataille describes transgression as *maintaining* the prohibition. The human subject is thus conserved, albeit through a tempestuous and anguished experience. Transgression is only as important as the taboo—our experience of it is more tumultuous, and therefore more impressive and poignant, but no more crucial to us than our boundaries" (161).

¹⁷ Parasite in French, *Parasite*, has three meanings: a biological parasite, a social parasite, and static.

being of a system. Serres draws upon the French word *hôte*—used for both “host” and “guest”—and posits that relations of the parasite is one of *hôte á hôte*.¹⁸ What grounds Serres’s project is use and investigation of fable. In particular, the fable of the country rat who is invited to feast in the house of the town rat. While they eat in the house of the rich tax collector, he wakes up and disturbs them, the country rat flees, preferring to eat simply without worry rather than gorge in constant fear. Serres’s text multiplies and overturns this act of interrupted feast. What sticks out is how an apparently simple, closed system is constantly thwarted and interrupted by some noise or element that can ultimately affect a shift in relations. The rats are viewed as parasites, yet they form a stable system that is interrupted by the noise, the disturbance of the tax collector (and who, in turn, “parasites” others through the collections of taxes). Guest and host alternate and switch. In my project, criminality often acts as aberrant, a break, a cut in the normative system, most often through transgressive / deviant behavior that disturbs the agreed upon codes and mores. The role of the female speaker / protagonist in Joanna Scott’s *Arrogance*, through her skulking, gazing, clinging to, subtly and specifically illustrates some of these features.

The role of liminal space as other space, or one aside, is at constant work and intricately tied to the always moving idea of transgression and criminality. Michel de Certeau’s theory of “tactics” as what differentiates one and enables one to navigate new spaces and situations is integral: “clever tricks, learning how to get away with

¹⁸ “It might be dangerous not to decide who is the host and who is the guest, who gives and who receives, who is the parasite and who is the *table d’hôte*, who has the gift and who has the loss, and where hostility begins within hospitality” (15-16). Derrida’s notion of these terms and relations, particularly in “Hostipitality,” *Of Hospitality*, *Adieu: to Emmanuel Levinas*, and *The Politics of Friendship*.

things...maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike” (xix). Tactics are actions that are in a constant state of reassessment, revision, and creative work that specifically relates to the surrounding environment. De Certeau also articulates “space” as “a practiced place”¹⁹ where one redescribes through thought, action, and being. Space is never a fixed thing, an entity one necessarily owns; it is inhabited, struggled with, simultaneously adapted to and estranged from. Similarly to what Foucault argues in “Of Other Spaces,” Edward Soja posits that “it may be space more than time that hides consequences from us, ‘making of geography’ more than the ‘making of history’ that provides the most revealing tactical and theoretical world” (1). Space and temporality are concrete and abstract at the same time, their relationships are not simply a mental construct or physical form. In C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation*, space is struggled with, constructed, deconstructed, lived in and out of, troubled, and, I argue, controversial in its depictions of prisoners in various Louisiana prisons. Form blurs with voices in this text which seeks to branch out and look at incarceration in a different way.

Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983) helps locate the criminal at work in Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction* and C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self*. Lyotard distinguishes a differend from litigation in that “a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments” (xi). Lyotard also differentiates between the victim and the plaintiff. A victim is not simply someone who has been

¹⁹ “Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (117).

wronged, but someone who has also lost the power to present this wrong.²⁰ Through the idea of the differend, Lyotard draws attention to parties who are in dispute and cannot agree on a common discourse or a rule of judgement. Lyotard contends that to “give the differend its due is to institute new addresses, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim” (13). Lyotard notes that “[w]hat is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them” (13). Waldrop’s gaps, stutters, and myriad silences throughout *Driven to Abstraction* are attempts to speak and witness war, a seeming impossibility. Similarly, C.D. Wright’s various constructions in *One Big Self* work in many disparate ways to give voice to the prisoner, an otherwise voiceless and invisible being.

What further delineates these integral spaces is the idea of language as set aside, away from, exemplified in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s study of Kafka, particularly their description of a “minor literature”: “the first characteristic of minor literature...is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (16). This notion spatializes the use of a particular form of writing. Deleuze and Guattari, echoing a Kafka letter, note that “Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for

²⁰ Lyotard’s most famous example involves the Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson, who demanded proof of the gas chambers, and who will only accept proof from eyewitnesses who were themselves victims of the gas chambers. However, there are no eyewitnesses because they were all killed and unable to testify. Faurisson concludes that there were no gas chambers. Since Faurisson will accept no evidence for the existence of gas chambers except the testimony of actual victims he will conclude from both possibilities (i.e. gas chambers existed; gas chambers did not exist) that gas chambers did not exist. Lyotard sees this situation as a double-bind because there are two alternatives: either there were gas chambers or there were not, which leads to the same conclusion: there were no gas chambers. Lyotard sees this case as a differend because the harm done to the victims cannot be presented in the standard judgement upheld by Faurisson. “The silence of the survivors,” Lyotard notes, “does not necessarily testify in favor of the non-existence of gas chambers, as Faurisson believes or pretends to believe. It can just as well testify against the addressee’s authority (we are not answerable to Faurisson), against the authority of the witness him- or herself (we, the rescued, do not have the authority to speak about it), finally against language’s ability to signify gas chambers (an inexpressible absurdity)” (14).

the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible—the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise” (16). Minor literature is a completely different, separate mode: “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics” (17). Both writer and work exist somewhere different: “and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community...” (17). An interesting focus of minor literatures is to illustrate the myriad ways the texts in my study simultaneously use language, transgressive acts, and liminal spaces to forge new ground, inhabit and reappropriate spaces. Minor literature does not entail minor writer/ writing, but a different writing, set aside. Just as Deleuze and Guattari posit Kafka’s German as unique language, occupying a Beckettian double-bind²¹ of writing / not writing, continuing / not continuing. Language in Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* works in similar ways. No longer does the current mode of African American writing, which Baldwin masterfully employs in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and examines thoroughly in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) sustain his project. Similarly, with the pressing catastrophe of the second Gulf War, Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction* carves out a singular space, a singular language, to look at the double-bind of a writer writing about war in different, complicated ways. Gilles Deleuze looks at this notion of language in his short essay “He Stuttered.” Here the focus is on Beckett’s switch from English to French, and what

²¹ Illustrated through these statements: “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (414), from *The Unnamable*. “Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition” (23), from *Molloy*. “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.... Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again” (7-8), from *Worstward Ho*.

writers like Beckett and Kafka do: they “invent a *minor use* of a major language within which they express themselves entirely; they *minorize* this language...” (109). Deleuze first references Melville and Billy Budd, who “cannot stir without having to reconstitute his ‘stutter or even worse.’” The turn, according to Deleuze, is when “it is no longer the character who stutters in speech; it is the writer who becomes a *stutterer in language*,” he continues, “A poetic operation such as this seems to be very distant from the previous cases...its efficacy will be poorly understood unless there is a corresponding *form of content*—an atmospheric quality, a milieu that acts as the conductor of words—that brings together within itself the quiver, the murmur, the stutter” (108). Throughout the texts in my project, language and form is struggled with, never fully a comfortable home / place of being, inhabiting, living; the texts and the individuals involved exist instead within a series of moving spaces, working things out and through, practicing and discarding and transgressing in order to seek different spaces and different ways of living.

Writing Transgression

A theoretical practice and description of the criminal is a bit trickier than looking at transgression and space. How I attempt to theorize the criminal is intricately tied to transgression and space and never fully separate. An obvious jumping off point is the return and extension of Critical Legal Studies. Through this lens, as I have already noted, the criminal is always subjected and pigeonholed as a lawbreaker who is caught, punished, and caught (again) in the system—seemingly stuck in a fixed space. The criminal, at this moment, is the opposite of whatever laws happen to be in place. This is helpful but reductive; it does not cover the full range of practices and tactics that drive

my study. Further, my previous description of the criminal, with its notion of action, movement, and being seems nebulous, free-flowing, impossible, in a sense, to concretely pin down. The criminal can and often does involve breaking the law, but I am also extending these ideas to include transgression that is also intricately tied to my chosen writers' experiments in form, and the unique subject matter they are engaging. The best way to articulate my theorization is through looking at how these texts both talk to, with, and against one another.

Chapter 1: James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

One pressing question in this project that looks at the relationship of the criminal, transgression, and liminal spaces, is how do these seemingly incongruent texts fit together? While following a chapter on Baldwin with one on Rosmarie Waldrop may appear strange on the surface, a thread of incongruity intricately tethers these works together. Except for James Baldwin, many of the writers from this study have been underrepresented in literary criticism. Baldwin studies has undergone a dramatic resurgence of late, with many of his essays serving as prescient guides to the current political milieu.²² *Giovanni's Room*, while written about at some length, is viewed as either a paradigmatic text in queer studies, or as an anomaly: a text written by a preeminent African American artist featuring only white characters. My focus on the criminal takes this dichotomy as a point of departure before reading the transgressive

²² *The Fire Next Time* (1963), for example, and especially the essay "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" serves as a jumping off point for Ta-Nehisi Coates's National Book Award winning *Between the World and Me* (2015), which takes the form of a letter to the author's son. Teju Cole's new book of essays, *Known and Strange Things* (2016) channels Baldwin as does Jesmyn Ward's new collection of essays on race, which she serves as editor: *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race* (2016).

achievement of both the book's subject matter and form, which has been undervalued. Baldwin, a figure beyond measure in the contemporary political climate, is first and foremost an artist who subsumes the social milieu into a highly stylized, transgressive form. The object of this chapter is the shifting role of "criminal," and Baldwin's "break" with form and narrative in his second novel. This text, a complete rupture in both Baldwin's, the contemporary literary practice, and the period's milieu, is not discussed in terms of criminality. However, there are important strains at work in both the novel proper, and the controversy surrounding its construction that clearly denote a criminal undertaking. *Giovanni's Room* centers around a young gay man (David) coming to terms with his sexuality in America and Paris in the 1950s. David, deeply troubled by a same-sex encounter, which is viewed as both criminal and deviant, flees to Paris where he quickly strikes up a physical and emotional relationship with Giovanni. David describes Giovanni's room over and over in terms that denote a prison cell. He constantly envisions how "to escape his room"; or how it is "not large enough for two." The very being of the room, he muses, "was not a matter of habit or circumstance or temperament: it was a matter of punishment and grief" (87). The figurative cell is replaced with the actual, as Giovanni commits murder and awaits execution. By focusing on the criminal in *Giovanni's Room*, I argue that David is not only subjectified by the heteronormative gaze, but forced to hide, flee, and develop practices of resistance brought about by what is perceived (by others and himself) as his criminal actions.

The criminal manifests in the myriad aspects surrounding Baldwin's construction of the novel as well. *Giovanni's Room* was met with opprobrium within the African American literary community for not having any black characters, and for abandoning the

concerns of the African American class. Baldwin's publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, rejected the manuscript because of its explicit homosexual content, warning Baldwin that this book "would ruin his reputation...and to burn the manuscript" (119). Most criticism of *Giovanni's Room* follows these two poles while bringing only scant attention to the construction of the text: its non-linear narrative, and flashbacks interspersed with the present; however, no one has noted how David "rewrites" and "draws" Giovanni's room during the present: "I scarcely know how to describe that room. It became, in a way, every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in hereafter will remind me of Giovanni's room" (85).

My pressing question of this chapter is how *Giovanni's Room*, and its delicate interplay with the criminal, inform its aesthetic construction, and vice versa. What this reading does is create a greater tension between creativity and criminality, taking the focus off of the individual's direct confrontation with the penal system. James Baldwin, to my knowledge, is the only individual in my project who has spent time in jail.²³ This opening chapter, as well, sets the tone for the rest of the study in its foregrounding of artistic questions that overlap and intersect with the criminal. For example: in what ways does Baldwin's choices as a writer rest upon his engagement with the criminal, and vice versa? *Giovanni's Room* is a specific, highly constructed fictional text; "Equal in Paris," on the other hand, is a probing essayistic examination of race. Further, I ask what is at stake and what is enabled by the depiction in *Giovanni's Room* that clearly separates it from Baldwin's essays? I read this novel not simply as a queer man's quest and subsequent struggle with identity, nor as a text by an African American artist looking to

²³ Baldwin chronicles his eight days in a Paris prison for allegedly being in possession of stolen hotel sheets in "Equal in Paris," from *Notes of a Native Son* (1955).

break his contemporary milieu, but as a highly stylized, highly engaged break of form brought about by an artistic interplay with the criminal.

Chapter 2: Rosmarie Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction*

What unites two enormously disparate individuals and writers—James Baldwin and Rosmarie Waldrop—is not only their strange, complicated relationship with language, but the ever-shifting, searching and complicated nature of their collective oeuvres. In “Autobiographical Notes” from *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin relates

that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral of Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history. I might search in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use—I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. (6-7)

This passage is quoted at length to articulate Baldwin's extreme sense of exile, of isolation. There are no true antecedents for Baldwin. As a queer writer, Baldwin is also cut off from the lineage of African American letters. This long statement further illustrates Baldwin's drive to create, map out, and transgress previous forms for his own

aesthetic. Unmoored, torn between, writing in a language that feels estranged, different. Similarly, Rosmarie Waldrop, born in Germany and later immigrating to the U.S., moves through these disparate in-between spaces as well. In a conversation with Christine Hume, Waldrop relates these spaces: “I have the feeling that as a child I was kind of sponge—just soaking things up without too much sense of what it was all about. Except of course the two radical changes of my world: in 1943 when my hometown was bombed and 1945 when all—well, a lot of—the values changed!” Waldrop continues, “I’ve always thought it was the conscious change to English, my coming to the US, that not only made me a translator, but gave me a sense of being ‘between,’ and a sense of writing as explaining what ‘happens between’” (252). Baldwin leaves the U.S. for Paris, Waldrop leaves war-torn Germany for the US, both move in transient, non-concretized spaces. The biographical notes are simply background, however. It is through their specific engagement with language, form, and content where my theories are at play.

The proliferation of the criminal is at its most tenuous, opaque, and complicated within the varied, difficult work of Rosmarie Waldrop. A strict narrative and formal departure from James Baldwin, Waldrop’s polyglot, polyvocal texts read as constant investigations of self, other, and world. Joan Retallack contends, “Waldrop composes the cultural flotsam and jetsam out of which we fabricate memory into shifting mosaics whose energy derives from instructions of textual particles (captions, lists, anecdotal fragments, descriptive glimpses—data of various, humorous sorts) and narrative/speculative waves that raise questions about our relation to art, science, politics, history” (330). Within these immense particles I add Waldrop’s confrontation with the criminal.

Waldrop's prose poems in *Driven to Abstraction* (2010) illustrate direct engagement through form and voice with the criminal in the investigative, probing questions of how one engages in the world around, particularly during war: what is the role of creator / artist during a time of conflict? And what does engagement even entail / produce? How does the writer engage with a country oblivious to the fallout from war, and one that justifies war? These questions are in light of Waldrop's sustained look at the war in Iraq in the section titled "By the Waters of Babylon," as the speaker notes: "'Then somebody thinks 'Operation Ivy Cyclone.' 'Operation Plymouth Rock.' / Operation Iron Hammer.' / In 2005, in Baghdad, 92% of the people did not have stable electricity, 39% did / not have safe drinking water, 25% of children under the age of five were suffering / from malnutrition (67). The prose poems in *Driven to Abstraction* are not Waldrop's first experiment with this genre; however, this work differs from previous texts in its immediate engagement with society and war, tracing subtle moments and movements, through various lenses and screens, both in direct and discursive ways. The criminal in *Driven to Abstraction* both extends and departs from Baldwin; here, Waldrop looks at crimes against humanity. The "individual" or "speaker" appears simultaneously to be experiencing the effects of trauma,²⁴ while also at a remove. The war is both present and

²⁴ This notion not only looks at Cathy Caruth's views from *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) as "a repeated suffering of the event, and continual leaving of its site," and "intense personal suffering, but it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face" (vii), but also Lauren Berlant's turn in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), when she relates, "given trauma's primary location in describing severe transformations of physical health and life, it might be surprising to think about trauma as a genre for viewing the historical present. A traumatic event," according to Berlant, "is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma." Berlant claims that "most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated. Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (10).

distant. One is able to exist without dwelling upon it. But what does this say about individuals and society? And what takes place when an artist decides to engage in this topic? The struggle here is to arrive at a place—both personally and creatively—where one can exist, while also coming to terms with artistic creation during a time of war. A little later in this section the speaker continues to relay tragedies, “4,000 to 6,000 civilians have been killed in Fallujah” (69), then notes, “It is impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to this sentence, without / simply repeating the sentence” (69). The criminal in Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction* centers around the opaque confrontation with war and works as both a break and investigation into the poet’s mode(s) of construction, illustrating what Hank Lazer calls “disruptive force.” The turn of the criminal in this chapter is away from an individual’s direct physical encounter with the law, his / her sense of wrongness, or being in “trouble,” and instead focuses on how one deals with criminal actions—in Waldrop’s case a country at war. This struggle causes a rift in Waldrop’s mode of creation, forcing the artist to ask / struggle / excavate myriad aesthetic questions, facing a time of war/crisis both head-on and obliquely, asking multiple questions, such as what does it mean to create during a time of war, and whether the aesthetic creation accomplishes anything.

Chapter 3: Joanna Scott’s *Arrogance*

My third chapter further develops notions of the criminal in Joanna Scott’s *Arrogance* (1990), her brilliant rendering of tortured Austrian artist Egon Schiele (1890-1918). Scott’s text is much more than a fictionalized portrait of the artist and his scandalous reputation and imprisonment. Here, Scott’s hyper-focus revolves around the

women in Schiele's life—sister, lovers, wife—as they deal with Schiele's troubles. On the surface, what Scott's text appears to struggle with is the notion of artist as outsider, romantic, as “criminal”; however, Scott instead refocuses attention to question the detritus of artistic and criminal existence, typified not only by the artist's gaze, and his time spent in prison for being accused of sexual relations with an underage girl,²⁵ but the gaze upon the artist as well. This subtle switch is accomplished by Scott's use of a female first-person narrator,²⁶ and how she maneuvers toward and around the artist, Schiele, interacting, watching, and attempting to become an artist herself. The interplay and conversation with Baldwin and Waldrop are illustrated through Scott's abrupt turn in form and content in her third novel.

As mentioned, the role of artist as criminal is well documented through individuals such as Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, and Ezra Pound to name only a few, Scott's portrait of Schiele adds to and differs from previous examinations of art and criminality not only through subject matter but in the telling. Georges Bataille's notion of transgression does not simply encompass breaking the law, ignoring rules, or refusing to submit to taboo; instead transgression is linked to the exuberance of carnival and sacred feast days, and can be looked at in tandem with Scott's text. Egon Schiele's life and art transgress mores and challenge the status quo of what art is and does, culturally and aesthetically. Scott's text incorporates modes of transgression through storytelling and subject matter: the criminal in *Arrogance* is illustrated through Schiele's discursive

²⁵ These charges were later dismissed; Schiele was found guilty of leaving nude portraits lying about in his cottage where children could see them.

²⁶ Scott's first two novels, *Fading*, *My Parmacheene Belle* (1987) and *The Closest Possible Union* (1988) are first person narrative accounts from the male perspective who are always at the center of action. *Arrogance* offers a distinct stylistic break through its female voice and the kaleidoscopic, blurry narrative that jumps from voice to voice.

relationship to art and life. This practice is multilayered and opaque because of the “telling” of the “story” from the point of view of the young female protagonist. The organization of this novel is designed not only to showcase a burgeoning outlaw artist—which in itself is not transgressive—but offers a startling break in Scott’s form, and the form of the novel, brought about by the symbiotic, criminal relationship to artist and subject matter.

Chapter 4: C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation*

The forth chapter focuses on C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007), a work that takes speech from incarcerated inmates in Louisiana state prisons and situates “poetic texts” in order to bear witness to the toll confinement takes on individuals. Initially published with photographs by Deborah Luster, Wright, in her introduction, states the text’s aim is “[n]ot to idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain. Not to demonize, not anathematize. What I wanted was to unequivocally lay out the real feel of hard time” (xiv). The “criminal,” in the final chapter, is brought full circle to the individuals who perpetrate and are affected by crime’s impact and aftermath. Their place, however, is not static, fixed, and / or concrete. Wright’s project locates criminals in various interstitial spaces, both locked “away” from society while bringing to the forefront through speech their existence within these criminal spaces.

Wright’s text raises many important, prescient questions about the criminal as well, and what it means to create contemporary poetry. Such as, how should one speak, or should one even attempt to speak for another? Do Wright’s text and Luster’s

photographs in any way exploit the individuals they initially set out to represent? This is an extremely dangerous territory / space, and one that is not easily answered; a line that runs throughout this study as well: what does the depiction of “criminal” in poetry and prose set out to accomplish? I argue, in this space, that Wright’s delicate, troubling text showcases disparate speakers, allowing each to carve out his or her own identity through the relation of quotidian minutiae, the weight of time, and the interactions with one another, the poet and photographer, and, ultimately, the reader. Wright’s text ruptures both the poetic and the criminal, relocating it through its immediacy with these individuals, who are given a plurality of voices from the margins. However, not without complications.

My aim in this project is to resituate and open up notions of the criminal to a much wider range of practices and engagements. C.D. Wright’s text, though returning to the normative idea of a criminal—one who is in prison for a crime—relocates the very nature of representation and investigation through her use of fragments and multiple voices. The individuals represented here are not necessarily “trapped” or “free” through the construction of this text, but exist in another, different separate space. Building upon the recently expanding field of criminal studies, my project opens new discourses not only to allow a space for non-traditional texts, but to reexamine well-known artists—such as James Baldwin—through different lenses. This study is integral not only for literary studies and academia, but for the way one ultimately reads, sees, and interacts with various individuals in the world.

Chapter 1

Fugitive Testimony: James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

David, the protagonist in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, is running for his life. Caught between finding and knowing, watching and being watched, acting and not acting, the space he occupies is one aside, away from everyone he encounters, and in a constant state of flux. *Giovanni's Room* is a criminal text that practices transgression through its pushing against the limits of the law, one which also practices hiding and concealment through David's constant engagement with liminal spaces, gaps, stasis, and silence. It is a text about movement that, on the surface, seems to never move. This "criminal" work foregrounds law-breaking, and is also a text where incarceration haunts individuals. However, prison and crime are not the focus; incarceration is not illustrated through one's placement in prison. Instead, being stuck, trapped, and confined are states brought about through David's internal struggle and physical surroundings, illustrated through myriad, suffocating descriptions of Giovanni's actual room: "I was in a box for I could see that, no matter how I turned, the hour of confession was upon me and could scarcely be averted..." (47). David's homosexuality is one of the main focuses of the criminal in *Giovanni's Room*, but not the text's primary driving force, as most critics contend. Instead, Baldwin's transgressive form, illustrated through David's multiple interactions and descriptions, is what places the text in its own singular space.

This chapter locates *Giovanni's Room* as a distinct break in Baldwin's oeuvre through its practice of writing transgression, its focus on criminal acts and behaviors, and the various, difficult movements through a series of constricting and expanding liminal spaces. The immediate transgressive nature of Baldwin's text centers around his

depiction of homosexuality, bisexuality, and the fact that the text features all white characters. Within the text, David transgresses through his constant oscillation between self-hatred and queer practice that was seemingly absent in most mainstream writing of the time. The form of Baldwin's novel, its stutterings, its ambiguous, disorienting sense of time and place, mirrors and frustrates David's thoughts and actions. The criminal element is explicit through the illegal acts of homosexuality that are illustrated, that individuals in the text must conceal and practice under a cloak of secrecy; Giovanni's murder of Guillaume and the imprisonment and eventual execution of Giovanni further the criminal aspects. David's narrative ligatures with Giovanni, while he waits in his prison cell, experiment with both time, space, and the view of the criminal. In one sense, David's journey is momentous and transformative. He leaves the U.S. for Paris and becomes engaged to a woman in an attempt to run from himself, his queerness, and the fear he may soon be caught in an uncompromising tryst. In many ways, David finds what he is looking for in Paris: a lover (Giovanni) and space that allows him to exist, albeit in the margins of society, among a coterie of similar individuals he despises and outwardly looks down upon. On the other hand, David gains very little through his journey. In fact, he is left with much less at the end: his fiancé finds him in a gay bar and their engagement dissolves; Giovanni—his true love—is executed; and David ends the text in the same place he started, running from who he is to another space he does not yet know.

Baldwin's break in form is illustrated not only through his subject matter, but his philosophically suffocating prose, which traps David while momentarily letting him breathe depending on the space he occupies at a particular moment. Baldwin's style is difficult to categorize: neither fitting within the high modernist mode nor displaying any

postmodern playfulness, the form and text occupies its own distinct space. The novel is a series of stops and starts, mimicking David's masochistic self-portrait; one he attempts to hide from those around him, quite unsuccessfully. What is startling about Baldwin's practice is that David is a first-person unreliable narrator, but one who believes his own lies while thinking everyone else is fooled, when they are not. David thinks he remains in the shadows, in the background, always watching and observing others, when in fact he is being observed as well. David opens by staring at his reflection in the window and ends looking at his face fade as the sun rises, sick over his life and feeling guilt about leaving Giovanni behind. While David stares into the window, he recalls a series of movements through disparate spaces: his apartment; a gay bar; Giovanni's room; and Giovanni's prison cell, to name a few. Many of these rooms act as in-between spaces that showcase situations where David is momentarily at ease; however, his well-being is soon broken, and he begins to run again. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is a series of suffocating spaces that illustrate transgression in both form and action through a close relationship with criminality. To illustrate the strain of the criminal within Baldwin's writing, and to show the extreme break in *Giovanni's Room*, a brief look at Baldwin is necessary.

Baldwin's Criminal Text(s)

"Criminal" is a term and way of thinking that runs through Baldwin's entire body of work. One famous example is from *The Fire Next Time* (1963) where Baldwin, after mapping out the in-between space of being caught as an African-American in the city, relates: "I certainly could not discover any principled reason for not becoming a criminal, and it is not my poor, God-fearing parents who are to be indicted for their lack but this

society” (37). Similarly, in “A Talk to Teachers,” Baldwin relates the African-American child, or “street boy,” he once was: “If he is really cunning, really ruthless, really strong—and many of us are—he becomes a kind of criminal. He becomes a kind of criminal because that’s the only way he can live” (681). According to Baldwin, society produces or points toward the street and life of crime. These two instances illustrate a choice of sorts, a dichotomy: take the path to literal criminality, or go another, different way. This other way is the life of the artist, the writer. On the surface, the gulf between these two poles appears wide; however, through most of Baldwin’s fiction and non-fiction this choice and occupation is blurry.

In a cryptic, lesser known essay, “A Letter to Prisoners,” Baldwin articulates the fluidly shared characteristics of these seeming opposites in clipped, philosophical sweeps. “What,” according to Baldwin, “artists and prisoners have in common is that both know what it means to be free” (212). This broad statement, left dangling, is described by Baldwin as a “thoroughly unattractive paradox” through the fact that “we value freedom, or find ourselves compelled to attempt to define it only when it is arbitrarily limited, or menaced: when another *human* power has the right to tell us when and where to stand or sit or move or live or make love or have (or claim) our children—or bow mighty low, or die” (213). Here, Baldwin specifically addresses the broad power held by groups in power that dictate the lives of others. The glaring contradiction is those who value freedom are the ones who impose limitations and restrictions of disenfranchised groups. “Freedom” is defined when and where it is denied, limited, pushed against. The artist, and the artist’s role, in this short text, is nebulous. The artist seems to occupy an unfettered space, aside from the seemingly normative, constrained functions of society.

“Freedom” is experienced by the artist through limits and limitations on what art can do. This underpinning is illustrated through Baldwin’s note that “we are compelled to hear each other: knowing perfectly well how little can be done, one discovers how to do some things” (213). These “things” are never specifically described; however, they are hinted at when Baldwin follows: “This may be part of the definition, or pride or price of freedom, for this apprehension necessarily involves a real recognition of, and respect for, the other and for the condition of the other. The other,” Baldwin ultimately claims, “is no longer other and is indeed...closer than a brother—the other is oneself” (213). Artist, here, is not defined as one who creates a tactile object, necessarily. Rather, an artist is one who occupies a separate space, a space where one reaches toward difference and the other. To see the “other” in one’s self is to require the ability to be in two places at once and occupy many different thoughts at one time.

The difficulty of “A Letter to Prisoners,” and the difficulty, at times, to pin down Baldwin’s thoughts are deliberate and a point of contention for critics. E. Francis White takes Baldwin to task for his distance and refusal to draw clear lines about homosexuality, and also for Baldwin’s restrained response to Eldridge Cleaver’s attack on Baldwin’s masculinity:²⁷ “Baldwin wanted to separate himself from those homosexuals whose behavior proved them to be debased. This dichotomy, however, leaves too many homosexuals exposed to homophobic disciplining. Moreover,” White continues, “it does not sufficiently undermine the homosexual / heterosexual binary

²⁷ In *Soul on Ice* (1968), Cleaver attacks Baldwin: “The case of James Baldwin aside for the moment, it seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in his racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake the white man’s sperm” (102).

because the category “man” depends on too many exclusions—including the exclusion of women” (254). White makes a valid point regarding Baldwin’s problematic depiction of women in certain texts. However, White appears to fault Baldwin’s work—both fiction and nonfiction—for not being more socially strict; or, in other words, for not drawing a clearer line in the sand and / or carrying the banner for homosexuality and its place in the cultural milieu. Earlier in the same essay, White faults Toni Morrison for not putting lesbian and homosexual expressions / material more at the forefront of her fiction. These critiques miss the point and project of both writers. Eldridge Cleaver attacks Baldwin for not showcasing sufficient African American heteronormative masculinity that he [Cleaver] requires to further the cause of black equality at the time period. White faults Baldwin for not specifically declaring both his allegiance to the queer cause, and for his representation of women. Baldwin, though, occupies a much different space, one only he adheres to. Two essays from *Notes of a Native Son* exemplify this other space.

Partway through the eponymous essay from *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin recalls a harrowing moment of trouble that takes place in a “enormous, glittering, and fashionable restaurant” (96). Baldwin, who earlier was refused service at a separate diner because of his race, becomes engulfed in rage that is directed toward a waitress: “I hated her for her white face, and for her...frightened eyes. I felt that if she found a black man so frightening I would make her fright worth-while” (96). After the waitress’s second admonishment of “we don’t serve Negroes here,” Baldwin, furious, “realized that she would never come any closer and that I would have to strike from a distance. There was nothing on the table but an ordinary watermug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her. She ducked and it missed her and shattered against

the mirror behind the bar” (97). This act causes Baldwin to snap back to attention: “I realized what I had done...and began running for the door.... A man grabbed me by the nape of the neck just as I reached the doors and began to beat me about the face. I kicked him and got loose and ran into the streets. My friend whispered, ‘*Run!*’ and I ran” (97). This dramatic scene illustrates not only the inner rage inside Baldwin that finally boils over, but looks at the dichotomy he is balancing as well: either stay in the states and succumb to rage and perhaps the life of a criminal or run toward something different. D. Quinten Miller notes the importance of this scene as a formative moment in Baldwin’s development as an artist.²⁸ I want to draw additional attention to this moment and how it specifically relates to *Giovanni’s Room*.

David’s Criminal Gaze

David, in *Giovanni’s Room*, stares at and through his reflection in a window as dawn slowly approaches, thinking of his troubled situation and Giovanni’s impending execution. This gaze, which serves as a crisis point in David’s life, is similar to the moment in the restaurant. Before he finally “breaks” his gaze in the window—a few pages from the close of the novel—David muses, “I seem to be fading away before my eyes—this fancy amuses me, and I laugh to myself” (166). He then imagines Giovanni being led to death, before noting: “I walk into the bedroom where the clothes I will wear are lying on the bed and my bag lies open and ready. I begin to undress. There is a mirror

²⁸ “Baldwin scholars and biographers point to three formative moments to define the origin of Baldwin’s story: three epiphanies: (1) his violent conversion on the threshing floor of his church followed by his decision to leave the church, described in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *The Amen Corner*, and *The Fire Next Time*; (2) the incident in which he throws a water glass at a waitress in a New Jersey restaurant who refuses to serve him because he is black (discussed in “Notes of a Native Son” and reworked in many other works); and (3) his decision to leave New York for Paris, discussed in *No Name in the Street* and in numerous interviews” (21).

in this room, a large mirror. I am terribly aware of the mirror” (167). This observation recognizes the gaze almost as one focused on one’s self, observed, watched. Like Baldwin’s pronouncement that he must flee after the restaurant incident, David, at this moment, faces a similar crisis. I draw these parallels not to focus on the verisimilitude of life and how it works in fiction, or to note any literal biographical overlapping—Baldwin expertly draws this dichotomy in both fiction and non-fiction—but to draw attention to the overt and covert interplay at work in the fiction, that is not always evident in the other writing, that overlaps between the social and aesthetic. The gaze is an extremely important tactic used to mark one as other; Baldwin, however, is always already gazing backward and inward, doubling and tripling the work of the gaze, on others and himself, and though this practice is evident in his essays, it is in the fiction, particularly *Giovanni’s Room*, where the gaze determines and interacts with the always changing form of the text.

As aforementioned, Baldwin, to my immediate knowledge, is the only individual in this study to have been physically incarcerated, and this experience is illustrated at length in “Equal in Paris” (1955); an event, I argue, that could be added to the list of integral moments of development from above. Jailed in Paris for receiving stolen property—a bed sheet—Baldwin spends eight days incarcerated, awaiting an unknown fate. Running to be free of American racism, Baldwin thought Paris and the French character to be “an ancient, intelligent, and cultured race,” but soon realizes “that there is a limit to the role of intelligence in human affairs; and that no people come into a culture without having paid a heavy price for it” (140). The “heavy price” Baldwin pays in the U.S. is to be black and homosexual. In Paris, the idea of “institutions,” and the

complicated, “outmoded, exasperating, completely impersonal, and very often cruel” nature are what one contends with. These institutions, along with the specter of racism that follows Baldwin, is looked at in great detail by D. Quintin Miller, who contends, “What Baldwin does not tell us in ‘Equal in Paris’ is that the experience in a Paris jail, far from being the catalyst for his writing life, nearly killed him” (23). Miller mentions Baldwin’s oft-overlooked failed suicide attempt, and also the way he covers up the seeming undercurrent of racism experienced through the prison incident: “Baldwin is reluctant to admit that racism is not unique to America, and that prison is one means through which racism can be legally reinforced even in the famously liberal City of Lights” (23). Miller draws attention to how “Equal in Paris” works as an origin for many of the wrongful arrests and imprisonments in Baldwin’s oeuvre; “Baldwin’s fate,” Miller notes, “[h]aving been labeled ‘criminal,’ is no longer in his control, and he contemplates his vulnerability in the context of incarceration” (25-26).

Ultimately, what Baldwin learns is that expatriation is not escape, that there is no place to run or hide, themes that are explored and practiced at length in *Giovanni’s Room*. Miller draws parallels with Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish*, especially how Baldwin is stuck in a fixed, regulated place, at the mercy of others dictating his movements. What I want to draw attention to in “Equal in Paris” is not the unnamed, underexplored racism Miller astutely brings to the surface, or the fact that one cannot truly run or hide. Instead, Baldwin’s deft legerdemain, his reappropriation of the criminal and seemingly fixed spaces, that are not truly fixed and set in stone, that act as a prelude for *Giovanni’s Room*. After arrest, while sitting and worrying in his cell, Baldwin is overcome with helplessness at the fact that “[n]one of my old weapons could serve me here. I did not

know what they saw when they looked at me.... It was a strange feeling...to discover that my weapons would never again serve me as they had" ("Equal" 145). Baldwin's mind, in this strange sort of epanalepsis, is both discarding and creating at the same time. These former weapons were practices of knowing who was doing the gazing, subjectifying, and marginalizing. Now, all is different. The loss of control Baldwin feels is not necessarily the formulation of a "docile body," imposed and regulated by the power of the prison, but more the loss of defense mechanisms. Similarly, for David in *Giovanni's Room*, the old ways of dealing with trouble, space, and relationships are shattered as well. Whereas physically fleeing and living as an expatriate, perhaps afforded Baldwin these feelings; now, a new place is needed, one that is not physically attainable.

In a text exemplified by tears and anguish, it is laughter that strikes the most devastating note in "Equal in Paris." Upon Baldwin's case eventually getting dismissed, a friend looks on in amusement and laughter; Baldwin relates:

This laughter is the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of the living is not real. I had heard it so often in my native land that I had resolved to find a place where I would never hear it anymore. In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne on me that laughter is universal and can never be stilled. (158)

James Campbell regards "Equal in Paris" as one of Baldwin's more comical essays. This view, though, seems to be held with the knowledge that Baldwin has survived the ordeal unscathed. Miller draws further attention to the title and the word "equal," noting that the

“poor are treated equally poorly wherever they go” (26), but Baldwin’s takeaway is more layered and diffuse. Baldwin’s practice in *Giovanni’s Room* is to situate time, space, and identity in relationship to form, and to do this in a radical way breaking from his known traditions. This is further practiced with an emphasis on the criminal and space. Being confined in a Paris jail turns out to liberate Baldwin’s work and thought process. The laughter he mentions is turned around; moreover, the laughter can be viewed as another fulcrum point: the tears are over; laughter, this strange, hollow, not-knowing laughter coming from another, is met with silence. Laughter plays an important role in two key moments in *Giovanni’s Room* as well: in David’s first male sexual encounter, and later, close to the novel’s end, as he breaks his stare from the window and pours a drink. Only through his branding of “criminal” can Baldwin reach this point. The transgressive trigger is Baldwin’s construction of *Giovanni’s Room*, and how he builds and centers the novel around a small group of queer, white individuals in Paris, marked criminal through gaze, actions, and the law. Whereas, I argue, the genesis of this text comes from “Equal in Paris,” working and thinking about a break with tradition of literary form, especially African American form, develops from another essay in *Notes of a Native Son*.

David’s Transgressive Spaces

In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” from *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin articulates a breakage with preconceived constraints of how one should write, specifically as an African-American artist. Baldwin, in a controversial comparison, holds Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), and its protagonist, Bigger Thomas, as expanding a tradition enacted by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852): “Bigger is Uncle Tom’s

descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses” (22). Bigger Thomas is crushed by the societal constraints imposed by others. In turn, Baldwin argues, “our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it” (23). The failure of the protest novel, Baldwin contends, lies in its rejection of life, that its focus is on ideology and not human interaction. *Notes of a Native Son* is an integral text in the Baldwin oeuvre. It serves as a hinge point between his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a text focusing specifically on African American individuals in Harlem, and how young John Grimes navigates the environs of family and church, and *Giovanni’s Room*. His second novel, focusing on a blonde, white American expatriate attempting to come to terms with his identity, is a stark, abrupt departure. *Giovanni’s Room* was met with opprobrium on both sides: his fellow African American artists saw the text as an abandonment of their concerns; while his publishers at Alfred A. Knopf rejected the manuscript because of its explicit homosexual content, warning Baldwin that this book “would ruin his reputation...and he was advised to burn the manuscript” (Weatherby 119). *Giovanni’s Room* is Baldwin’s first text where he appears truly to come into his own as an artist, and it breaks from the type of novel he rails against in “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” While the break is overt, the hidden aspects in *Giovanni’s Room*—both in creation and within the text—act as covert moments where this break, and the extension to contemporary experimental literature is illustrated.

One way Baldwin practices a shifting, criminal aesthetic is through David's relationship with liminal spaces in *Giovanni's Room*. David's doomed love affair with Giovanni is exemplified by the multiple, quotidian aesthetic descriptions of the room they share together:

I remember that life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea,
Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning.
In the beginning, our life together held a joy and amazement which was
newborn every day. Beneath the joy of course, was anguish and beneath
the amazement was fear; but they did not work themselves to the
beginning until our high beginning was a loe on our tongue. By then
anguish and fear had become the surface on which we slipped and slid,
losing balance, dignity, and pride. (75)

This passage illustrates the paradoxical duress David undergoes. Giovanni's actual room becomes a place where David hides, where he can express his feelings and desires. It is also a place of terror. Upon first entering the room, David panics, "if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost" (64). Giovanni's physical room engenders multiple philosophical and emotional spaces where David feels simultaneously trapped and released. David continually mentions a wish to "escape" the room: "I'm talking about that room, that hideous room. Why have you buried yourself there so long?" (117); "I've been living in Giovanni's room for months...and I just can't stand it anymore. I have to get out of here. Please" (135); "What kind of life can we have in this room?—this filthy little room" (142). Despite David's outward verbal articulation of his hatred for the room, he relates, "Giovanni had awakened an itch, had released a gnaw in me" (83). The

outward terror David expresses about the room is undercut by his thoughts never spoken aloud to anyone. These feelings are buried until David is overcome with guilt over the crime Giovanni commits. Giovanni, in a fit of rage, kills Guillame, an older gentleman who makes unwanted advances. David, because of his fears, abandons Giovanni and his room, running back to his fiancé, Hella. David hopes to hide under a cloak of heteronormativity in order to freely exist. This hope fails, and Giovanni is arrested for murder and awaits execution, which leads David to gaze upon his own face in the window, thinking, finally, of everything that has brought him to this point.

David initially rejects the physical space of Giovanni's room, but thinking intensely about the room, through a hidden aestheticization, leads to a realization of sorts. This aspect is also closely intertwined with Baldwin's construction. The text opens with David at the window, already, in a sense, coming into agency, a realization: "But people can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life" (5). Here, David realizes, though too late, that his physical running and hiding have led him nowhere, for he could not, ultimately, escape and hide from himself. Through these musings, though, Giovanni's room takes on a different aspect. In an interview Baldwin relates "I write in order to describe. If you describe it, you can control it, if you can control it you can outwit it, you can get beyond it." Most criticism of *Giovanni's Room* brings attention to the non-linear narrative and flashbacks interspersed with the present; however, no one has brought direct attention to how David "rewrites" and "draws" Giovanni's room during the present: "I scarcely know how to describe that room. It became, in a way, every room I had ever been in and every room I

find myself in hereafter will remind me of Giovanni's room" (85). Initially, David stops and starts, he has trouble bringing the room into being. He presses forward, however, facing the room differently now, uncovering new, hidden areas that both enable and force him to face his being:

Before and beside me and all over the room, towering like a wall, were boxes of cardboard and leather, some tied with string, some locked, some bursting, and out of the topmost box before me spilled down sheets of violin music. There was a violin in the room, lying on the table in its warped, cracked case—it was impossible to guess from looking at it whether it had been laid to rest there yesterday or a hundred years before.

(87)

David, through his cataloguing of the broken flotsam in the room, brings into being another aspect: the relationship between space and time. Through description, David is able to take ownership in his relationship with Giovanni. There seems, through these simultaneously dazzling yet quotidian descriptions, a move toward agency. Within these mental notes David ultimately argues that it was "not the room's disorder which was frightening; it was the fact that when one began searching for the key to this disorder, one realized that it was not to be found in any of the usual places" (87). David's being, at this moment, is undergoing an entropic metamorphosis. The use of "one" hides his personal engagement with both the room and Giovanni. This hiding gives way to the realization that "it was a matter of punishment and grief" which allows David to speak in the first person: "I do not know how I knew it because I wanted to live" (87). David's descriptions of Giovanni's room lead to describing Giovanni in his new room—a jail cell,

while he awaits execution, and leads to David's "confession": "No matter how it seems now, I must confess: I loved him. I do not think I will ever love anyone like that again" (112). With David's agency, though, comes no release or relief; there is no closure, or place David can safely go to and exist. David's confession is positive in that he now admits his feelings for Giovanni, but Giovanni will be dead by morning. The end of *Giovanni's Room* finally shows David breaking his gaze from the window: "I pour myself a very little drink, watching in the window pane, my reflection, which steadily becomes more faint. I seem to be fading away before my eyes—this fancy amuses me, and I laugh to myself" (166). David's laughter, here, hides a terror, for in the morning Giovanni will be executed.

The close of the text finds David breaking his gaze, and ultimately leaving his room; however, earlier moments find David trapped and scrambling to make sense of his surroundings. David's gaze into the window both fixes him in space and conjures forgotten specters from his past life in the United States. For example, his first male lover, Joey: "For awhile he was my best friend. Later, the idea that such a person *could* have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me. So I forgot him. But I see him very well tonight" (6). The ability to run and hide, to bury unwanted thoughts and feelings has served David until this moment. A moment that triggers, in detail, the night and aftermath of the encounter: "But *Joey is a boy*.... That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood.... I was ashamed" (9). This scene (and room) is integral and shades how David views himself and physical encounters throughout his life, whether

these are the encounters back in the U.S., or queer encounters in Paris.²⁹ According to Brett Beemyn, “Having internalized the homophobic attitudes of the dominant society, the pattern for his isolation is set from his first sexual experience” (62). Regarding David’s gaze, Beemyn continues, “David is unwilling to face himself in the glass’s opaqueness...so he can neither accept his attraction to men nor find satisfaction in relationships with women” (62). David, however, seems to want to confront something by the fact of running to the more tolerable environs of Paris. David’s relationship to sex, the physical body, is determined through his relationship with space. On the surface David seems unwilling to face himself, but he appears to be doing just that: the gaze into the window, the myriad descriptions of various rooms and their effect all take place throughout the course of the text. David, I contend, seems to be simultaneously trapped and constantly moving through a series of rooms. His “first room” is the space of his first sexual encounter with Joey. His subsequent rooms include Giovanni’s actual, physical room, Giovanni’s cell, and the handful of bars David frequents in Paris.

David’s encounters at his first bar are marked by criminality and liminal space. Acting as though he has been dragged along by his close, older friend, Jacques, the bar is described as a “noisy, ill-lit sort of tunnel, of dubious—or perhaps not dubious at all, of rather too emphatic—reputation. Every once in a while it was raided by the police, apparently with the connivance of Guillaume...who always managed...to warn his favorite customers...” (26). The bar, this “sort of tunnel,” is both a safe place for queer individuals to interact and drink, and one that is also always under threat of raids. David,

²⁹ According to Sharon Patricia Holland, “Here, Baldwin constructs a dual hell for David—one in which he has the distinct pleasure of experiencing his own self mirrored in the physiological sameness of their bodies and in the difference marked by the making of a ‘black...cavern’” (274).

throughout the text, and throughout his interactions with himself and others, appears both present and absent. This habitus is in full effect in the bar. He both belongs and sees himself apart, particularly when he discusses the bar's owner, Guillaume: "I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy, perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkey's eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs" (27). David's homophobia is intense, yet his self-loathing appears equal or greater. He confesses to having entered this place before: "I had been in this bar, too, two or three times; one very drunk, I had been accused of causing a minor sensation by flirting with a soldier" (27). David's mode of telling (confessing) is illustrated by admitting what he deems a transgression, then walking it back: "My memory of that night was, happily, very dim, and I took the attitude that no matter how drunk I may have been, I could not possibly have done such a thing. But my face was known and I had the feeling people were taking bets about me" (27). Brett Beemyn is slightly mistaken about David's acceptance of his homosexuality, and his denial of himself. There are multiple layers, interstices; David, throughout the text, never fully "comes out," not even to himself. He feels guilty over Giovanni, yet these feelings of guilt at the close of the novel precipitates another escape. Like Baldwin, David occupies an in-between space: he knows what he likes, and experiences a little more freedom in "the tunnel" compared to life in the states, where David must always be on guard. The bar, "the tunnel," works as a space of escape and hiding, a space where he unwittingly lets down his guard. David never expresses complete comfort there, but his actions and momentary thoughts break through his thickly guarded exterior. However, David also sees himself as different, apart from the

others;³⁰ he views Jacques and Guillaume as grotesque; these views manifest David's self-hatred and project his thoughts on others back to himself. So, ultimately, this bar—and David's relationship with it—acts simultaneously as temporary safe space and one where he is constantly under surveillance.

This temporary safe-space is fully experienced when David first meets and has an extended conversation with Giovanni. Despite his protests to Jacques, David feels “elated” at the prospect of interaction with Giovanni. Upon their meeting, Giovanni's initial smile unsettles David and his ability to read others: “He grinned. I could not tell whether he grinned because he thought I was lying or because he knew I was telling the truth” (32). Giovanni's discerning effect on David complicates his constant surveillance on those around, and, for a brief moment, allows David to worry less, to let down his guard, and to not constantly worry and be wary of how others act and how they perceive him. In this space of the bar, another, smaller, personal space between David and Giovanni is mapped and experimented with. Again, David muses: “I realized that I was quite happy³¹ to be talking with him and this realization made me shy” (32). Their discussion touches on America, Paris, grandeur, and the notion of time; time that frames their lives. Time, on another level, is integral to the framing of the text. During this flirty, effortless, successful interaction, time seems to stop, however. Then, in this space, David

³⁰ “Well, you may find this hard to believe, but actually, I'm sort of queer for girls myself, If that was his sister looking so good, I'd invite *her* to have a drink with us. I don't spend money on men” (30). Jacques sees through and replies: “I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment, that”—he paused—“that *immaculate* manhood which is your pride and joy” (30). This back and forth has the feel of a common repartee played out between the two friends. David ends up paying for Giovanni's drink.

³¹ There are very few instances in the text where David relates this feeling: On his look back at Joey: “Odd to remember, for the first time in so long, how good I felt that night, how fond of Joey” (7). Another moment with Giovanni a little later: “I am smiling too. I scarcely know why; everything in me is jumping up and down” (53). When Giovanni asks how David is, he replies “I feel fine.” This masks his inner elation. However, once they consummate their relationship, David turns full of dread and grows increasingly distant.

notes: “Giovanni looked at me. And this look made me feel that no one in my life had ever looked at me directly before” (37). This look works on many levels. Initially, as a response to David’s reply to Giovanni’s question regarding the former’s relationship with Jacques.³² The look is also one of recognition. Giovanni knows that David is queer, and knows what he wants, at least this is David’s impression of the look. This is not his first time in the bar; David, in turn, knows Giovanni knows and is caught about what to do. For the only time in the text, David dissembles, his guard has been willingly broken. The other patrons in the bar recede; there is no one else here at this moment. This has a strange effect on David, who otherwise speaks in cryptic remarks or replies with silence. Now, David, in replying to Giovanni’s statement of their friendship, stammers and thinks, “I know I must look foolish and that my question was foolish too: ‘So soon?’” (37). This type of dissembling is referenced by Gilles Deleuze in “He Stuttered,” and notes how another space, a “third possibility” opens up: “it is the writer who becomes *a stutterer in language*. He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language...” (107).³³ David, in a text of gazes, in various complicated scenes where he is constantly on edge about reading others and being read in return, is momentarily free. When someone calls Giovanni—“Garcon!”—the spell is broken and David immediately snaps back.

³² “‘May I offer you a drink now,’ [Giovanni] asked suddenly, ‘before the old man comes back? Who is he? Is he your uncle?’ I did not know whether the word ‘uncle’ was being used euphemistically or not. I felt a very urgent desire to make my position clear but I did not know how to go about it. I laughed” (36). Again, this “laugh” reverberates and echoes with the previous descriptions of laughter in Baldwin’s nonfiction and in this text. This is not a laughter of amusement or lightheartedness, but one of hiding, masking, of covering up, not knowing what to say or how to act.

³³ Deleuze makes specific reference to Melville, Kafka, and Beckett as writers who create and operate in a “minor language” who create a separate aesthetic space. I would like to add Baldwin to this list, especially with his distinct and explicit practice of breaking away from any group of like writers and carving out a singular, unique space.

However, during the course of this conversation, time ceases. This interaction comes about through the relationship of this momentary space created by David and Giovanni.

This space David occupies in the company of Giovanni is a separate space, aside from even the bar they presently inhabit. This space within a space is a counter-site, simultaneously regulated by not only the heteronormative culture of Paris—that is slightly less homophobic than the states—but also regulated by the other queer patrons who are constantly surveying the terrain. It operates momentarily as a counter-site in the span of the conversation because these other, separate regulators dissolve into the background. Foucault designates “heterotopias” as a “kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). Heterotopias are designated as “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (24). David, in this space with Giovanni, experiences a vast range of dissembling emotions: happiness; nervousness; he engages in the longest conversation in the text, one that is simultaneously playful, flirty, witty, intellectual, philosophical, and urgent. This last description of “urgency” perfectly reflects David’s habitus throughout the time of the text. Time is in integral notion that both joins Giovanni and David, and drives them apart, illustrated through different views and relationships with it. Giovanni argues ““what is this thing about time? Why is it better to be late than early? People are always saying, we must wait, we must wait. What are they waiting for?”” (37). Time is “now,” in the present for Giovanni; David, on the other hand, is cautious, meticulous, responding ““I guess people wait in order to make sure of what they feel”” (38). Tricky, though, David appears to be revealing in this exchange, in this long flirtation, his interest and attraction toward

Giovanni. One of the major characteristics of a heterotopia, Foucault argues, is deviation: “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25).³⁴ David and Giovanni represent deviation through their initial meeting site (Giovanni’s site of employment), and they also transgress this initial site from their construction of a separate space within. Another aspect of heterotopias is ephemerality. This space is not permanent, fixed, sustained forever or for very long. This moment is no different and is soon broken through David’s next encounter.

After his conversation with Giovanni, David is approached by a man, garishly made-up, described by David as “It”: “it looked like a mummy or a zombie...it walked, really, like someone who might be sleepwalking.... It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness. It seemed to make no sound.... It glittered in the dark light...it stank of powder and gardenia-like perfume,” before ending, “He wore buckles on his shoes” (39). Josep M. Armengol and Henry Thomas have spoken at length about David’s homophobia and self-loathing in *Giovanni’s Room*. Thomas ends his important essay with a sustained look at this encounter before summarizing: “While its straight-acting protagonist rejects what he sees as their weakness, it is these effeminate men in the novel who are strong enough to be honest about who and what they are, even in the face of a massively homophobic and heteronormative culture” (613). Thomas is correct that these individuals are confident in their being and bodies, but it is only at certain times and places. David does not

³⁴ This space constructed and enacted by David and Giovanni also employs other characteristics of a heterotopia: “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25). “Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time.... The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men [and women] arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (26). “Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (26). “The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains” (27).

necessarily deny his being outright so much as he does not want to acquiesce, or to be trapped in this being, fixed in a given space. The next meeting with an individual rocks David to the core.

The final scene in a separate bar illustrates David's attempts to lose himself, and also where he is "outed" by his fiancée, Hella. Having fled Paris and Giovanni for Nice, with Hella, David "roamed all the bars of that glittering town, and at the end of the first night, blind with alcohol and grim with lust, I climbed the stairs of a dark hotel in company with a sailor.... On the final night of the sailor's leave, we stood drinking together in a crowded bar. We faced the mirror" (162). There is no extended description of the sailor or the bar, only a wish to escape toward oblivion. David's constant self-gaze—either in this mirror, or the window in his apartment, work to momentarily trap him in the agonized space of his mind as well. These moments are broken either by anguished thoughts or the encounter of another. David, while staring into the mirror, sees "Hella's face." Hella confirms her suspicions about David, but it appears she had inklings: "I think I've known it for a long time" (162). She knows what bar to go looking. Upon recognition, the sailor laughs. A laughter not unlike the previous laughter experienced, one that marks David as unable to run and hide, as one of "them." The mirror David gazes into reflects what everyone knows; the laughter simultaneously haunts and traps, but only momentarily. This space does not act as epiphany, that is, this is not a singular space where the moment is a revelation to everyone around. Instead, it becomes a space where David can no longer believe to be running and hiding. Yet this already happened with David's previous encounter. This recognition is also mirrored in a much earlier encounter with a sailor as David walks the streets. David stares at a young

passing sailor, and the sailor looks back “as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he gave me a look contemptuously lewd and knowing.... *Look, baby, I know you.* I felt my face flame, I felt my heart harden and shake as I hurried past him...” (92). David is marked; or, he thinks he is marked. However, his initial gaze upon the sailor does not connote only lust: “He made me think of home.... I wondered if my father had ever been like that...” (92). These myriad associations that occupy David’s mind are thoughts that shift and redirect, brought about through space and what he thinks. The final scene in the bar reveals nothing but what everyone already knows. The bars are no longer a separate space, a separate entity; the streets have never been. The momentary refuge David experiences earlier with Giovanni dissolves for good. In place is a sense of one’s self that is kaleidoscopic, brought forth through David’s complicated spatial being.

David’s Other Spaces

David’s initial relationship with space can be exemplified through Foucault’s notions of regulated, fixed spaces, from *Discipline & Punish*, and his idea of separate spheres located in heterotopias; ultimately, however, Homi Bhabha’s third space, and liminal spaces, illustrate how David moves and engages as a whole. Throughout *Giovanni’s Room* David never completely inhabits one concrete space. He is always moving, looking to escape the moment he becomes temporarily static; his in-between is illustrated through his gazing into the window, and looking into different mirrors. David’s in-between is also practiced through his watching and contemplating those who watch him in return. This frustrates many critics who see David’s waffling on matters sexual and social as a shortcoming. I argue, however, David’s refusal to acquiesce to

what anyone else wants him to do is a positive, singular gesture. Even harsh moments, such as the final scene in the bar, and David's imagining Giovanni's final moments in his cell before execution offer integral, in-between spaces of being. Most notably applied to postcolonial studies, Bhabha's shifting notions are more than apt for redescribing David's predicaments. David is always liminal, in-between; his bisexuality throughout the text showcases one aspect. David's bisexuality is also covert, used to alleviate self-hatred and fear. His refusal to verbalize or act concretely further exemplifies this habit. Bhabha mentions our present existence as one "marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present', for which there seems to be no proper name..." (1). Bhabha locates these places as "in-between spaces" that "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2). David's specific refusal to align with a heteronormative life (with Hella), or an "openly" queer life (with Giovanni) signals his refusal of two possible narratives. David chooses a lonely, brutal way; however, it is his way, to be and act how he wants. These identities enacted through different relationships with diverse spaces exemplifies David's choice of going beyond, even though he does not know where going beyond leads. To be located in the "beyond," according to Bhabha, "is to inhabit an intervening space.... But to dwell 'in the beyond' is...to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hitherside*" (10). David's singular encounters with space represent parts of a whole; his habitus, though, enacts Bhabha's notion of liminality.

One example of David's practice is his complicated relationship with home, illustrated through his shifting descriptions of Paris and the states. "Home," the idea of a solid, concretized space one occupies, leaves, and can return to is nonexistent for David. This thought is exemplified when he states, "perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition" (92). The idea that David posits "home" as an "irrevocable condition" entails it as something transient, ephemeral, barely existing at all, and that no matter how hard one tries, one cannot return, or create one of permanence. Home, then, does not exist for David; it never did. Early on, at the start of his window-reverie, he muses about the changing dimensions of his childhood landscape: "There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard—the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger" (6). Like the notion of home, and David's protean identity, spaces seethe and blur, expand and contract throughout his journey. In a separate, longer philosophical flight-of-fancy, David ruminates on a space and time he longs for:

I ached abruptly, intolerably, with a longing to go home, home across the ocean, to things and people I knew and understood; to those things, those places, those people which I would always, helplessly, and in whatever bitterness of spirit, love above all else. I had never realized such a sentiment in myself before, and it frightened me. I saw myself, sharply, as a wanderer, and adventurer, rocking through the world, unanchored. (62)

A simultaneously heartfelt, yet false thought. The states were never “home” for David in the traditional sense he is thinking of;³⁵ there are people there he knows, family, and he understands the culture—and that he is a criminal and does not belong, and these are the main reasons he has fled.³⁶ What David realizes relates to when Homi Bhabha mentions Walter Benjamin’s idea of “states of emergency.” Benjamin argues that the “tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (257). Bhabha sees this as engendering a “state of emergence,” particularly when Bhabha notes that the “question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (64). David’s troubled identity, coupled with his fractured relationship with home, enables him to live in a constant state of emergency. The “real state of emergency”³⁷ Benjamin asserts, is faced when David confronts his fading visage in the window, and is further confronted through his myriad encounters with different spaces.

David’s relationship with home is exhausted, broken, and finally reconciled through his relationship with Giovanni. In their initial meeting, and flirtatious conversation at the bar, David and Giovanni banter back and forth about New York and

³⁵ “We lived in Brooklyn then...we had also lived in San Francisco, where I was born...and we lived for awhile in Seattle, and then in New York—for me, New York is Manhattan. Later on, then, we moved to Brooklyn back to New York and by the time I came to France my father and his new wife had graduated to Connecticut. I had been on my own by then, of course, and had been living in an apartment in the east sixties” (10).

³⁶ “I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well—by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion. Even constant motion, of course, does not prevent an occasional mysterious drag, a drop, like an airplane hitting an air pocket. And there were a number of those, all drunken, all sordid, one very frightening such drop while I was in the Army which involved a fairy who was later court-martialed out. The panic his punishment caused in me was as close as I ever came to facing in myself the terrors I sometimes saw clouding another man’s eyes” (20).

³⁷ “Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism” (257).

Paris; on the former, David responds: “‘Perhaps you feel...all the time to come. There’s such power there, everything is in such movement. You can’t help wondering—I can’t help wondering—what it will all be like—many years from now’” (33). David, at this moment, is wobbling a bit; he knows what New York is like for him, and this is one reason he has fled. A bit further, when arguing the difference of culture, David exclaims, “‘You people dumped all this *merde* on us...and now you say we’re barbaric because we stink’” (35). For David, New York is newer, and suffers from the European influence. This playful conversation echoes in a later, heated exchange, when David finally breaks off the relationship with Giovanni; upset, Giovanni remarks, “‘You want to be *clean*...and you do not want to *stink*.... You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love’” (141). Ultimately, what Giovanni wants to do is contain David—both physically and emotionally. Like Jacques earlier,³⁸ Giovanni attempts to persuade David to live and accept a certain lifestyle, habitat, room(s); however, David wants none of it, and toward the end of the fight, replies, “‘I feel nothing now...nothing. I want to get out of this room, I want to get away from you, I want to end this terrible scene’” (141). James D. Bloom argues that the opening and closing of *Giovanni’s Room* “isolate David and frame him in a position akin to that of Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ speaker...where Arnold elicits sympathy for his speaker’s appeal to ‘faith’, Baldwin casts a cold eye on David’s closing resort to religion” (40). When David interacts with Giovanni he grows cold and withdrawn. In an attempt to fix David in a static space—his room—Giovanni drives him

³⁸ “Love him,” said Jacques, with vehemence, “love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at the best, can it last? Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that...in the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his” (57).

away. The pain David carries is separate from Giovanni's and Jacques's. Trying to make up for Jacques's past mistakes will not fix David, and neither will providing solace and refuge for Giovanni. Only through David's long, philosophical meditations on Giovanni's room, and Giovanni's prison cell, can David begin to work out his life and move forward.

Giovanni's physical room is ubiquitous for David and acts as a tendentious interlocutor that enables a move toward agency, and a design to keep traveling and changing. The physical rooms he enters and inhabits also allow David to equally transcend and move toward thinking new spaces. Like Giovanni, later on in his prison cell, David feels trapped: "I remember that life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea. Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning" (76); "[l]ife in that room seemed to be occurring underwater...and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there" (85). Space takes on new meaning and forms, existing outside of mere physical proximity. Space bends and stops time, and has a dramatic effect on David. Giovanni's room—more so than Giovanni—haunts David and exacts its toll. When thinking further on Giovanni and his room, David surmises: "I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life" (88). The myriad flotsam and jetsam of the room serve neither as symbols or markers of the disarray of David and Giovanni's lives. The garbage, random detritus, that has accumulated work as preludes to David's contemplation on his present predicament. Their being, their "objectivity" in Giovanni's room are minute *memento moris* stirring David to action: "I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work. I threw out the paper, the bottles, the fantastic accumulation of trash; I examined the

contents of the innumerable boxes and suitcases and disposed of them” (88). David’s attempt to clear this mess works toward enlarging the space of the room, and to locate a central point within it: “Stop fighting it. Stop fighting. Or I thought, but I am happy. And he loves me. I am safe. Sometimes, when he was not near me, I thought, I will never let him touch me again. Then, when he touched me, I thought, it doesn’t matter, it is only the body, it will soon be over” (88). This strange dance is a negotiation of being, through a specific relationship to the space of the room. Looking back at this moment, David is torn, yet he knows the way he is leaning: toward a break and movement away.

This break and movement happen when David “breaks” with Giovanni. The moment is initiated by the initial relationship, and its continuation: “The beast which Giovanni had awakened in me would never go to sleep again; but one day I would not be with Giovanni anymore” (84). Unlike Joey, and other ephemeral trysts, David has maintained a somewhat steady relationship with Giovanni, knowing the whole time that he will end it. David wonders what will happen: “And would I then, like all the others, find myself turning and following all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenues, into what dark places” (84). This sentiment draws further attention to the dark spaces David occupies, interacts with, and philosophizes on throughout his journey. Giovanni senses something off in David and attempts to create more space—physically and psychologically—by working on the room: “He had some weird idea that it would be nice to have a bookcase sunk in the wall and he chipped through the wall until he came to the brick and began pounding away at the brick” (114). Giovanni’s physical work on the space of the room is his attempt to work on their relationship. David notes that it “was hard work, it was insane work but I did not have the energy or the heart to stop him”

(114). Looking back on this moment from the present, staring into the window, David remarks: “Now-now, of course, I see something very beautiful in those days which were such torture then. I felt, then, that Giovanni was dragging me with him to the bottom of the sea” (114). This note situates David in the in-between, liminal space—in-between torture and beauty. This memory of Giovanni further relates to David’s initial thought that “people can’t, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends...”

(5). Just as Giovanni seems as an in-between relationship, for Giovanni, David simultaneously works as an attempt at oblivion and forgetting of his own troubled past, particularly the death of his childhood and subsequent dissolution of his marriage, back in Italy.

David’s break with Giovanni works as a fulcrum point in space, one where David passes from opportunity to inhabit a new community, to one that is solitary. David realizes that life with Giovanni in the room, life drifting from bar-to-bar, with Jacques and others, is not for him: “I wanted to live. And I stared at the room with the same nervous, calculating extension of the intelligence and of all one’s forces which occurs when gauging a mortal and unavoidable danger...” (87). David, like a cartographer, is mapping the philosophical and psychological dimensions of this space, knowing the hazards, and at the same time plotting his escape. In a text mostly void of physical action, David and Giovanni’s relationship rests on sexual attraction and consummation that nearly boils over into violence: “I was guilty and irritated and full of love and pain. I wanted to kick him and I wanted to take him in my arms” (116). Guilt hovers just below the surface of David’s life as well, always threatening to consume him. The guilt David feels seems to always catch up in whatever physical space he inhabits. Tied specifically

with notions of criminality and transgression, guilt always relates to spaces and suffocates David. David appears trapped, that the walls of the room are closing in, and wishes for escape: “‘I’m sick of this city...I’m tired of this ancient pile of stone and all these goddamn smug people. Everything you put your hands on here comes to pieces in your hands” (115). David’s sense of being, of drowning underwater, is coming to a head in Giovanni’s room. This claustrophobia reaches its apex after Giovanni mockingly asks David about Hella: “I was vividly aware that he held a brick in his hand, I held a brick in mine. It really seemed for an instant that if I did not go to him, we would use these bricks to beat each other to death” (118). This almost-violent culmination happens shortly after David admits he’s “frightened.” David, though, is not frightened of Giovanni’s brick, but of what he—David—knows he will do to Giovanni emotionally and psychologically by breaking things off: “I dropped my brick and went to him. In a moment I heard his fall. And at moments like this I felt that we were merely enduring and committing the longer and lesser and more perpetual murder” (118). How David eventually breaks off with Giovanni is by simply ignoring or ghosting him. When Giovanni runs into David at a small bookstore, space comes into play once more, and David is faced with his problem. Giovanni’s actual, physical room is malleable and often changing. The room works as prison cell, a room of passion, one of domesticity; it seems to enact the bonds of marriage all in truncated time, which is apt, for time is different in the room. David gives himself over to everything there, but only for a limited time.

David's Narrative Confession

David and Giovanni's final physical interaction signals a change in the narrative. During this argument, Giovanni "confesses,"³⁹ begs David to stay, and condemns him; this exchange has no clear effect on David; however, thinking back on this last, heated argument with Giovanni, David notes an immense change. At the height of this exchange, Giovanni describes David as a "lover who is neither man nor woman, nothing that I can know or touch" (139), and David, who earlier, remarks, "I felt nothing for Giovanni. I felt terror and pity and a rising lust" (138), now feels the room, the space, as unbearable: "I want to get out of this room, I want to get away from you..." (141). After David departs, Giovanni, alone and desperate, murders Guillaume in a fit of rage and revenge for the bar owner's advances. David, in a narrative turn, imagines Giovanni's altercation with Guillaume:

I could hear the conversation: "*Alors, tu es revenue?*" This from Guillaume, with a seductive, sardonic, speaking look. Giovanni sees that he does not wish to be reminded of his last, disastrous tantrum, that he wishes to be friendly. At the same moment Guillaume's face, voice, manner, smell, hit him; he is actually facing Guillaume, not conjuring him up in his mind; the smile with which he responds to Guillaume almost causes him to vomit. But Guillaume does not see this, of course, and offers Giovanni a drink. (154)

³⁹ Giovanni relates his sad life, back in a small Italian town, about his girlfriend and still-born child: "I left my village.... I was the day of my death—I wish it had been the day of my death.... Yes, I had made a baby but it was born dead...but it was born dead, it was my baby and we had made it, my girl and I, and it was dead, I took our crucifix off the wall and I spat on it and I threw it on the floor and my mother and my girl screamed and I went out. We buried it right away, the next day, and then I left my village and I came to this city where surely God has punished me for all my sins and for spitting on His holy Son, and where I will surely die. I do not think I will ever see my village again" (139-140).

The scene that David imagines and narrates works to show the switch in narration that is related to the criminal encounter Giovanni has when he murders Guillaume. Before this moment David relates how he “may have been the only man in Paris who knew that he had not meant to do it, who could read *why* he had done it beneath the details printed in the newspaper” (153). This narrative turn precipitates David imagining and drawing Giovanni in his prison cell, awaiting execution. After Giovanni goes on the run and is eventually apprehended, David imagines him in his cell, alone, waiting and thinking about his pending execution. David cannot stop thinking of Giovanni in his cell:

“Giovanni’s face swings before me like an unexpected lantern on a dark dark night.... I cannot read what is in his eyes: if it is terror, then I have never seen terror, if it is anguish, then anguish has never laid hands on me” (167). David continues this strange reverie and construction: “Now they approach, now the key turns in the lock, now they have him. He cries out once. They look at him from far away. They pull him to the door of his cell, the corridor stretches before him like the graveyard of his past, the prison spins around him” (167). The narrative is mostly void of metaphor and simile, Baldwin, through David’s character, uses these devices to both construct and locate Giovanni in a space and time. David’s attempts at reconstructing Giovanni’s minute-by-minute narrative could read, at first glance, as an attempt to put himself in his former lover’s space. One may also wonder if David’s attempts to narrate Giovanni’s final moments are acts that try to pay for what he feels guilty for, though, I do not think so. Earlier, David imagines if Giovanni is alone or with a lover; if Giovanni must use the bathroom. During these moments, David’s narrative acts at reimagining Giovanni’s new spaces signal a direct break in the form of the text. David recalls almost all of the action in the text through memory, while

gazing into the window of his apartment. Memory, importantly, can also be viewed as a liminal space David momentarily inhabits to contemplate his experiences.

Giovanni's Room, as a narrative construction, hinges upon David's first-person recollections of his life, and whereas I do not view and / or read him as falling into the traditional role of unreliable narrator, he lives, thinks, and acts within a constant, shifting web of self-deception, justification, and existence. His views are shaped from his self-described criminal experiences of same-sex love and desire, particularly with Joey, and in other run-ins that haunt his memory. Mikko Tuhkanen reads Baldwin's navigation of spaces in *Giovanni's Room* as negotiations through a guilt-ridden abyss: "the experience of the grotesque that the inhabitants of the underworld emulate in David and Baldwin points to the underground queer spaces as scenes of violent transformation, a mixing of categories" (128). Further, Tuhkanen notes that Baldwin's ambiguities, his thinking that is simultaneously "open and hesitant," makes his "texts themselves queerly productive" (129). This straddling of in-between spaces, intellectually and physically, is directly tied to Baldwin's form and construction of *Giovanni's Room*. The fluid overlapping of the criminal, with movement through and in liminal spaces is practiced by a transgression of form. The liminal space is mapped even more with David's thoughts and construction of Giovanni awaiting execution in his cell. Each moment is physically and emotionally imagined and formed: "perhaps his voice is crying now, in all that stone and iron. I see his legs buckle, his thighs jelly, his buttocks quiver, the secret hammer there begin to knock.... He is sweating, or his is dry. They drag him, or he walks" (167). The special attention David pays to Giovanni's body during these descriptions works as eroticizing and locating him in a distinct space. Memory gives way to construction; where David

earlier battles his memories of Joey and others, he now constructs Giovanni's existence in painstaking detail. David, who deceives and hides from others and himself, now seems to be facing life the best way he knows how—through construction. This current state could not have happened without David's constant juggle with memory; memory, then, works as liminal space in that it is "beyond," as Homi Bhabha notes, a thing that is always already slippery and difficult to grasp. Bhabha mentions this state as a "moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge, which...represents a hybridity, a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality" (19). David's practice, then, is illustrated through his equal attention to presence and absence, located in the many different spaces he inhabits and moves through, and worked out in the construction of his narrative.

Transgressive Queering

What David accrues throughout the text is a layering of awareness. David's ultimate transgression is not only his practice of same-sex desire, but his intense refusal to acquiesce to any one system of being, one way of thinking, or one community. Equally transgressive is Baldwin's form in constructing a text that illustrates David's kaleidoscopic thought process, and subsequent actions. One way to talk about David's narrative is to attempt to locate *Giovanni's Room* in a specific field or genre, which, I argue, is impossible. Baldwin's third book signals a complete rupture in his practice and breaks with contemporary literature of the time on multiple levels. However, reviews and studies have overlooked *Giovanni's Room* and its radical transgression. Initial reviews obsessed over the queer content. Other reviewers considered the novel to be "sensational

and more cheaply written” (118) than previous work. William Esty’s initial review is favorable, calling it “the best American novel dealing with homosexuality I have read” (26). Yet argues the novel’s ending “is somewhat lame, his [Baldwin’s] descriptions of the hero’s emotions run too heavily to beating hearts, trembling, bright lights, overwhelming stirrings, falling, drowning, the bottom of the sea. Also, Baldwin’s blond-athlete-type hero...never wholly emerges from dimness” (26). Leslie Fiedler’s review argues the opposite end: “There is not only no Negro problem...there are not even any Negroes—and this, I must confess, makes me a little uneasy” (204). The initial reaction to the text divides it into a dichotomy: it is either solely a queer novel, or a strange experiment by a leading black writer to compose a work with an all-white cast. Tony Hilfer’s important study of American fiction lauds Baldwin’s first two books, then dismisses *Giovanni’s Room* as “pure bathos, [where] Baldwin’s attempts to rationalize politics in terms of the love-heart-terror ethos of the psychological-lyrical novel are thoroughly unconvincing” (47). What the focus in most of *Giovanni’s Room* criticism relies upon is content. An intricate, complicated look at the novel’s form not only situates the text as a singular achievement, but one that reaches this spot through an integral practice of transgression.

To look closely at Baldwin’s form is to further examine how the criminal and liminal spaces are developed through transgression of construction and content. On the surface, *Giovanni’s Room* appears to straddle the in-between in its break from an African American literary tradition; moreover, through an acute playfulness with time, a somewhat complicated structure, and an attention to images and shards of existence, it seems to fit within the mode of late modernism. These tactics are fully realized in the

shifting nature of Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. *Giovanni's Room*, his second novel, is an abrupt change. Located wholly within David's point of view, this text feels equally claustrophobic and nebulous. David, eerily, seems to be suffocating under internal and external pressures, while never completely tethered to one spot. These characteristics are illustrated through Baldwin's prose. Much has been made of Baldwin's admiration and debt to Henry James,⁴⁰ Proust, Dostoevsky, and Dickens. When asked, in a *Paris Review* interview, why there were no black characters in the novel, and where this idea came from, Baldwin replies:

I suppose the only honest answer...is that *Giovanni's Room* came out of something I had to face...it broke off from what later turned into *Another Country*. Giovanni was at a party and on his way to the guillotine. He took all the light in the book, and then the book stopped and nobody in the book would speak to me. I thought I would seal Giovanni off into a short story, but it turned into *Giovanni's Room*. I certainly could not possibly have—not at that point in my life—handled the other great weight, the “Negro Problem.” The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. (239)

This long excerpt sets the foundation for the conception of the text but does not intricately discuss the specific architecture of the novel. There is, however, the warring space of in-between: Baldwin struggles mightily with subject matter, not wanting to follow, but to strike new ground. One interesting idea that Baldwin relates in the passage is that the work in progress “stopped and nobody would speak.” I read *Giovanni's Room*

⁴⁰ David Leeming recalls Baldwin talking about “the importance...of James's style and technique. It was something about point of view, something about discipline, that had originally attracted him.... But later what drew him most to ‘the Master’ was the realization that they shared a central theme, that of the ‘failure of Americans to see through to the reality of other’” (254-255).

as a text of concurrent silences, illustrated through David's inability to speak and articulate what he is feeling and what is going on. Two things that I believe he is aware of at times, and at other moments, oblivious to. In another interview, Baldwin mentions that "Art has to be a kind of confession. I don't mean a true confession.... The effort, it seems to me, is: if you can examine and face your life, you are connected to other lives..." (21). In one sense, *Giovanni's Room* works and acts as David's "confession," particularly through the guilt he feels over Giovanni. In another sense, the novel, as the title of my chapter suggests, works also as testimony, which brings special attention to criminality and space throughout its construction. I argue that *Giovanni's Room* is an outlier, working and constantly moving somewhere between modernism and postmodernism. This point is based not only upon the practice of form within the text, but with attention to everything surrounding its composition.

The construction of the text, with an equal emphasis on form, illustrates these myriad practices. In Marjorie Levinson's important essay, "What is New Formalism?", "the defining category [New Formalism] is neither an established period nor topic, but a developing theory or method emerging from the entire repertoire of literary and cultural studies..." (558). Levinson traces the fields in distinct terms,⁴¹ setting out particular differences and demarcations, commenting on the supposed "usefulness...of classifying critical work by reference to schools, movements, and isms," warning that those who

⁴¹ "Activist Formalism" includes "those who want to restore to today's reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form (traced by these critics to sources foundational for materialist critique—e.g., Hegel, Marx, Freud, Adorno, Althusser, Jameson)," and Normative Formalism," who are those "who campaign to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with from (regarded as the condition of aesthetic experience as traced to Kant—i.e., disinterested, autotelic, playful, pleasurable, consensus-generating, and therefore both individually liberating and conducive to affective social cohesion) the prerogative of art. In short, we have a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism and a backlash new formalism" (559).

attempt a refocus on the purely formal elements of literature “might worry the irony of their own turn to sectarian and, in some cases, extremist self-definition, however liberal its ideals and however pitched to the provocation” (568). I am trying to heed this warning. A close look at *Giovanni’s Room*, and its layered form does not override some of its other salient, social and political concerns. What I am arguing is that the form and transgressive experiment of this unique work is often overlooked for these other areas, instead of being intrinsically tied together. I am placing *Giovanni’s Room*, and the other texts in my study, within the slippery category of the criminal. I do this not based wholly on subject matter, but on a special attention to subject matter alongside criminal and transgressive form, which each of these texts practice.

Caroline Levine’s study, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Structure* (2015) argues that “paying attention to subtle and complex formal patterns allows us to rethink the historical workings of political power and the relations between politics and aesthetics” (xiii). Levine politically foregrounds her formalist study and argues that formalism “offers a promising way forward” (xiii). Similar to Levinson’s tracing of distinct structure, Levine argues for a formalist practice of four specific categories: wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks.⁴² Levine posits that “narrative form affords a careful attention to the ways in which forms come together, and to what happens when and after they meet” (19). Looking at forms, Levine notices, “brings with it some strange side effects. It throws into an odd kind of disarray another form—the binary division between public and private—as the secret courtroom, which joins intimate storytelling

⁴² *Wholes*, which focus on “domestic walls to national boundaries; temporal *rhythms*, that look at industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time; powerful *hierarchies*, including gender, race, class, and bureaucracy; and *networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation” (21).

with the adoption of impersonal, public rules” (21). Levine asks the question: “What specific order does each form impose?” (22). Ultimately, she argues, “the most significant and challenging claim of this book is that many, many forms are organizing us at all times” (22), and asks where “we can locate the best opportunities for social change in a world of overlapping forms?” (22). Levine seems grounded in the forward-moving, societal / political advancement that an attention to literary form can possibly engender. I am more skeptical, and, in turn, like the focus Levine brings to the “strange side effects,” that have other, alternative modes and means. These alternatives fall into my nebulous category of the criminal, and all of its fluid, interlocking, and overlapping parts.

One way that form works in *Giovanni's Room* as something singular is through its focus on the erotic and the body, and through its seeming mélange of influences. Through flashback, doubling, and repetition, David's sexual encounters are obsessed over, accumulated, and then experienced with a guilt-ridden malaise. Like previous relationships, as Joseph M. Arangel has noted, David sees his involvement with Giovanni as “equally dark, dirty, and stinking” (680). This tortuous repetition is talked about at length in a recent article by Colm Tóibín, where he posits many influences, especially in the mode of confession: Hemingway; Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*; Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*; James's *The Ambassadors*; Joseph Conrad; and, curiously, Tóibín notes that the “idea of [David's] passing for straight has echoes in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). These are fascinating examples and allude to much of the style David—through Baldwin—affects in his telling. However, one nameless individual, who has been less examined, has the greatest influence on David, and his eventual turn. About three-

quarters of the way through *Giovanni's Room*, David, in extreme anguish, "Thinks of prison," and

a man at a party at Jacques's house who was celebrated because he had spent half his life in prison. He had then written a book about it which displeased the prison authorities and won a literary prize. But this man's life was over. He was fond of saying that, since to be in prison was simply not to live, the death penalty was the only merciful verdict any jury could deliver. I remember thinking that, in effect, he had never left prison. Prison was all that was real to him; he could not speak of anything else. All his movements, even to the lighting of a cigarette, were stealthy, wherever his eyes focused one saw a wall rise up. His face, the color of his face, brought to mind darkness and dampness, I felt that if one cut him, his flesh would be the flesh of mushrooms. (112)

This passage is quoted at length to illustrate the converging of the criminal, liminal space, and transgression, a system that ultimately leads to David's new narrative. Immediately after this memory David starts to describe Giovanni's life in prison, and this scene works as the hinge point in the text for David's (and Baldwin's) form. From this moment on David no longer obsesses wholly on the past but hones his attention on creating his and Giovanni's present. It is at this moment where modes or the genre of confession are transformed. The writer, David recalls, "described to us in avid, nostalgic detail the barred windows, the barred doors, the judas, the guards standing at far ends of corridors, under the light" (112). David, at the end of the text, knows this new narrative, new description is held within the warring factions of his body: "I look at my sex, my

troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. The journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already, half over. Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh” (168). This struggle is exemplified further in Georges Bataille’s notions of transgression.

Bataille’s theories of transgression are explored in *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (1957, trans. 1967), where eroticism is viewed as transgression through its violence and excess, and despite these challenges, boundaries remain in place, the consensus prevails. Transgression through eroticism, Bataille notes, suspends taboo and order without completely breaking them; transgression through eroticism momentarily occupies a liminal space as well. David, throughout *Giovanni’s Room*, transgresses in multiple manners: he breaks and lives somewhat outside of heteronormative constraints, without being completely free of them; similarly, he refuses to acquiesce to Jacques and Giovanni and what they want in their separate communities as well. David falls into and cultivates a separate “queer” space, seemingly fluid and simultaneously apart of various spaces while never belonging wholly to one. “Queer”⁴³ practices an array of different tactics that further sets an individual aside and away from; “queer” transgresses, and “queer” manifests itself experimentally in many always as well. Moreover, “queer” transgresses the appellation “gay” through the former’s diffuse definitions; however, it is never completely free from the appellation. Much has been made about Baldwin’s hatred of the term “gay.” According to Nicholas Boggs, “The term *queer* may be something of a misnomer when referencing Baldwin’s sexuality; yet his attitude toward social construction of sexual subjectivity is certainly more aligned with the identity sign of

⁴³ I am using the term “queer” not only in its connotation with homosexuality, but also with notions of being “strange,” “odd,” “slightly ill,” etc.

‘queer’ than with any other system currently available.” And Boggs notes how Baldwin “consistently rejected the self-designation ‘gay’” (156). David’s encounters throughout the text would not typically fall into the realm of the erotic, if the term is taken at face value, in its traditional definition, as relating to or cause of sexual desire or excitement. Instead, the erotic and eroticism are looked at askance, or “queered” through David’s practices. David’s “eroticism” throughout *Giovanni’s Room* oscillates between internal and external surfaces,⁴⁴ yet reaches its singular, strangest, and “queerest” points during the minute and myriad imaginings of Giovanni’s body in prison, the “million details, proof and fruit of intimacy, flood my [David’s] mind,” such as “if he is sweating or dry, [or] if anyone has made love to him in prison” (113-114). These thoughts are enabled after the meeting with the French writer (Genet?), and work on multiple levels. Giovanni, through David’s descriptions, is more real, present, an individual, than he ever was during their time together in the room; a time David spent in panic, trying to escape. During these narrative reconstructions, David never objectifies or fetishizes Giovanni; instead, there is an urgent search being worked out.

David’s thoughts and narrative construction transgress and experiment with traditional practices of storytelling. The key note Bataille strikes, regarding transgression, and what David practices, is the in-between space. This in-between is characterized through Bataille’s look at the oscillation of inner experience, in tandem with transgression, and the constant checking of one’s self. Inner experience, Bataille contends, is a form of anguish internal and unique to humans. When one “transgresses,”

⁴⁴ Before David’s first encounter with Joey: “And I think it began in the shower. I know that I felt something...” (6). And later, with Giovanni: “He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry, and slowly pulled me down with him to that bed” (64).

one is aware of the taboo, and feels anguish (36-39). David desires the violation of taboo yet feels anguish after his transgression. Bataille notes that one achieves “inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels that he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside that resists him. He goes beyond the objective awareness bounded by the walls of the chrysalis and the process...” (39). David experiences these feelings throughout. Initially, it seems, he transgresses through sexual behavior; however, this transgression reaches out further through David’s descriptions of Giovanni that point toward another way for David to be and act. This focus illustrates another split in that David’s concentration and revision of Giovanni’s body takes place when they are physically separate from one another. Yet, to David, they grow closer. Rebecca Roberts-Hughes notes how Bataille “describes transgression as *maintaining* the prohibition. The human subject is thus *conserved*, albeit temporarily, and through a tempestuous and anguished experience. Transgression,” she argues, “is only as important as the taboo—our experience of it is more tumultuous, and therefore more impressive and poignant, but no more crucial to us than our boundaries” (161). David’s existence in the past and, now, moving forward, hinges on this oscillation through its physical, emotional, psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic guises. David’s descriptions of Giovanni are erotic through the above-mentioned lenses as well, enabling David movement and an opportunity to move forward.

Baldwin, in his construction of Giovanni’s Room, practices similar modes of transgression, constantly brushing up against and moving between genres and practices. This practice is specifically illustrated with Baldwin’s explicit look at the erotic in *Giovanni’s Room*, a marked departure from his previous two texts. The erotic, as well, is

intricately tied to violence,⁴⁵ another aspect Bataille examines.⁴⁶ There is violence in Baldwin's first novel, and in his second book, a collection of essays, but it mixes and melds with the erotic and reaches its height in *Giovanni's Room*. I have traced David's erotic strain from Joey to Giovanni, and to David's thoughts of Giovanni in prison. What also exemplifies Baldwin's form is David's uses of silence, understatement, and inability to speak or say what he wants, specifically regarding sticky situations involving the erotic. David's actual dialogue from the text is minimal. The numerous silences and gaps are composed almost entirely of David's interior thoughts, physical and philosophical musings he undertakes while staring in the window: "I did not tell him my decision" (9); "I did not dare describe this dream" (11); "I still could not say anything" (18); "we had never talked, that now we never would" (19); "I said nothing" (25); "We stood in silence" (30); "We were silent for a moment" (37); "I stammered" (37); "It seemed better to do nothing" (46); "There was silence" (56); "I cannot say" (67); "I wish I could think of something to make her stay...but of course it will never be said" (70); "I did not dare tell him" (77); "I was holding something back" (78); "I cannot say" (94); "Still, still I could not act" (115); "I don't know" (122); "he never tell me anything" (128); "I did not know what to say" (137); "In a moment, I thought, I will say something" (137). Initially, what this silence engenders is David's confession.⁴⁷ In the Foucauldian sense, David's supposed confession seems to work as "an obligatory act of speech which, under some

⁴⁵ During one of their heated arguments, David recalls: "I was vividly aware that he held a brick in his hand, I held a brick in mine. It really seemed for an instant that if I did not go to him, we would use these bricks to beat each other to death" (118).

⁴⁶ Bataille states, "We should not be frightened of violence in the same way if we did not know or at least obscurely sense that it could lead us to worse things" (64). Bataille specifically notes de Sade in this mixing as well (168-169).

⁴⁷ Throughout the text David alludes to his thoughts as a confession of sorts, and often wavers back and forth: "No matter how it seems now, I must confess: I loved him" (1122); "But this would have been too great a confession" (144).

imperious compulsion, breaks the bonds of discretion or forgetfulness” (62). David’s breaking point, spurring the “confession,” is Giovanni’s impending execution and the role David feels he has played. However, David does not simply feel guilty over Giovanni, but is in immediate anguish over the space he finds himself in. Moreover, with Foucault’s notion, there is an integral play, a back-and-forth between power relationships, a listener who grants the confession its healing power. David, despite this “confession,” speaks to no one specifically, is not healed, and is not looking to be healed through the act of confession alone. It is not as though he wishes to be absolved of sin, to be granted forgiveness and then move on. David wants to experience the acts that brought him to this point again and again, and he begins to do this through his description. Baldwin’s form, the bank-and-forth silences mixed with speech mixed with description complicate and point toward something other than simple confession.

Baldwin’s form through David’s thoughts is a diverse blurring of genre, subsuming ideas of confession, mixing them with the practice of testimony, and moving toward his own construction, which he is already practicing. One definition of testimony is a “formal statement, especially one given in a court of law” (946). *Giovanni’s Room*, I have shown, is a text practicing criminality; however, David is not guilty for Giovanni’s predicament. David feels guilty for the way he has treated those around him, but this is not enough to sentence him for any crime. The text, at moments, falls into another definition of testimony: producing “evidence or proof of something” (946). This definition hinges on truth, and throughout the text David has told lie upon lie, building a narrative full of holes, stories he believes. This pattern changes when David starts to describe Giovanni. The focus is taken directly off David, yet he is still creator. In the

double text, *The Instant of My Death*, by Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida's *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (1998), Derrida looks at Blanchot's startling, autobiographical short prose piece, where a young man is brought before a firing squad during World War II and then released moments before execution. Derrida examines the problems of testimony linking it with the idea of secrecy to investigate how testimony and truth perform. *Giovanni's Room* works as a glimpse into a certain number of David's secrets. There are gaps, multiple silences, but they are layered around dazzling moments of description, creation, and recreation. In reading Blanchot, Derrida exclaims, "I do not know whether this text belongs, purely and properly and strictly and rigorously speaking, to the space of literature, whether it is a fiction or a testimony, and, above all, to what extent it calls these distinctions into question or causes them to tremble" (26). Similarly, David's task in *Giovanni's Room* is varied; it is never one thing, but always working at other practices. Derrida asks "whether a secret testimony is impossible. In principle, to testify—not being a witness but testifying, attesting, 'bearing witness'—is always to render public" (30). In *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin illustrates how David occupies these multiple spaces, various roles. Derrida notes the idea of a "secret testimony seems thus a contradiction in terms. Especially when the experience of the secret itself implies some inner witness, some third party in oneself that calls one to witness" (31). David testifies and describes to no one specifically (except the reader); however, his movement through various spaces and silences enable his descriptions, which act as practices of resistance and moving forward. This text is not a traditional *Bildungsroman* (Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* works in this genre), nor is it a *Künstlerroman* (*Another Country*, Baldwin's third novel falls into this category), maybe *Giovanni's Room* works as a

“*Verbrecherroman*,” or “maturation of the criminal,” but it does much more than this awkward term entails. David, at the close of the novel, is still running, always in motion, moving from space to space. However, he is now armed with the practice of description. What *Giovanni’s Room* is, ultimately, is a separate text, occupying a separate space, practicing transgression through form and content, a singular, uncategorizable work.

Chapter 2

“There is chaos and void”: War and the Transgressive Glimpse in Rosmarie Waldrop’s

Driven to Abstraction.

Rosmarie Waldrop’s twentieth collection of poetry, *Driven to Abstraction* (2010), is a unique investigation into the subject of artistic creation during war, marking a distinct turning point in both the practice of the poet, and her subject matter. In this text, Waldrop’s prose poems employ a different kind of engagement with the criminal, one occupying liminal space and practicing transgression. Whereas Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* engages criminality and transgression through David’s movement and relationship with different spaces, Waldrop’s engagement with criminality is through state violence in the form of war. She locates criminality through her practice of the glimpse, a practice that allows the speaker to direct focus through a break in form and content. Looking and the gaze are enacted by David in *Giovanni’s Room*, as both a mode to locate others and how others fixed David in a space. The glimpse takes the idea of the gaze further, allowing the speaker brief moments and fractured glances at difficult subject matter. Through these poems, particularly in the section “By the Waters of Babylon” focusing on the second Gulf War, the speaker constantly balances the slippery, often complicated, role of creator during a time of conflict. However, both the speaker and the form of these poems occupy diffuse, transgressive spaces. Unlike well-known personal encounters with war from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, from Whitman to Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Yusef Komunyakaa, that work to place the speaker in the middle of the action, to even more recent engagement, explored in Kevin Powers’s *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting* (2014), Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet* (2005), and

Hugh Martin's *The Stick Soldiers* (2013) and *In Country* (2018), the speaker in the fifteen poems from Waldrop's sequence is spatially distant, spatially removed, not a soldier but one commenting on specific acts from a floating space, as if relating moments and information once removed from the news, looped and thought about: "'Then somebody thinks 'Operation Ivy Cyclone.' 'Operation Plymouth Rock.' / 'Operation Iron Hammer.' / In 2005, in Baghdad, 92% of the people did not have stable electricity, 39% did / not have safe drinking water, 25% of children under the age of five were suffering / from malnutrition'" (67). James Anderson Winn looks at the history of war poetry as a genre that remembers and honors, a mode that can "offer thoughtful readers precious insights into war—moral, political, and aesthetic ways of understanding war that are valuable precisely because they are not simple, flat, or formulaic" (7). Waldrop's look at war and poetic form is much more oblique and fragmented than some of the more famous, direct engagements; facts and statements are left dangling; there is no overall arching claim or moral to be gathered, no teleological grasping. War simply exists; it appears equally present and distant. However, it weighs down and troubles the speaker. *Driven to Abstraction* "abstracts" and complicates one's involvement with war through the creative act. The speaker in these poems struggles, causing a rift in creation, and forcing the artist to ask myriad difficult questions, to relate gut-wrenching facts: "4,000 to 6,000 civilians have been killed in Fallujah / It is impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to this sentence, without / simply repeating the sentence" (Waldrop 69). Waldrop's poetics and her transgressive practice of the "glimpse," extends the notion of "war poetry" while also breaking away; this break enables a new, troubled look at how artists respond to war.

Waldrop's engagement with criminality locates the criminal in the blatant disregard of life on both sides of the war, including casualties suffered by U.S. and Iraqis, and the occupation of Iraq. Waldrop's project, however, is not as straightforward as it initially seems. Taking into account a history of war poetry, and writing about war, Waldrop's glimpse acts as a fractured look at how individuals react and write about war, and if writing about war can accomplish anything. Waldrop's practice includes a transgression of form that works as an abrupt break in her oeuvre. The poems from "By the Waters of Babylon" are difficult to categorize. On the surface they appear as random lines on a page; however, I read this section as a series of broken prose poems, where the left and right margins indicate a block, but the lines are broken and float, there is white space, there are fragments that indicate the difficulty, or impossibility of the project at hand. Waldrop's glimpse extends the notion of the gaze in that it works with partial images, incomplete looks at a fraction of the whole; the glimpse works to uncover information, thoughts, and asides, but is quickly jettisoned by the inability of the information to lead toward any final statement or illuminating insight. Instead, the glimpse offers smaller statements that allow the speaker to engage on different levels, mainly through form and style. What is also fascinating about Waldrop's sequence is the attention she draws to gender, the feminine space when talking of war. Most war writing is told from the masculine, first-person point of view, usually a soldier's point of view. Waldrop complicates this idea in many ways. Her speaker is physically passive for the most part; most of the difficult work being done is through philosophical asides, the breaking of form, and thinking about war happening somewhere else, while balancing day-to-day life. Waldrop expertly practices this difficult task with a formally fractured

poetic sequence that glimpses at war through different lenses and encounters the criminal through a transgressive way of thinking.

Criminal Topics, Criminal Engagements

The focus of the criminal in Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction* centers around the United States' involvement in the second Gulf War, and how artists come to grips and make meaning from horrible events. The criminal in this chapter differs greatly from the first, where Baldwin's protagonist must navigate a hostile world in order to survive and make meaning. However, this chapter extends the idea of the social space, the liminal space, particularly with one's involvement in creation and the political. Here, the speaker of the poems deals with a seemingly criminal engagement, the war and U.S. occupation of Iraq, in both direct and indirect encounters. Waldrop's transgressive practice confronts war, and works as both a break and investigation into the poet's modes of construction, illustrating what Hank Lazer calls "disruptive force."⁴⁸ This struggle causes a rift in Waldrop's practice, forcing the artist to ask questions of creation, shifting styles in order to face a time of war / crisis through a discursive lens, investigating what it means to create during a time of conflict and whether creation accomplishes anything.

Waldrop's opaque engagement throughout the collection also works as a prescient interlocutor for the present moment. In a recent article, C.J. Chivers notes:

In early October, the Afghan war will be 17 years old, a milestone that has loomed with grim inevitability as the fighting has continued without a clear exit strategy across three presidential administrations. With this

⁴⁸ "I am interested in poetry as disruptive force—within one's personal life as well as within one's creative endeavors to write poetry" (182).

anniversary, prospective recruits born after the terrorist attacks of 2001 will be old enough to enlist. And Afghanistan is not the sole enduring American campaign. The war in Iraq, which started in 2003, has resumed and continues in a different form over the border in Syria, where the American military also has settled into a string of ground outposts without articulating a plan or schedule for a way out. The United States has at various times declared success in its many campaigns—in late 2001; in the spring of 2003; in 2008; in the short-lived withdrawal from Iraq late in 2011; in its allies' recapture more recently of the ruins of Ramadi, Falluja, Mosul, and Raqqa from the Islamic State, a terrorist organization, formed in the crucible of occupied Iraq, that did not even exist when the wars to defeat terrorism started. And still the wars grind on, within the conflict in Afghanistan on track to be a destination for American soldiers born after it began. (Chivers)

Chivers's passage illustrates the strange, difficult project of constructing poems on an ongoing war, especially from a seemingly detached vantage point. The ways Waldrop navigates this terrain is through placing her lines and text in conversation amidst a multitude of sources. Much of *Driven to Abstraction* is culled from other texts: Brian Rotman's *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, John Cage's *Silence*, Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions*, Yol Hoffman's *The Book of Joseph*, Elizabeth Willis's *Meteoric Flowers*, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, and other comparable works. Many of the direct quotes of war are sifted from Eliot Weinberger's "What I Heard about Iraq in 2005," itself a spliced montage of facts and soundbites about the war. The effect

of this dizzying display is to place the poet's voice not as authority per se, with final word and thought, but as one occupying a space among many others. This juxtaposition of texts, along with the speaker's personal preoccupations, showcase a kaleidoscopic lens through which the conflict is viewed. What is important about this lens is not only the varied, difficult subject matter, but the writer's form as well. Waldrop has worked in the medium of the prose poem often, her trilogy—*The Reproduction of Profiles* (1987), *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (1993), and *Reluctant Gravities* (1999), collected together in *Curves to the Apple* (2006)—showcases an insouciant, dizzying interplay of voices and space, centered around being and language; the prose poem, according Waldrop, fits Ezra “Pound's postulate of ‘a center around which, not a box within which,’” and the trajectory of the trilogy contextualizes “‘the empty space [Waldrop] place[s] in the center of each poem to allow penetration’ to the ultimate gap, as between two people” (xii). In *Ceci n' est pas Keith / Ceci n' est pas Rosmarie* (2002), Waldrop, talking about Edmond Jabès, mentions that “the fragment is our only access to the infinite. I tend to think it is our way of apprehending anything. Our inclusive views are mosaics. And the shards catch light on the cut, the edges give off sparks” (86). Waldrop practices this fracturing in *Driven to Abstraction*, where the prose poem form is complicated further with an even greater emphasis on space and fragments. Instead of the standard block format, the prose is broken, with space in-between certain lines; this form enables startling facts to float free, to be lingered over. These are loose, broken blocks, mimicking the attempt of the speaker to come to terms with the immense gravity of difficult situations; the form also mimics and illustrates a war which has broken language, bodies, and lives.

An integral way to look at Waldrop's practice and preoccupation in *Driven to Abstraction* is through the lens of Edward Said's notion of "late style." In his posthumous text *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2006), Said wonders about "artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (7). Said looks at late style in a number of writers and composers who practice "a nonharmonious, nonserene tension" (7), Said, describing this style of "lateness" as "a kind of self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable... [it] insists on the increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism (17); it defies predictability... [it] is never fully a part of any one side" (21). What Said relays is that this particular style of "lateness" practiced in one's work occupies a different, separate, other space. Much has been noted about the idea of gaps and spaces at work in Waldrop's practice. In an interview with Christine Hume, Waldrop mentions this idea in relationship with language: "I've always thought it was the conscious change to English, my coming to the US, that not only made me a translator, but gave me a sense of being 'between,' and a sense of writing as exploring what 'happens between.' Between words, sentences, people, cultures" (252). Waldrop further details this sense of between in a conversation with Joan Retallack: "Well, discontinuity seems the actual state. It's how I see the world. We come to know anything that has any complexity by glimpses. So it is best to have as many different glimpses from as many different perspectives as possible, rather than trying to develop a linear argument where one thing follows another" (301). This notion of "discontinuity" abstracts a good deal of Waldrop's work; however, there are moments throughout Waldrop's vast and varied oeuvre where personal glimpses fuse with a more

language centered approach.⁴⁹ *Driven to Abstraction* practices the “glimpse” Waldrop mentions; these poems, despite their diffuse nature, through the use of glimpses, consciously attempt to look at war and one’s involvement through the creative act.

Involvement through writing about war, though, is a tricky, complicated endeavor, fraught with missteps and pitfalls. Roy Scranton, an Iraq War veteran and writer, calls out the public’s view and misconception regarding war literature in “The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*” (2015). Scranton explains that the myth of the trauma hero follows the formula of trauma and recovery: “A boy goes to war, his head full of romantic visions...but on the field of battle he finds death and horror.... After the war the boy, now a veteran and man, returns to the world of peace haunted by his experience,” where, according to Scranton, the “Trauma Hero,” then becomes “wracked by the central compulsion of trauma and atrocity: the struggle between the need to bear witness to his shattering encounter with, and the compulsion to repress it” (Scranton). The ultimate truth of war, the veteran learns, is beyond words, a “truth that can only be known by having *been* there, an unspeakable truth he must bear for society and culture” (Scranton). This myth informs the way we encounter, speak, and frame war literature in society. This myth, Scranton contends, works as a scapegoat function, “discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy.” Scranton blasts Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper* (2014) for its depiction of the protagonist, Chris Kyle, as a trauma hero, and its caricatures of Iraqis as “savages.” What this film elides are the

⁴⁹ There are a number of “personal” poems from her first collection, *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger* (1972) that balance personal material; Waldrop’s first novel, *The Hanky of Pippin’s Daughter* (1986) gives a fictional autobiography of a young girl growing up amidst the wreckage and fallout of post WWII Germany.

“complex questions of why Kyle was in Iraq in the first place.” This thought can extend to most war films and literature about war that relies heavily on a protagonist’s outlook and glosses over the intricate bureaucratic network that leads to war.

Scranton traces the rise of the “Trauma Hero Myth” and several texts that display these characteristics. When he looks at Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990), a paradigmatic text of war literature, Scranton posits that “[f]or O’Brien, a true war story is about the failure of language to communicate experience altogether, which is an assertion that the soldier’s truth is a mystic truth.” Scranton sees this type of literature as occupying a distinct realm: “Illumination here takes the form of negative theology, apophatically denying that the experience of war can be described, thereby denying both the truth of prior descriptions and the possibility that the experience can ever be communicated at all” (Scranton). O’Brien’s position occupies the well-worn path of the inability of language to communicate truly raw human emotion, but, ultimately, language is all one has. Scranton then takes on George Packer’s review of contemporary war literature, where Scranton calls out recent works by Kevin Powers and Phil Klay, as propping up and perpetuating this myth. Taking aim at Kevin Powers’s *The Yellow Birds* (2012), a National Book Award finalist, Scranton notes how this text “flips the script” on O’Brien’s contention, and represents “war trauma as the font of poetic transcendence: instead of negating language, the experience inspires it.... For Powers, the conventional tropes of war lit are not a means of conveying truth, but the truth of war itself.” Scranton then derides Powers’ poetry as “rather banal,” and remarks that Brian Turner, considered the preeminent poet of the Iraq War (*Here, Bullet* is his prize-winning collection from 2005), has a “deeply romantic sensibility. For Turner, poetry itself is already experience-

as-revelation; the fact that he is a war poet is practically accidental, insofar as we seem to expect our war poets to write precisely that kind of poem” (Scranton). *That* kind of poem is the “Trauma Hero” narrative: the wrought language gobbled by the majority of readers looking for the affirmation of “truths” they already hold: war is hell, etc. Scranton chides Packer for not including important texts by writers who are not veterans.⁵⁰

What is important about Scranton’s list is that it includes many women writers, a group often overlooked and dismissed when it comes to war literature. The biggest problem that Packer promulgates, and how journalists and historians distort war, and how the public and “The Trauma Hero Myth,” through recent literature, “takes the war, though not its terrible cost, as a given.” Scranton exclaims “that by focusing so insistently on the psychological trauma American soldiers have had to endure, we allow ourselves to forget the death and destruction those very soldiers are responsible for.” The “Trauma Hero Myth” elides specific questions about criminality in that it never investigates and / or looks at the role of the state in sending these individuals off to war; instead the reader / viewer gets wrapped up in individual narratives that work as emotional voyages the character and reader / viewer go on together. Scranton looks at Phil Klay’s National Book Award winning collection of short stories, *Redeployment* (2014) and notes that “most American readers will care more about a dead dog than they will about a dead Iraqi...” (Scranton). What these texts do is make “the dirty war in Iraq palatable as an individual tragedy [while] obscuring the connection between American audiences and the millions

⁵⁰ He notes Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2012), Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya’s *The Watch* (2012), Hilary Plum’s *They Dragged Them Through the Streets* (2013), and also works by Iraqi writers such as Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* (2013), and Hassan Blasim’s *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014). I would also add Ahmed Saadawi’s recent, amazing *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018) to this list as well.

of Iraqi lives destroyed or shattered since 2003.” However, this failure and lack of awareness is not the fault of the writers, Scranton notes, but the “readers and citizens who expect veterans to play out for them the ritual *fort-da* of trauma and recovery, and to carry for them the collective guilt of war.” What, then, should an artist’s (and reader’s) encounter with war illustrate and exemplify? Scranton’s take broadly calls to action the traditional narrative of war literature and notes that what “The Trauma Hero Myth” does is to simplify and make acceptable for public consumption horrific situations. This is the criminal element writ large: the young soldier heads to war under the auspices of a government who does not have her or his best interests in mind, and this notion does not end here; more, the public passively ingests these ideas as how things are and how things will always be. The antithesis of the trauma hero would seem to lie in a separate space, away from the masses. Waldrop’s project and glimpse completely overturns the notion of the “Trauma Hero” through its foregrounding of form over content; the way the poetic sequence is fractured; how its focus is not on action and a journey, but static individuals, philosophically contemplating the meaning of existence during war. A glance at the famous correspondence between Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov provides a space to look at and situate Waldrop’s poetic project.

The relationship and subsequent dissolution of friendship between Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov lends a unique angle to war literature, form, and how a writer handles difficult subject matter. According to Albert Gelpi, “By almost any measure, the correspondence between Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov constitutes the most important exchange between two American poets in the second half of the twentieth century” (ix). What is intriguing about this relationship is the well-known break in

friendship over how one should create poetry and interact with the Vietnam War, a break intricately linked to gender dynamics of the time period as well. What is also tied to this break is the notion of space in the Duncan / Levertov debate. Anne Dewey posits that the Duncan / Levertov argument “articulates yet another of the multiple spheres New American poets address: that of social and political activism” (109). The break occurs with the disagreement of how one should create poetry during war, and, ultimately, one’s engagement. For Duncan, Levertov’s overtly political poems are narrow, simple engagements. Although both poets are vehemently against the war, Duncan resists direct protest and group advocacy, believing that it ends in herd mentality, and prevents free thought and the development of the individual. Duncan insists that the poet resist embattled, collective contemporary perspectives, that one must imagine and reinterpret the war in a larger context. Duncan’s position can read as abstract and, at times, employing elitism. On the other hand, Levertov sees the crowd and protest as possessing a specific type of energy that represents consensus, that actually affirms the power of the individual to shape public meaning. Levertov views the public arena as a vehicle for direct communication and a vehicle for peace. Duncan, in turn, views Levertov’s poetry from this period as insouciant and overcome with ideology; her direct involvement, Duncan tells her in a famous letter, leads to “empty and vain slogans because those who use them are destitute of any imagination of or feeling of what such greed, racism, or imperialism is like” (*Letters* 669). Duncan continues, “The poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it: what if Shakespeare had opposed Iago, or Dostoyevsky opposed Raskolnikov—the vital thinking is that they *created* Iago and Raskolnikov and we begin to see betrayal and murder and theft in a new light” (669). These opposite views do not

simply relate each poet's stance on the war, but further illustrates a deep distance in ways of thinking and being. This last letter stems from Duncan seeing Levertov on TV, at an anti-war rally for women; this sight prompts Duncan to depict Levertov in his poem, "Santa Cruz Prepositions": "*SHE* appears, Kālī dancing, whirling her necklace of skulls, / trampling the despoiling armies and the exploiters of natural resources / under her feet. Revolution or Death!" (49). Levertov replies that she participated in the rally as a private citizen rather than a poet, and this, according to Anne Dewey, "grounds her [Levertov's] authority in representative activism, not a special poet's understanding of the war" (116). The relationship, after this point, was never the same.

Another facet that relates to this relationship and subsequent break has to do with the difficult gender dynamics played out between Levertov and Duncan. Michael Davidson has remarked that referring to Levertov as Kālī, the Hindu goddess of destruction, Duncan "reinforces the idea that it is her female presumption that is unconscionable" (551). Davidson notes an often overlooked aspect of the Duncan / Levertov dynamic is the gendered space drawn and occupied by both poets. In an essay drawing parallels to the Cold War, Davidson contends: "As these letters attest, the political Manicheanism of national security was being experienced on the domestic front as a drama of shifting gender roles" (540). Initially, the role Duncan plays is Levertov's mentor and poetic interlocutor. This dissipates with their separate unique interventions regarding the Vietnam War. The ultimate breaking point occurs when Duncan, in James Mersmann's *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry against the War* (1974), states, "She'll be writing about the war and suddenly—in one of the earlier poems that's most shocking—you get a flayed penis, and...when she reads it you get an effect

and tone of disgusted sensuality. And,” Duncan continues, “when you look at her poetry it tells more to look at that flayed penis and realize that her earlier poems are talking about stripped stalks of grass!...and the poem is not a protest though she thinks she’s protesting” (*Letters* 749). Levertov, in an earlier, twenty-page response, pushes back at what she sees as Duncan’s domineering role: “But there are...times when you pontificate” (675); “You say my poems which talk about Viet Nam aren’t at bottom about Viet Nam at all but about the sex war. That is unmitigated bullshit, Robert. First of all, you again *assume* that I am active in the woman’s Liberation Mvt apparently. Well, I’ve actually come slowly to a lot of sympathy for women’s problems I never realized existed” (678). In the letter following the Mersmann book and attack, Levertov relays, “There can be a statute of limitations on emotional commitments, though we might like to think in terms of eternal loyalties.... Gradually my love for you dwindled, until I cannot honestly say I feel it any more” (716). These long, intimate passages illustrate that what underlies the split is not necessarily the response to war, though this topic is what initiated the break, but the underlying, continues attacks on Levertov that go beyond the surface of Vietnam. Duncan seems to be pigeonholing Levertov as being simultaneously overwhelmed and overcome with feminine emotions that overstep a cold eye toward the war and how war poetry should operate.

Jose Rodriguez Herrera, however, reads Levertov’s war poems in a different vein. He argues that “what some of Levertov’s antiwar poems (“Relearning the Alphabet” being one of the most salient cases) try to do is explore the limits of language in time of war in order to see whether it was possible to imagine other boundaries, other worlds” (149). Similarly, to what Albert Gelpi argues in his introduction to the letters, Herrera

sees a different temperament between the two poets, leading to their break. Herrera also notes how gender plays a role in the split as well, remarking that George Oppen was one of the first male poets to “declare his antipathy to Levertov’s antiwar poetry,” when he exclaims “she was very determined to be (or become?) a good mother, to enter political (anti bomb, at least) activity, etc etc.” (150). Moving from Oppen’s characterization, Duncan concludes that in Levertov’s antiwar poems there is a “deep underlying consciousness of the woman as a victim in war with the Man” (*Letters* 667). Thus, what at first appears to be a disagreement about war poetry turns into a gendered response of how one should write. Herrera ultimately argues that instead of “viewing her political poems as a detriment of her development as a poet...in those poems many aspects of her new poetics begin to crystallize,” which “forge a reinvigorated language capable of merging the song and the struggle” (151). Where Duncan sees Levertov as joining the throng of public outcry, of professing from a soapbox, Herrera sees her sowing the seeds for a different aesthetic. A powerful assessment of the letters and each poet’s project is articulated by Michael Davidson, who contends that “Duncan’s tendency to mythologize the war seems, by current standards, inadequate. Too often, his cavalier dismissal of social protest is elitist and at worse, ratiocinative in the face of palpable evil” (555). Here, Duncan is viewed as too hermetic, cut-off from society, its problems, and any engagement at all. Davidson, though, finds himself “in agreement with Duncan on the limits of Levertov’s war poetry: “Levertov’s work of the late 1960s *is* pious and doctrinaire,” Davidson argues, “often relying on a rhetoric of indignation and anger to deal with an important liberating stage for her, but the result is a considerably reduced verbal palette” (555). Davidson ends with noting that what is lost with this type of

demotic practice “is the meaning of poetry as a specific kind of expressive act where the language of power and domination, so common in political rhetoric, is no longer effective” (556). Davidson, in one sense, seems to agree with Duncan in that directly addressing war with bombastic language lessens the encounter and draws more attention to the mode and act. What Davidson does not do is offer specific examples and alternatives. The glimpse employed by Waldrop, in many ways, works as an in-between space that bridges the gap between Duncan and Levertov. Waldrop’s poetic sequence is specific on many accounts, particularly naming the war and several atrocities, yet it never lapses into soapbox rhetoric or polemical bromides against the atrocity of war; instead, it looks at war as a part of life and one that will undoubtedly continue in the future. What is telling about Waldrop’s glimpses, is how and who it implicates. Writers and their roles in creation of art from war do not go unscathed, and Waldrop hints at this throughout her sequence with the constant stuttering, fragments, and the inability to speak about the conflict.

Another way that doubles down and takes Duncan’s practice a step further is illustrated by John Ashbery in his response to Louis Simpson. Ashbery, in defense of the recently deceased Frank O’Hara, who had been attacked for his apolitical poetry and stance, contends that “O’Hara’s poetry has no program and therefore it cannot be joined...it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist.... ‘This is me and I’m poetry—baby,’ seems to be [the poems’] message, and unlike the ‘message’ of committed poetry,” Ashbery exclaims, “it incites one to all the programs of commitment as well as to every other form of self-realization—interpersonal, Dionysian, occult, or abstract” (81-82). Ashbery relates that O’Hara’s refusal to engage with any

distinct, specific program works as an opening to non-defined modes of critical thinking. Ashbery's and O'Hara's "program," then, is one of multiplicity and inclusion. Later in his letter Ashbery argues, in a somewhat similar vein as Duncan, to resist being swept up in rhetorical fervor and pigeonholed in a particular strain of resistance, for a poet must develop and practice his or her own singular approach to poetry: "All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn't poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action" (674). This statement seems to indicate—echoing Oppen—that poetry and politics are indeed mutually exclusive, and that by the act of writing poems one is engaging in a form of politics to a certain extent. In many ways this is an extreme political view as well; it is detached, albeit a view not uncommon among literary practitioners and critics. This view, in a sense sounds powerful: the writer struggling away, scribbling and sweating in her or his garret, with the art at the center and standing for singularity. However, politics and art are not mutually exclusive, whether one wants them to be or not. There exists, at least, a nebulous, floating overlap, where each side touches and brushes up against the other.

Tatiana Sverjensky argues for Ashbery's engagement through his manner of address and syntax, and what she deems a "lyric relationship to subjectivity and temporality" (283). She sets this base by looking at Theodor Adorno's statement that "even in the most sublimated work of art there is hidden 'it should be otherwise'" (282). What Sverjensky looks at in Ashbery's poetry is its "inoperativity"⁵¹— "its insistent

⁵¹ Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1986), argues that at the center of western thinking is a longing that exists for an "original community." Now, at the present, one lives in an anonymous society full of selfish individuals and that close ties are gone. Only by turning back to previous ways of thought and life can one achieve "community." According to Nancy, this is false; the longing for an originary community is

celebration of the liberatory qualities of what we might call the potential not to” (284). What this practice does is “register the political...with self-actualization as ‘a person’ activating a heightened potential through the individual’s experience in the world” (303). In many ways, Waldrop’s sequence “By the Waters of Babylon” from *Driven to Abstraction* enacts this practice as well but does so on different levels. Many of Waldrop’s practices are more overt than what Sverjensky sees in Ashbery. The speakers in Waldrop’s sequence both call attention to the criminal acts and practices of war and its multiple effects on countless individuals; however, Waldrop does this without using a particular language that acts as a bombastic interrogator or seeks to immediately ameliorate the situation and people involved. Instead, the form and language seek not to develop a specific community of activists and protesters, but the “glimpse” of a speaker and momentary community aware of its being and surroundings. Earlier, Sverjensky argues a “merging of features of prose and lyric is thus part of a broader attempt to open alternate conditions of subjectivity and temporality, one which...engag[es] with the actual” (302). The prose poems constructed by Waldrop engage the criminality of war through its mixture of prose and lyric, through its recycled texts, fracture syntax, and cacophony of disparate voices speaking and encountering horrible situations, anchored

built on myth, and an original community is a myth. An “inoperative community,” then, practices more of a spontaneous inclination to come together that has no object or purpose other than itself. The “inoperative community” does not indicate or point toward a higher purpose among its individuals; it is not motivated by individual desire or collective insecurity; rather, it practices in the passion and practice of sharing. Nancy notes that “Writing...or ‘literature,’ inscribes the sharing: the limit marks the advent of singularity, and its withdrawal (that is, it never advenes as indivisible: it does not make a work). The singular being advenes at the limit: this means that it advenes only inasmuch as it is shared. A singular being (‘you’ or ‘me’) has the precise structure and nature of a being of writing, of a ‘literary’ being: it resides only in the communication—which does not commune—of its advance and its retreat. It offers itself, it holds itself in suspense” (78). This, then, according to Nancy, answers the question: “In writing’s communication, what does the singular being become? It becomes nothing that it is not already: it becomes its own truth, it becomes simply the *truth*” (78).

throughout most of these poems by a feminine speaker. This practice of poetic transgression is illustrated through Waldrop's deft use of the "glimpse" to zoom in and out, to both document from a distance and closely engage with. In many ways Waldrop's glimpse and her construction of form brings greater attention to the criminality of her confrontation in that it draws attention not to an individual's journey but points to the larger, governmental structures involved.

Waldrop's Transgressive Glimpse

The first poem in the sequence "By the Waters of Babylon" from *Driven to Abstraction* locates and compares both the fragility of language with the fragility of bodies through its spatial form on the page. Waldrop's glimpse also works to usher in a new way of looking at the notion of criminality in a time of war. It reads in total:

1

We take language for granted, as we do sitting and weeping. Unfamiliar speech
we take for inarticulate gurgling. Filtered through sandbags.

A searchlight beam makes a statement.

The order of the world is so foreign to our subjective interests that we cannot

imagine what it is like, says William James. We have to break it. Into histories,
art, sciences, or just plain rubble. Then we feel at home.

I could list the parts of the body as in a blason. And how they can get hurt.

The first two lines of this broken⁵² prose poem immediately embrace the fact that most individuals "take language for granted," in a similar way they do "sitting" and

⁵² Most prose poems are unbroken blocks, either with a flush right margin, or uneven lines. I argue that the poems in this sequence are "broken" because of single lines, of couplets, of no inherent delineation, but they still practice the form of the "prose poem."

“weeping.” The speaker, as well, implicated the self in this group with the use of “we.”⁵³

The first complete sentence and thought work as public and personal admonishment. One needs to pay close attention to language, not to take language for granted; however, one needs to acknowledge this fact in the first place. The idea that “we” take “Unfamiliar speech / ...for inarticulate gurgling” illustrates a thread running through this sequence: monolingual distrust leads to xenophobia, that individuals speaking one language (most times only one language) distrust languages that are different; “gurgling” refers to the way many westerners horribly describe the style of speaking of many Middle Easterners, and this idea is brought home with the speaker’s fragmented sentence “Filtered through sandbags,” which immediately thrusts the reader with a further overt hint at The Middle East. This is Waldrop oscillating and formulating the in-between space, the glimpse, that is at work throughout these poems. The specific yet somewhat oblique references are another turn in Waldrop’s practice locating a space and action within her poetry. On the surface, with sentence fragments, and fractured, jutting lines, Waldrop’s poetry can be unnerving for the reader. In a sense, these are not particularly sonorous poems to read. The reader stops and starts, mimicking the work in the poems, and this is part of Waldrop’s project. Waldrop mentions her switch from “single-word or very short lines to prose poems,” being influenced by William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Charles Olson.⁵⁴ The move to prose poems illustrates Waldrop’s practice of the in-between space

⁵³ Waldrop’s use of “we” further exemplifies the in-between and separate space at practice at the beginning, differentiating itself from the “I” common in a lot of contemporary poetry, and the “you” at work, particularly in Ashbery’s oeuvre. See John Vincent’s *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (2007), and also Vincent’s insightful article, “John Ashbery and You,” in the winter 2006 issue of *Raritan*. The “we” also extends and builds upon the “I” and “you” that dominates Waldrop’s *The Reproduction of Profiles* (1987).

⁵⁴ In an interview with Christine Hume, Waldrop quotes Williams: “The poem is a field of action,” and Pound: “the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, a force, transferring, welding and unifying,” and

of poetry and prose. Now, in her late style, Waldrop fractures even further by incorporating again the full stops, broken syntax, and sentence fragments into her spatially-fractured prose poems. In the essay “The Ground is the Only Figure,” Waldrop relates how the “full-stop becomes a rhythmic device. Connections and continuities, sometimes strange, sometimes less so, suggest themselves, but they do so only at the elision of syntax and punctuation,” Waldrop continues: “Full-stops act as the caesura, ‘another empty center,’ and disjoint as much as they structure and build by degrees” (250). Nikolai Duffy notes that Waldrop’s use of punctuation in her prose sequences also functions to realise her attempt to sidestep causality, rationality, and to construct instead a grammar and a language which is, first and foremost, contiguous rather than relational” (96). When the speaker contends that a “searchlight beam makes a statement,” there is attention drawn to the looking and perhaps ferreting out of the other. This act is the statement, not language, not an attempt at understanding. The James quote intensifies this statement and feeling, particularly in pointing out the space and order of one’s being. We are comforted with only the familiar and scared of difference; not only scared, but hostile toward as a sign of defense—the other is dangerous, backward.

The ending line is a plainly devastating harbinger for the rest of the poems in the sequence. It acts as entreaty, threat, promise; it worries and wavers: “I could list the parts of the body as in a blason.” “Blason” is a startling word / image to fix upon; a “blason” is a form of poetry, originating in French heraldry, particularly sixteenth-century French literature, that praises a woman by singling out different parts of her body and finding

also Olson: “At root (or stump) what is, is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the turns of the reality contemporary to us—and the turns of what we are” (254).

appropriate metaphors to compare them with.⁵⁵ It also means the codified description of a coat of arms or the coat of arms itself. The speaker reverses the traditional notion of blason by using it as a threatening method of reportage. The obscene aspect is also flipped; now, descriptions of women and their bodies are not objectified in terms of bawdy leering but as mangled descriptions not of repletion but of subtraction and damage. The ending sentence, “And how they can get hurt,” further situates the speaker’s relationship with space in that on one hand the speaker threatens, asks, wants to take the reader into this other space, where bodies are torn and destroyed and also hints that we might remain where we started before the sequence, in the safe space of ignorance and comfortable familiarity.

The second poem continues to straddle this in-between space by echoing the first poem’s beginning: “Unless we recognize a language we do not recognize a man. We wrap entire / villages in barbed wire” (66). Again, the pronoun “we” grounds the text, as does another warning (or simple statement) about language, and the notion that not recognizing another’s speech is tantamount to trapping people behind “barbed wire.” A turn occurs in the second couplet: “My father used to close his eyes and remain as motionless as possible to let his / body-image dissolve” (66). Here, the speaker complicates the poem by introducing a personal element; the father, though, points again to a gendered dynamic raised in the first poem with the inversion of blason. Now, however, the reader follows (is taken, led?) on a similar journey, straddling the spaces of the broad, opaque, political statement with a personal aside. This move also further

⁵⁵ According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, despite early rules and warnings, “many blasons fall under the category of the obscene, in the satirical tradition of the paradoxical eulogy.... From the perspective of feminist poetics, the blason is a male inventory of the female body; from that of postcolonial studies, a way of mapping and taking control of the Other” (150-151).

illustrates the “glimpse” at work in the sequence. The reader receives a glimpse into a political world not yet specifically defined, through seemingly broad, sweeping statements, that are, nonetheless, specific observations, statements, and / or warnings. These statements now coincide with a glimpse into the speaker’s personal life. There is a glancing poetic element with the off rhyme of “his” and “image,” with their short “I” sounds, but this is tenuous, ephemeral, and is undercut by the next, single line: “I repeat myself often” (66). This statement is equally banal and prosaic, and also devastating in its implication. It does not practice any traditional poetic elements, but it can point toward the idea of writing, and writing about war, of political poetry being a continuation of what has come before, as war as never-ending, and undeclared wars that are not officially “wars” at that. On the other hand, it can be a simple statement about how the speaker, simply, repeats. Waldrop’s style and form in these broken prose poems is conveyed by the ambiguity of this last statement: one could even argue that these are not even prose poems at all in the traditional sense of unbroken blocks; rather, they can be looked at as hybrid forms, taking the traditional prose poem further, breaking it, creating a new, different space. However, the poems practice ephemeral elements of the prose poem through the undefinable construction and breaking of form while, nonetheless still inhabiting the same form.⁵⁶ This breaking away is illustrated through its use of space within the physical confines of the poem and the way the poems spatialize war. There are

⁵⁶ The prose poem, according to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “is suitable to an extraordinary range of perception and expression, from the ambivalent (in content as in form) to the mimetic and the narrative or anecdotal.... [It] represents a field of vision, only to be, on occasion, cut off abruptly. Emotion is contracted under the force of ellipsis, so deepened and made dense.... The prose poem aims at knowing or finding out something not accessible under the more restrictive conventions of verse.... It is often spatially interesting. For some critics, it is necessarily intertextual; for others politically oriented.... It is, in any case, not necessarily ‘poetic’ in the traditional sense of the lyric and can even indulge in an engaging wit” (1112). Waldrop’s prose poems touch and practice a number of these references.

no immediate, concrete locations at the beginning. The speaker contemplates war from a floating perspective encompassing the Middle East alongside spaces the speaker inhabits in the United States.

What Waldrop develops in the first two poems in this section is an extension of her essay on the experimental German poet Helmut Heissenbüttel. Waldrop reads Heissenbüttel's poem *Endlösung*, ("Final Solution"), "as one of the most powerful poetic statements about Germany's *unbewältigte Vergangenheit*, the past it has yet come to terms with. Here," Waldrop continues, "Hitler's 'final solution' for the Jews is talked about without being mentioned, except in the title. Likewise, the Nazis are referred to as "those who just simply thought of that" (27). Waldrop, in these two opening poems, practices the mode of apophasis, where a speaker brings up a subject while at the same time denying it should be brought up. In American poetry and prose about war, this practice is not the case; emphasis is placed on the speaker's intimate knowledge and encounter with war. Waldrop describes this practice's power as existing 'in the fact that the text does not state what it was 'they thought up...'" (27). Initially, Waldrop does not name the second Gulf War, or the invasion of Afghanistan until the third poem in the sequence. Only after reading the fifteen poems and returning to the beginning does one infer the target. In describing Heissenbüttel's poem, Waldrop explains that the reading experience "seems to range through a whole scale of reactions—from shying away from the horrible and grappling with something that seems incomprehensible to pushing away responsibility." Waldrop notes that, "Paradoxically, the refusal to name is more expressive (in this case) than naming could be" (27). The refusal to name is practiced in the first two poems but the glimpse illustrates Waldrop's project in the third.

The switch in this group of poems happens in the third entry, when the speaker references “Then somebody thinks ‘Operation Ivy Cyclone.’ ‘Operation Plymouth Rock.’ / ‘Operation Iron Hammer’ (67). These references of anti-insurgent sweeps conducted by the U. S. military float, existing in their own space, separate from the rest of the poem. There is no authorial frame or aside, initially, that examines the consequences of the sweeps. People purported to be insurgents were arrested, detained; structures were also destroyed; lives were affected. The ending of the poem relates this: “In 2005, in Baghdad, 92% of the people did not have stable electricity, 39% did / not have safe drinking water, 25% of children under the age of five were suffering / from malnutrition” (67). In-between both the white space on the page, and the experience of these two disparate moments of poetry, a change occurs. Now, everything written of and thought of until this moment is linked. The statement works through its seeming matter-of-factness; it exists as equal parts reportage and witness, practicing the glimpse into the suffering of others, without a straightforward condemnation at the moment. The speaker, in this practice, exists in the in-between space of both active in witnessing—“creating”—through the poem—and also passive in the inability to alter what has happened, and is currently happening. This practice, too, is different from the simple adage “language is all one has so one must use it,” as well through the refusal to hint toward this thought. What further ruptures Waldrop’s practice of the prose poem is discussing various lines: are they simply disconnected, floating segments? Does each line work as its own entity, following a pattern? How the lines, the fragments further connect and frustrate the prose poem works to note Waldrop’s break with the form while still practicing a semblance of the form. The poems in this sequence are brief glimpses, moments where the speaker acknowledges the

toll of war, while also inhabiting the gap, the in-between space of creation. The extremity is illustrated by the opening line and subsequent language in the third poem.

A deeper look at Waldrop's practice in this poetic sequence can be gleaned from her essay, "A Basis of Concrete Poetry." Rosmarie Waldrop is not a concrete poet; she mentions, in the preface to the essay: "I myself have written very few visual poems...but I remain fascinated by the spatial constellation" (49). And though the fifteen poems in the sequence are not concrete poems, they use spatial practices to convey their project. In describing characteristics of this practice, Waldrop notes that "the most obvious feature of Concrete poetry is reduction—a few words at a time, or maybe just one. Our reading habits tend to construct contents even out of fragmentary texts" (49). Though the fifteen poems do not explicitly practice using one word, or spatially abide by some of the tenets, there are multiple repetitions of words ("language," for instance) that draw attention to construction and content; this dramatized pattern of stating and relating is conducted with minimal authorial intrusion. This hallmark of Concrete poetry, Waldrop contends, reduces the poet's material to a "point where even the inattentive reader is forced to pay attention to the word as word, as a meaning and a 'body'" (49). Instead of a complete Concrete practice, Waldrop's "glimpses" hint at meaning without the overdetermined spatialization of Concrete poetry. The "glimpse," however, is shaky ground to tread upon. In Waldrop's poems there is no immediate, outright outrage, as exemplified by Levertov; there is no explicit condemnation of the criminal aspects of war; no interrogating or uncovering of collateral damage; instead, the speaker, as watcher, reporter, constructor, becomes distantly a part of through simple fact. Finally, in looking at Concrete poetry, Waldrop surmises that the advantage of some of the practices, of the "spatial syntax,"

includes, “precisely that its complexity is potential. It needs the reader to activate it.” Waldrop continues, “The absence of context and the non-linear combination leave words in their full lexical meaning, with none of its possibilities ruled out. The reader is free to construct his [or her] own contexts. He [or she] is given a stimulus rather than a product” (55). This illustrates a great deal of Waldrop’s poetic practice, and specifically her work in the sequence, for now, the reader “has to become a coproducer of the work. This is even more the case when a strewing effect allows one to take the words in many different sequences” (55). What is integral is Waldrop’s emphasis on potential. This emphasis is illustrated through the poet’s practice of not specifically condemning the criminal aspects of war. Instead, the spatial in-betweenness, which can be frustrating for readers wanting clear, easy answers and stances, is what guides the project.

The Gendered Space of the Glimpse

Spatiality, both in the poem and in the world, is brought to the forefront in the opening of the fourth poem. The speaker, in a seemingly philosophical aside, relates: “whereas the concept of spatial measurement does not conflict with that of spatial / order the concept of succession (bombings?) clashes with the concept of duration (U.S. presence?)” (68). The idea of “concept,” repeated twice, is interesting for drawing attention to the movement at the beginning of the poem. Poem four is the first in the sequence that does not begin with a reference to “language”; instead, it correlates that measurement “does not” conflict with “order,” which correlates “succession” with “duration.” On one hand there is the notion of bombs measured and designed to hit the target, where only the “bad guys” dwell. We know this is not the case; there is also the

specter of occupation raised in the poem: “(U.S. presence?).” The next line, a single sentence dividing the poem, reads: “Tanks enter the discussion, and the case for absolute time collapses” (68). However, the tanks entrance works as an idiom covering an act which there is no dialogue. The physical presence of tanks leads to the collapse of time. Further, the image of tanks is the first concrete image of a mechanism of war, a physical, tangible thing. This draws another line on these poems between moments of physical actuality and philosophical aside. Most of the contact hovers in-between these two areas, albeit the space is drawn from the philosophical. The next line reiterates the stress on language: “We speak our own language exclusively. It embodies the universal form of human / thought and logic” (68). Again, the repetition of monolingual groups practicing and abiding by their own “image” points out the tribal thought that blocks recognition of the Other. Noticing this fact, again, in the fourth poem, signifies the ongoing relationship people have with language, and how lives are thought of and structured by it. The poems do and do not challenge this thought. One of the sequences main goals is the reflection on one’s use, relationship, and framing of the world through language.

The final line in poem four locates an obliquely personal note, situating the sequence on a separate level, one that draws specific attention to gendered dynamics. The final line, as well, extends the sense of dis-ease throughout the sequence: “I toss in my sleep. As do many women” (68). What fascinates about this moment is the attention drawn to gender, especially the space of gender, heretofore absent in the series. One tosses in sleep from a nagging sense of something: insomnia, incompleteness, distress. What is also telling is the period—the full stop—in between the two clauses, thus pausing, doubling down on the attention, and tension, within the line. Waldrop, though

considered one of the most important experimental poets and translators, is not widely held as representing gender as a predominant mode of expression. However, the focus on the body, particularly the feminine body, has characterized her complete oeuvre. Her first collection, *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger* (1972), was attacked in a brief review by *Kirkus Review*, bemoaning this fact: “These are all too clearly a woman’s poems, turning again and again in their narrow orbit of unfulfilling, vicarious days and insomniac nights and mornings that promise only more of the same” (*Kirkus Review*). It is uncanny how the last line of poem four relates to this condemning review. “Woman’s poems,” I assume, according to this review, center around domesticity, around thinking not doing, perhaps, and as the reviewer exclaims, “the housewives nightmare,” where the speaker enacts a “passive-aggressive steadfastness.” Domesticity, purportedly, can also be looked at as a limiting space, and what Waldrop is doing is transgressing space and previously delineated boundaries in the broken form and subject matter of the poems. Similarly, Lynn Keller notes, as well, how Waldrop’s first collection is “focused on women’s experience, on gendered identity, and on intimate male-female interaction. In their exploration of topics like depression, menstruation, house cleaning, and insomnia, they suggest,” Keller continues, “the impact of the confessional movement, particularly of Plath and Anne Sexton” (65). While Keller is kinder than the review, both miss many of the subtle practices—though expanded and layered—that stick with Waldrop up to the poems in *Driven to Abstraction*. For example, in the poem, “Between,” from the first book, the speaker relates: “I’m not quite at home / on either side of the Atlantic,” and ends: “a creature with gills and lungs / I live in shallow water / but / when it rains / I inherit the land” (16). This poem already sets in motion the oscillating quality of

Waldrop's practice, the complete notion of being "in-between," never one thing nor the other; one is, in a sense, homeless, capable of living and adapting to almost anything. This moment does not dwell in the traditional realms of femininity but points toward a completely new way of thinking and writing.⁵⁷ Gender and the feminine in Waldrop are not relegated either to the space of the domestic, or completely front and center; rather, gender is a multifarious space of deployment where one is constantly in contestation with the male, never fully gaining the upper hand and never subsiding.

Waldrop's practice of writing the feminine occurs within the in-between space. On writing as a woman, Waldrop relates: "This fact clearly shapes my writing—thematically, in attitude, in awareness of social conditioning, marginality—but does not determine it exclusively" (*Dissonance* 207). Though Waldrop's poetics have undergone radical changes throughout her career—from the skinny, snaking lines of her first two collections, to the prose and broken prose poems of her later work—the role of woman has been a constant occupation. Talking of her first two volumes, Waldrop notes, "Consciously I was pushing at the boundaries of the sentence. I was interested in having a flow of a quasi-unending sentence play against the short lines that determine the rhythm" (209). These ideas relate to Waldrop's encounter with gender in the early work: "Woman in our culture has been treated as object par excellence, to be looked at rather than looking, to be done to rather than doing. Instead," Waldrop continues, "these poems propose a grammar in which subject and object function are not fixed, but reversible roles, where there is no hierarchy of main and subordinate clauses, but a fluid and

⁵⁷ Lynn Keller notes the "in-between" in this poem, contending that this "homelessness has its compensating benefits in that comfort is exchanged for consciousness: 'a home makes you forget / unaware / where you are.' In her in-between space, however, figures as the ocean or the liquid of a glass window where she is 'touched on all sides,' she is 'aware' of being nowhere" (65).

constant alternation” (210). Waldrop further recontextualizes the feminine space in the sequence from *Driven to Abstraction* by building on her earlier notion of fluidity, then fracturing it with the use of discontinuity through stops and fragments.

In many ways Waldrop’s practice of the glimpse in relation to gender, war, and the other extends and complicates Laura Mulvey’s notion of the Male Gaze. Mulvey’s project looks at how women are portrayed in film, noting how they are projected in “patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman” (834). Woman, in turn, remains tied to her place as the “bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning” (834). Mulvey argues that women, traditionally in film, are the passive receptacles of male desire. That women are silent objects of pleasure. Mulvey argues that overturning the gaze is to “free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment” (844), therefore destroying the male gaze’s satisfaction. Mulvey’s article is not only prescient and integral in today’s milieu of gender dichotomies and trichotomies, with high-profile and influential contemporary feminist campaigns making feminist politics meaningful through questions and representation, but relevant in looking at other facets of life as well. Billy Middleton uses Mulvey’s idea of the Gaze to examine the role of the Confederate flag as a symbol of Southern pride during the American Civil War in *Gone with the Wind*.⁵⁸ Waldrop’s use of the glimpse in the poetic sequence appropriates and furthers the use of historical gaze to look at war in a

⁵⁸ Middleton looks at Tom Brown’s contention that historical films use “spectacle” to create a “historical gaze” positioning its characters in relation to the history they are living—their present, our past—and giving them some limited foresight into that moment’s time. Middleton argues that this historical gaze induces audiences to evaluate the onscreen portrayal of history

multitude of manifestations. This idea relates back to Roy Scranton's notion of the "Trauma Hero" in film and literature that perpetuates mainstream thought and opened this chapter. War is highly cinematic in its own right; war is spectacle. War is something to be glimpsed and projected as well. In many ways, war can be twisted, used, and abused to fit certain narratives. Traditionally, when speaking of the Other in war, they are viewed either as the enemy or helpless victim needing to be saved. When individuals from these places are killed or suffer they are labeled "collateral damage." The Other is fastened within the gaze. Waldrop refashions the gaze to look, albeit obliquely, at the Other. This glimpse is further predicated on the notion of spatiality. Here, the speaker of the poems is spatialized through distance, the relationship mediated by the in-between attempt to speak and confront while simultaneously acknowledging the inability to completely speak or grapple with the war.

Waldrop's glimpse and attention to the other is at the forefront in the fifth poem. This attention, though, does not precipitate a call to action or lament, but simply states and repeats what is taking place: "4,000 to 6,000 civilians have been killed in Fallujah" (*Driven* 69). What illustrates the speaker's glimpse in this stripped first line is the simplicity with which it is delivered mixed with the gravity of pronouncement. The subsequent two lines repeat and emphasize: "It is impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to this sentence, without / simply repeating the sentence" (69). Here, the speaker draws the reader's attention again to the opening line and what is taking place, yet this is accomplished without explicit description but through the statement of fact. The prosaic nature of these lines is undercut through what they represent and what they convey. Waldrop mentions the "empty spaces" she places at the center of each poem, and

her project in doing so follows: “I must cultivate the cuts, discontinuities, ruptures, cracks, fissures, holes, hitches, snags, leaps, shifts of reference, and emptiness *inside* the semantic dimension. *Inside* the sentence” (*Dissonance* 262). This description employs a cinematographer’s lens toward creation and the jump cut is practiced in the next line, “A cat chases a yellow butterfly. My father sneezes” (*Driven* 69). Here, as in earlier poems in the sequence, the tragic aspects of war jut against the quotidian habitus of the speaker’s life. The ailing father is a hovering presence throughout—there and not-there—popping up when the facts of war begin to press. This juxtaposition culminates with the close of poem five: “Unlike the id, the ego, through which alone pleasure becomes real, is subject to / time” (69). Again, the in-between space is hinted, with the ego being subjected to time, while the id seemingly remains unfettered. What the speaker appears to be doing in these poems is cloaking the id within the ego’s mediation. The glimpse in the fifth poem is fractured into three parts: one that comments on the war, one that mentions a personal aside, and one on image, an observation of the outside world. The effect of this is disorienting, breaking into multiple parts when the speaker no longer zooms in on a singular element.

The sixth poem juxtaposes geography and further comments on one’s relationship with time. The speaker locates a distinct place in the U.S.: “There used to be a harbor where downtown Providence is, a pond full of perch / under the civic center, Roger Williams’s body under an apple tree” (70). At work here are the changes of time; the mention of Roger Williams is interesting in that he is the first individual referenced in the sequence. Waldrop has looked at Williams before, in her collection, *A Key into the Language of America* (1994), that takes its title from Williams’s 1643 book, and looks at

Williams's relationship with the Indians of Rhode Island. *A Key* is an immigrant's take on the heritage and complex early history of her adopted country. Here, Waldrop examines Williams's attack on the doctrine of *vacuum domicilium*, the doctrine that states the colonists were entitled to the land because the Indians were not making full use of it. Waldrop notes that Williams's original book "was not written as a handbook for successful colonization. It was written not only to teach a language, but also to teach a lesson" (xvi). The spatial elements of geography raised at the beginning of the sixth poem in the sequence from *Driven to Abstraction*—invasion, one's right to land, one's right to occupy and take over—have been present in Waldrop's work for a long time. She mentions this concern in the preface to *A Key*, and how she sees herself occupying this in-between space:

I live in Roger Williams's territory. I was born in 1935, the year Williams's 300-year banishment officially ended. I was born "on the other side," in Germany. Which was then Nazi Germany. I am not Jewish. I was born on the side of the (then) winners. I was still a child when World War II ended with the defeat of the Nazis. I immigrated to the US, the country of the winners, as a white, educated European who did not find it too difficult to get jobs, an advanced degree, a university position. I can see myself, to some extent, as a parallel to the European settlers/colonists of Roger Williams's time (though I did not think God or destiny had set the country aside for me as a virgin garden). Like Roger Williams, I am ambivalent about my position among the privileged, the conquerors" (xix).

What is further fascinating about this passage and text, is that its composition takes place on the heels of the first Gulf War, an event that had to weigh on Waldrop's mind. The parallels are illustrated with the next two lines from the sixth poem: "Where the Sumerian cities of Umma, Umm al-Akareb, Larsa, and Tello were / there is now a landscape of craters" (*Driven* 70). These places are where some of the world's earliest civilizations developed and where artifacts have been damaged and looted. The destruction and pillaging of these sites parallel Waldrop's concerns in *A Key*, and looks at other levels of suffering, this time on a global level. The next part of the sixth poem again references one's relationship with time: "The ultimate origin of the idea of time, it is said, lies in our perception of / difference and resemblance" (70). This sentence, initially, reads as one of the more oblique passages in the sequence. Does the speaker suggest that one's relationship to time depends on how one relates and differentiates time? That is, how one measures time, according to events and experiences? The first two couplets suggest a distant relationship; however, through war, which seems to be always already taking place, time is dependent on the specific individual and where the individual is located.

Waldrop, throughout, locates herself in the in-between space, hints in her preface to *A Key*, at how she views her being. Following the earlier quote on Williams, about privilege and ambivalence, she states, "But am I among them [the privileged]? I am white and educated. I am also a poet and a woman. A poet, in our days, is regarded as rather a marginal member of society, whose social usefulness is in doubt. As a woman," Waldrop continues, "I do not figure as conqueror in the shell game of archetypes, but as conquered (*A Key* xx). This position directly situates an in-between and sheds light on some of the thought and practice at work in the sequence. Time itself is experienced differently and is

noted by the final line of the sixth poem: “When I look at the mirror in the morning I see a grey mist. Then it is hard to / rescue distinctions” (*Driven* 70). The use of “at” rather than “look into the mirror” is telling; the speaker, in an attempt to get a sense of the physical self, is even more disturbed by a “grey mist,” the speaker is even more distracted; one’s identity is blurred; one can no longer “rescue distinctions,” but grasp at attempts to make distinctions. In one of the more opaque poems of the sequence, a key of sorts is gleaned, especially if the reader looks at Waldrop’s sequence through the lens of what Charles Altieri thinks is the primary social role of poetry: “that it offer concrete experience of possible and plausible worlds that foster individual powers of self-reflection without tying the individual to one of the explanatory schemes competing to dominate the political marketplace” (21). The key mode of thought in Altieri’s statement, and what Waldrop practices throughout with her “glimpse,” is that the speaker (and the poet) is never tied to one ideological apparatus. The effects of war are stated and situated, yet there is no concretized statement, instead, there are concrete descriptions and interruptions.

However, the gathering of facts, incident, casualties, points toward the “concrete experience” that leads to “individual powers of self-reflection,” though, in Waldrop’s sequence, the self that is reflected upon is pulled in myriad directions. This cracked self is led, once again, to dwell on the ravaged landscape at the beginning of the seventh poem: “Trenches filled with trash. Sandbags filled with archeological fragments. Men / filled with fear” (*Driven* 71). The notion of space raised in the previous poem, the idea of what once occupied that space, is extended by the speaker’s focus on detritus, and the idea of men being filled with fear. Again, speech is raised with the short, following line,

“Language is a network of easily accessed wrong turns” (71). The speaker is drawing attention to the extreme slipperiness of language, the way it can be manipulated depending on time and situation. What language can also do is console and attempt to make meaning. Altieri notes that “[t]he most obvious way to state the distinctive condition of thought that takes itself as self-consciously contemporary is to speak of reason as systematically revealing its own unreason” (27). The speaker in Waldrop’s sequence simultaneously practices a similar mode, while always stopping short. The glimpse exposes by laying the incidents and laying the facts bare, without any surrounding commentary, as in the next two lines: “At the dedication of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, the / President compared his War on Terror with Lincoln’s war against slavery” (*Driven* 71). Here, the speaker calls attention to this absurd comparison by simply relating the line. The poem ends, “Sometimes the clouds race along Elmgrove Avenue. Sometimes they hover over / city hall” (71). Again, the juxtaposition of place is brought forth; the idea of clouds racing supposes an ominous foreboding, something sinister on the horizon. Elmgrove Avenue is where the Waldrop’s house in Providence, Rhode Island is located. What this specific reference provides is the war, the unease, the difficult thoughts are hitting home; that these things do, in fact, creep into one’s daily life whether one wants them to or not, whether one specifically makes the connection through language or not.

Spatial Impasses

At the midway point of Waldrop’s sequence, the speaker appears at an impasse. Repetition accumulates: the references to war, daily worries, and images; there seems to

be no progress only wheels turning in place. This notion is illustrated in the final line of the eighth poem: “If I try to say the whole thing in one sentence I say the same thing over and over” (72). This statement, read closely, can also act as guide to the entire sequence. Obviously, for the speaker, a one-sentence summation of everything being explored is an impossibility. Instead, layered sentences, multiple investigations, broken points-of-view, are what is needed, and this practice is what has thus far taken place. The opening of the eighth poem both continues earlier thoughts and serves as a break: “In one version, reality is desperate attacks by a few desperate individuals. In another, / we have been in a civil war for a long time” (72). A common thread in explaining disaster, catastrophe, and / or attacks is that a few disturbed individuals act on impulse to carry out an act. The second line, referencing an ongoing “civil war,” is more oblique. Here, equally, the speaker attests that nothing new is taking place. The struggle of power, particularly in the U.S., is won by the most powerful. The mention of “civil war” also reflects on the statements from the seventh poem and draws further attention to the “other,” in a global context, and race in the confines of the U.S. However, if the speaker of these poems is simply reiterating the endless plight of war, and the idea that the powerful will always retain power, what is the purpose of the sequence? What, at this impasse, enables the speaker to move forward and move from beginning to end in the sequence, arriving at a different space? Waldrop’s transgressive construction, through the use of glimpse, is what ultimately carries the sequence and becomes apparent in the remaining poems.

The initial impasses in the middle section gives way to the speaker developing the glimpse even further, broadening thought and experience. The working through of this impasse is best viewed through the way Lyn Hejinian thinks of poetry, particularly in her

book, *The Language of Inquiry* (2000). In her famous essay, “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian talks about impasses, noting that the problem of impasses “can be described as the disjunction between words and meaning, but at a particularly material level, one at which the writer is faced with the necessity of making formal decisions” (42).⁵⁹ The formal decisions Waldrop has made in the sequence, especially the moves in the middle of the sequence, are predicated on space and subject matter. Waldrop’s spatialization contends with the actual, physical look and construction of the poem on the page, the broken prose I described in depth in the first section of this chapter; space as physical dwelling—the war in the Gulf, the people in the states—defines the parameters of this sequence. Further in her essay, Hejinian differentiates between closed⁶⁰ and open texts. In an “open text,” according to Hejinian, “all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work” (43). These characteristics are in play in the third and fourth lines of the eighth poem: “We place mirrors in our bedrooms. We hope their virtual depth might reflect on / our loves” (*Driven* 72). The speaker, for the first time since the first poem in the sequence, uses the pronoun “we”; this “we” invites and takes the reader back into consideration; however, the speaker also recognizes that each individual is looking into the mirror. Ultimately, though, these gestures by the collective “we” work as a reaching out. The next three lines think about time and the ways in which

⁵⁹ Hejinian continues this note about formal decisions, commenting that one must continue “devising an appropriate structure for the work, anticipating the constraints it will put into play, etc.—in the context of the ever-regenerating plenitude of language’s resources, in their infinite combinations. Writing’s forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work’s motion. The material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself” (42).

⁶⁰ “We can say that a ‘closed text’ is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity” (42-43).

one measures: “Greater accuracy in measurement can be obtained by means of atomic and / molecular clocks. Implicit is the hypothesis that all atoms of a given element / behave in exactly the same way, irrespective of place and epoch” (72). This abrupt swerve from the intimacy of “we” is both jarring and emphasizes the previous nature of time within these poems. The speaker is reckoning with war and time, noting throughout that war has always taken place; however, this fact, instead of simply locating the Gulf War within a long line of wars—with more to follow—focuses on how this engagement affects.

The ninth poem’s opening balances the sequence’s themes and explores them together within the first three lines. Here, the personal directly mixes with the political and images from beyond: “My father, from his balcony, looks at astral spaces. Where the orbiting of a planet, / a suicide bombing, and his breath condensing in cold air are equally part of the / system” (73). All of these seemingly disparate images and experiences simultaneously exist together. There is the space of the father looking, his breath on the balcony, a suicide bombing taking place in an unspecified location, and the “astral spaces” beyond, where the planet spins. Previously in the sequence, the speaker relates facts, events taking place. This poem ushers a change, where things begin to overlap and cohere, to intrude and mix with one another. In the next line, the speaker attempts to enter the father’s mind: “He wonders whether he must fit his perceptions to the world—which world?—or / the world to his perceptions” (73). This moment is important in distinguishing the philosophical space of the speaker in the sequence. Here, the switch continues from the speaker’s perceptions, into the glimpse of the father’s perceptions; “which world?” broadens this glimpse further in that it entails the “world” of our own

making, belief, but also the world outside of this; which, obviously, one can never enter, but one can at least muse upon it. This philosophical quandary is shattered as the poem moves on: “50,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq had no body armor in 2005. The equipment manager / had placed it at the same priority level as socks” (73). This statement, delivered in a one-line deadpan, is equally frightening and absurd, and echoes the President’s remark from poem seven. What is integral about this moment is the glimpse it gives into the lives of U.S. soldiers, who are vulnerable without body armor. This moment works to break down the traditional dichotomy in war literature of an “us” vs. “them,” where U.S. soldiers are viewed as aggressive killing machines; instead, this note of fear portrays the soldiers as vulnerable, simply playing a role within the larger governmental machinations. Again, the echo with the seventh poem—“Men filled with fear”—that encompasses men who are Iraqis, soldiers and civilians affected by the war, and also U.S. troops sent to carry out and fight.

The balancing act performed by the speaker with this glimpse is a remarkable feat and illustrates Hejinian’s notion of an “open text.” Whereas Waldrop’s sequence can be viewed through Hejinian’s essay, “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian’s essay, “Who Is Speaking?”, helps further explain the continuing and close of Waldrop’s project. In the ninth poem and the subsequent poems in the sequence, Waldrop obliquely reaches out in language and practice to form a different community. This subtle, transgressive construction can be used through the speaker’s return to the use of “we,” the glimpse of another’s interior thoughts, and the aside about U.S. soldiers. Hejinian contends that the “question of community and creativity is not one issue but a whole complex of interrelated public and private issues, and as one brings the pressure of one’s attention to

bear on one of them, another rises up requiring that one adjust one's emphasis" (34). The speaker's adjustments can be explained through the juxtaposition of the personal and political; the facts and comments about war, casualties, troops, alongside the quotidian thoughts of the father and images that keep surfacing from day-to-day life. This difficult balance is practiced through the oblique jumps and random swerves in Waldrop's sequence. Hejinian notes that balancing the public and private is not easy: "There is an inevitable conflict between community and creativity, and writers very often feel torn between the possibilities of solitude and the requirements of the social" (34). This dichotomy is illustrated in the focus on Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov in the first section of this chapter. The speaker in the sequence portrays this conflict with observations attesting to the difficulty of speech: "I repeat myself often" (#2 66); "If I try to say the whole thing in one sentence I say the same thing over and over" (#8 72); "I would prefer to be able to explain the air. The sun. The Adam's apple" (#10 74); "One way of thinking links thoughts with one another in a series, another keeps / coming back to always the same spot" (#11 75)' "My writing is nothing but a stutter" (#12 76). These moments both acknowledge the difficulty of talking about the themes in the sequence while attempting to talk about them.

The speaker's inability to convey and / or talk about these troubling criminal events can be looked at through the lens of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. "As distinguished from a litigation," Lyotard contends, "a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule or judgement applicable to both arguments" (xi). Lyotard, through the idea of the differend, draws attention to the problems of presentability of the

referent when the parties in dispute cannot agree on a common discourse, or rule of judgement. One must try, however, to present the unrepresentable. Waldrop's project in this poetic sequence looks at war quite differently from its common portrayal in literature, film, and media. The speaker in these poems looks to talk against the ravages of war yet is unable to speak and to develop a sustained, coherent process. The differend at work here is the United States' government's view of war and politics, waging war and then subsequently occupying Iraq. The speaker in the poetic sequence looks to combat this narrative while simultaneously not constructing another narrative that takes its place, as Roy Scranton illustrates with the Trauma Hero. Instead, the speaker uses elision, gaps, stutters, and silences to show the incommensurability of speaking of war by still attempting to speak of it.

The transgressional, in-between space achieved is the recognition that a final word, statement, and illustration of these themes is impossible; however, one can still lean toward looking at them, even in an oblique manner. According to Hejninian being part of a community is not an option: "One quick way to answer this is to say that, want it [community] or not, we have it. And this is the case not just because the world is with us. To the extent that humans know about humans, community occurs" (34). The speaker's communities in Waldrop's sequence are guarded; this speaker works alone but is cognizant of others; the speaker always already exists in a community, yet there is a singular nature to the speaker's practice. What furthers this practice is sharing: the speaker sharing thoughts, ideas, insecurities, fears; the end of poem nine states: "Some do not like blood outside the body. Others do not like body counts" (*Driven* 73). The body is the focus of the close and also the reaction of others. In many ways, the speaker, through

sharing, invents new communities. Hejinian notes that “*Invention*, in the literary as in many other contexts, is a term nuanced toward reciprocity—between the creative imagination and utility, between originality and the world” (35). What is important to note is that one of the communities shared is the community of the dead, the wounded, on both sides, with the living. One way to view this sharing is through Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of *mêlée*, “an action rather than a substance” (150).⁶¹ Nancy differentiates *mêlée* as being an “action rather than a substance” (150). An action connotes something that is always in process, always moving, never fixed; as opposed to a substance—a singular “thing” where one traces not only its mixture but what specifically it is composed of. In a community, being “with,” “together,” or “united,” is not analogous to being “one”—a unified thing that can be pointed out and categorized. “Within *unitary* community [*communauté une*],” Nancy argues, “there is nothing but death, and not the sort of death found in the cemetery which is a place of spacing or distinctness, but the death found in the ashes of crematorium ovens or in the accumulations of charnel-houses” (155). The living, however, now take an active role in thinking about and writing about the others; this new role is brought about from Waldrop’s glimpse. This different, active role, though, illustrating a change in the sequence, does not necessarily point toward a teleological end in discussing war and atrocity, simply a different space.

The tenth poem situates the dead, juxtaposing specific statements with philosophical asides and the continued confrontation of writing this subject matter.

⁶¹ Cultures, according to Nancy, do not mix. A mixing implies that there is some originary point that then joins together causing this blend. Instead, *mêlée* entails “meetings and encounters...crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing, and it is never a single thing, nor is it ever the same” (150-151). There already always is *mêlée*; every culture is always already “multicultural.” What this allows one to do is “practice singularities” through the notion of *ipseity*—a “being-its-self”—that moves the conversation from what, specifically “cultures,” “communities” or “identities” are to how they exchange and interact.

However, the tenth poem is not simply an extension or more of the same; instead, it zeroes in on the toll from war. The poem opens, “In Swan Point Cemetery, there is a gravestone in the form of a little house. With / the inscription GONE HOME” (74). This seemingly quotidian moment locates a specific American site—“home”—a graveyard with personal markings and place. This moment is starkly contrasted in the next four lines: “Assassinated: four clerics, two officials from the Military of Defense, the dean / of a high school; killed by bombs: nine National Guards, thirteen civilians, two / engineering students. In all, thirty-one dead, forty-two injured, and seventeen / abducted. A fairly quiet day here in Baghdad” (74 quotation marks are Waldrop’s). The final sentence, again, is equally devastating and contains an element of black humor. The fact that these individuals have been killed and injured and the day can be described as “fairly quiet,” attests to the criminal glossing over of the toll of war. The final sentence draws attention even more to the criminality of war; specifically, the victims who share the space of these lines, regardless of nationality, suffering the effects. These four lines are an integral moment in the sequence and point toward a turn. The poet (and speaker) in cobbling these four lines from another text, then situating it within the sequence, reveals a startling transgression in practice and spatiality. In these lines, Waldrop’s glimpse shares work; part of what this sharing does is blur absolute lines; it challenges the divided allegiances between “us” and “them,” the Americans and Iraqis. This, ultimately, develops a different way of looking, a different space both in practice and thinking about war. In many ways, Waldrop’s glimpse destroys traditional notions of community—“us” vs. “them”—that is a constant in most war literature.

What happens, then, is the subtle shifting practice of transient space and communities. This practice in Waldrop's work is noted by Nick Selby, in reference to Waldrop and Hejinian's poetics: "They are poems that assert an abject subjectivity, one framed by a language that is always 'late for the event,' always just missing the expression of selfhood it so craves." Selby continues, "The disjunctions of their textual surfaces make real the hesitations, refusals and desire for self-expression that characterize a decentered poetic subjectivity" (3). The self, like community, is decentered and at times obliterated. "The poetic space that they occupy," according to Selby, "stems from a breaking down of the very idea that the (lyric) poem provides the expressive completion of a unified, essentialized selfhood" (3). This tarrying, then breaking down, is considered in the tenth poem with the following line: "The flux of time helps us to forget what was and what can be" (*Driven* 74). This moment indicates the glimpse and different space coming into being and coupled with the final line notes a turn in the sequence: "I would prefer to be able to explain the air. The sun. The Adam's apple" (74). The speaker's wish for a different practice is simultaneously expressed and dealt with. Again, there is the specific note of the in-between space, the wish for an alternative while forging ahead, carving out a separate political space for the remainder of the sequence.

Waldrop's Political Spatialization

In the early parts of this chapter I have traced a strain of political poem and writing about war. Roy Scranton's articulation of the "Trauma Hero" located the predominant narrative of literary and mainstream writing and film about war in American culture. The Levertov / Duncan debate illustrated the poetic dichotomy. I also situated

Waldrop's work through Edward Said's notion of "Late Style" coupled with Charles Altieri's "Disturbance." The practice of the "glimpse" employed throughout the sequence extends and complicates Mulvey's notion of the "Male Gaze." Waldrop, in the "By the Waters of Babylon" section of *Driven to Abstraction*, has carved out a separate space in the practice of balancing war and poetry. This space has been displayed through Waldrop's "glimpse," which is a dizzying, opaque engagement with the criminal aspects of war, and also works as a transgressive break in her practice of poetry. The final five poems in the sequence continue this strain and further pushes the glimpse and its reckoning with art and war. The eleventh poem opens with a glimpse into a horrific scene followed by an accusation: "Corpses of small children, families lying in pools of blood in their homes. The / President promises investigation. And sidesteps the problem" (75). Other than a few earlier hints (glimpses), this opening is the first moment where the speaker shows accusation rather than frustration. This juxtaposition is telling in that it indicates a subtle shift in the latter half of the sequence. The same three threads continue yet there is another layer. However, this layer does not work as a complete solution to uncovering criminal activity that others are unaware of; instead, it spatializes the speaker as occupying a separate creative realm from earlier. Again, this move is not a teleological working through of anger and war; rather, it is a subjective nuance brought to light. Once this combative line is out, though, the speaker catches, and troubles this moment with the next line: "Heine's curse: *Nicht gedact soll seiner warden*" (75), from the poem of the same name, translated as "Not meant to be his!" This moment is a break in that instead of building on the outrage expressed in the beginning, the speaker now swerves toward a different angle. Heine's poem serves as surrogate for the speaker's outrage in that it

illustrates dismay yet does it through the German language. The title—"Not meant to be his!"—taken by itself could indicate a number of different spaces. For example, it could point toward the speaker not wanting to dwell on the President and his negligent response to the war. However, after reading Heine's poem, the invective is doubly harsh.⁶² Heine looked to Ezekiel's pronouncement, a form of punishment in the name of God against the Ammonites, as the premise for the poem. Waldrop's use in the sequence is another startling switch, calling upon past poetry to look at and contemplate the present situation. Here, the past space of time, narrative, and practice presents itself in the speaker's contemporary setting.

The following two lines extend this move and illustrate both the larger project of the sequence and the minute movements of the speaker's mind: "One way of thinking links thoughts with another in a series, another keeps / coming back to always the same spot" (75). The dichotomy draws attention to the space between these two poles: thinking, working, movement. Now, though, the speaker occupies the middle space, or the outside space between these two poles. The speaker, so far, is simultaneously linking disparate thoughts; however, at times, many of these thoughts creep back and haunt the speaker. The ending the eleventh poem locates the ephemerality of time regarding law and pleasure: "The flux of time is society's most natural ally in maintaining law, order conformity. / We learn that every pleasure is short and are resigned even before society

⁶² The fourth stanza reads:

Not meant to be his,
Not in the song, not in the book—
Dark dog in the dark tomb,
You rot with my curse!

forces / us to be so” (75). Does the resignation relate to the fact that we are powerless against war and suffering? Does this realization diminish one’s ability to experience pleasure? From this poem on, time has shifted. The first line notes the harsh condemnation and the speaker, with a few poems left in the sequence, feels the weight of the task pressing, time slipping away.

The twelfth poem’s opening brings the speaker back to observation. This note troubles the line between nature and city: “The spring rain splashes up cones of water from puddles formed by the broken / asphalt” (76). Unlike many of the previous statements, this beginning reads like a Zen kōan. There is the combination of nature with the city, the asphalt, the moments and flux between them. A seemingly withdrawn observation at first glance; or, in turn, a hyper-focused zeroing in on the minute and immediate. This opening furthers the spatial component at work in the final few poems. The “splashes” note a current, contemporaneous action the speaker observes; the “broken asphalt” is heavy with connection to the notes about war as well; however, I read this as the speaker’s glimpse away before quickly hurtling back in with the following lines: “The crimes of U.S. soldiers in Iraq are as inevitable as the crimes committed by / soldiers of other imperial armies. It takes many years before it comes to light that / they are official policy. Fifty years, in the case of No Gun Ri in South Korea” (76). These lines articulate the separate political space, where the U.S. is described as an imperialistic regime. This in and of itself is not a new claim; however, the speaker, with this note, shifts complete agency from the soldiers onto the larger apparatus. Here, the “U.S” government is to blame, not simply the individual taking part. This hints back to an earlier glimpse⁶³ in the

⁶³ The opening of the eighth poem reads: “In one version, reality is desperate attacks by a few desperate individuals. In another, / we have been in a civil war for a long time” (72).

sequence that situates an individual as part of a larger network. The subsequent lines comment and attempt to situate the beginning: “The aspects of time that were significant for primitive man were repetition and / simultaneity. Even in his first conscious awareness of time man sought to / transcend, or abolish it” (76). This moment exhibits repetition through the speaker’s mention of past war atrocities within the context of the present, noting, simply, this is how things are and will be. One’s wish to “abolish” time is simultaneously inhabited by the attempt, through writing, to mark a feeling during a specific moment. This sequence attempts to transcend and abolish time, yet it fails, as the speaker well knows. The final statement drives this point home: “My writing is nothing but a stutter” (76). It is integral to note the speaker specifically mentions “writing,” not speech, not language. In my opening chapter on Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, I noted how David’s practice of elision through language works as a Deleuzian “stutter” that opens another space where David is momentarily free, or so he thinks. The Deleuzian “stutter,” I contend, is a hallmark of experimental and transgressional writing, one that spatializes and situates the practice through new modes of expression. Waldrop takes Baldwin’s practice of the “stutter” to a different space. An important aspect of Deleuze’s contention is writers using and working in another language.⁶⁴ What these writers do, according to Deleuze, is “invent a *minor use* of the major language.... [T]hey send it [the language] racing along a witch’s line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation”

⁶⁴ “This is not a situation of bilingualism or multilingualism. We can easily conceive of two languages mixing with each other, with incessant transitions from one to the other; yet each of them nonetheless remains a homogenous system in equilibrium, and their mixing takes place in speech. But this is not how great authors proceed, even though Kafka is Czech writing in German, and Beckett an Irishman (often) writing in French, and so on. They do not mix two languages together, not even a minor language and a major language, though many of them are linked to minorities as a sign of their vocation.

(109). Waldrop, in this sequence, performs a quiet stutter. There are no loud pronouncements, denunciations; yet there is an extreme disambiguation, an *ostranenie* through repetition and phenomenological balancing of time. The speaker in these poems takes English, the major language of U.S. Government, the major language of discourse and rhetoric in the United States and the world and uses it to glimpse and juxtapose the various atrocities of war, while also balancing the extreme difficulty of actually writing about these things.

The thirteenth poem extends the idea of history repeating itself; now the speaker, once again, looks toward the Bible: “Nothing new under the sun. Which comes and goes. When it stood still at the prayer of Joshua, did time nevertheless continue?” (77). Does the beginning read like a resignation? Does the speaker, through evoking the biblical, hope to either explain away or contextualize the present? The spatial movement at work appears dizzying and fractured: the speaker references the Bible to comment on the repetition of history, and then, in the next line, zooms out to ruminate on the wish for different subject matter: “I would like to concentrate on the rotation of the earth and the wind it brings / about” (77). Instead of resignation, or the glimpse into history and the Bible, the speaker struggles, oscillating between the subject matter coursing through the sequence and the mind wanting to focus on something else, yet being unable to. Quickly, the speaker returns to a focus on the war: “Eight months before the invasion, the chief of M16 reported to Tony Blair that the / U.S. was going to ‘remove Saddam, through military action...’ But because ‘the / case was thin, Saddam was not threatening his neighbors, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea, or Iran...the intelligence and facts were / being fixed around the policy’” (77). This note

glimpses at how language is specifically manipulated to meet the ends set out by the powerful. The comment that “the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy” is a prescient aside that hints at the current regime’s catchword: “alternative facts”—that the information can be spun to achieve a goal—in this case, an excuse to invade Iraq and dispose of Hussein. The speaker, spatially, is never removed, never outside of this realm, as the closing of the poem attests: “Our language seduces us into asking always the same questions. As long as there / is a verb ‘to be’ that seems to function in the same way as ‘to eat’ and ‘to drink’ / we’ll be asking questions of identity, possibility, falsehood, truth” (77). This list places all of these ideas on the same plane: asking questions and being seduced through language is analogous to eating and drinking, necessary functions one cannot live without. The poem’s close continues the project of oblique engagement through its insistence on questioning as a natural function. Questioning, then, is never a choice. The space occupied by the speaker throughout is always shifting, always elsewhere, swerving from a position of question, toward an attempt at explanation through contextualization. Some moments could, in fact, read like resignation; however, the Beckettian practice of going on, of moving forward through the sequence combats this.

The fourteenth poem’s first line is the most startling and immediate in the sequence. The line is situated as a direct quote from a gunman. What is fascinating, though, is that the nationality of this individual is not given: “Well, I knelt down. I said a prayer, stood up, and gunned them all down” (78). This person could be one from either side, from any side; this person could have recited a prayer from any religion, using the prayer in numerous ways: as justification; as help through a difficult moment; for

forgiveness; for the shooter's own safety. The speaker, throughout, has referenced the Bible to situate the history and continuation of war. The opening line of this poem reads as the speaker pointing at religion as harbinger for much of history's and the world's strife. The next line makes this point clear: "As the physicist Stephen Weinberg said, for good people to do bad things it takes religion" (78). The fourteenth poem is the shortest in the sequence, composed of five spatially desiccated lines that illustrate the speaker's reckoning with the primary subject matter. The first line, though laden with dense signifiers, is quick, spoken by one who prefers action over thought; this aspect is noted through the attention to physical movements: "I knelt down...stood up." The line following the Weinberg aside relates: "I suddenly start to wonder at birth, death, sleep, madness, war. As if awakening" (78). This line is simultaneously clear and frustratingly opaque. The speaker appears to be having an existential crisis. Though not overtly dramatic, the words "suddenly" and "wonder" indicate a rush overcoming the individual. The final sentence in the line—"As if awakening"—could indicate the speaker, believing him or herself to be asleep, or sleepwalking, is now "suddenly" awake. After fourteen poems in the fifteen-poem sequence, the speaker is startled and closes the poem by noting, "Time helps us to forget, and to forget means to forgive. What should not be forgiven" (78). This seemingly prosaic statement is radical regarding the project at hand. The final line also brings together the myriad references—whether Biblical, literary, philosophical, or factual statements from the news—sprinkled and anchoring the sequence. As history repeats itself, wars fought, people killed, the speaker notes through writing "What should not be forgiven," and I would add, what should not be forgotten.

The beginning of the final poem situates the speaker back within the space of the personal, as though the speaker must look closely at his or her own life before branching back out. The first two lines read, “My father cuts himself shaving. While he looks for a band-aid he thinks of his / astral body and if it is bleeding too” (79). This statement is not only taking the father’s actual, physical body into account, but also the ontological balance of the father thinking of his body in a separate space. The fact that he is bleeding lends another note of the in-between in that the father is cut, injured (albeit slightly), yet grasping for something to staunch the nick. A porous reading might look toward the larger symbolic implications of this opening, but I am reading these lines literally, taking each moment as it comes, as it is. The next part, once again, balances time: “Time is the form of our inner sense, said Kant. And Guyau, that a being who did not desire, did not want anything, would see time shut down in front of him” (79). In the final statement on time in the sequence, the speaker chooses to reference philosophers to contextualize, yet this moment points out, importantly, that without desire time shuts down. Throughout the section the speaker has tracked the difficult, frustrating relationship with time; one can argue that writing is an attempt to stop time. James Baldwin acknowledges this as one of his views on writing and art as a whole. The speaker, while occupying this in-between space, knows, despite the attempt, that it is impossible. So, at the close, what does the speaker ultimately desire? The speaker is too adept, and notes through multiple historical references, that war will never stop. The attempt, however, is brought to light in the next line: “Everywhere people wind clocks to prevent this from happening” (79). The speaker relates how people try to use time in an attempt to erase; the choice of “this” is telling in that there is no direct reference, but “this” can broadly point toward a multitude. The

speaker, while pointing out that “people” attempt to manipulate time, to “wind clocks,” further draws the speaker to the in-between space. Here, the speaker is neither separate nor together. Throughout the sequence the speaker knows this has been a practice, an attempt to manage, frustrate, and play with time, but the speaker continues anyway.

The final four lines of the fifteenth poem illustrate a disparate continuous history, locating the present moment within the space of war and history, and within the space of the project: “The battle of Agincourt was fought in hours, Waterloo in a day, Gettysburg lasted / three days, the Battle of the Somme four and a half months, Verden ten, Stalingrad / six. There were the Seven- and the Thirty-Years Wars. The President told the West / Point cadets: ‘Iraq is only the beginning’” (79). This grim ending points to many moments scattered throughout the sequence that associate time, history, and war together, as a never-ending sequence. Allowing George W. Bush (who is simply referred to as the President throughout) to have the last line works in a variety of ways as well. The speaker posits this final thought only after recognition in the previous poem—“Time helps us to forget, and to forget means to forgive. What should not be forgiven”—in that by mentioning these wars, the speaker connects the present predicament; however, the space occupied by the speaker is one of writing about, marking, not forgetting (not forgiving), through the construction of the sequence, which has swerved and jugged from one thought and from one practice to the next.

Waldrop’s project throughout “By the Waters of Babylon” in *Driven to Abstraction* confronts war obliquely, from the side, away, in a separate space. The speaker has one foot in the political and one within the personal; neither, though, is straightforward. The criminal aspects of war are raised, yet there is no overemotive

gnashing of teeth by the speaker—there is grim acceptance and a promise to write, talk, and move forward. The space of women writers is also touched upon, problematized, and transgressed through multiple philosophical asides and a self-reflexive awareness at work. What Waldrop accomplishes is a difficult feat: she melds the lyric and the personal with the transgressive and the experimental. There are moments when the speaker appears cold, remote, and other instances where fear creeps in. Gillian White's study, *Lyric Shame* (2014), opens that, more and more, the “expressive lyric is the chief abjection of a powerful and increasingly canonical avant-garde anti-lyricism now forty years in the making, it is an identification that opens these poets’ work to shame” (4). White sees a certain group, mainly the Language and academic-based poets, as viewing the lyric “I” poetry as confessions that are shamelessly narcissistic. Instead of two distinct schools—the confessional poets and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets—vying for artistic and aesthetic supremacy, they, according to White, overlap, steal and appropriate practices from one another, and that the boundaries around each group are porous and broken.⁶⁵ Waldrop, I contend, would not situate herself with any particular group. Too experimental to be a lyric or confessional poet, too lyrical and personal, at times, to fit into the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E camp, she occupies the in-between, the other space, and this practice reaches its apotheosis in her twentieth book, *Driven to Abstraction*. White balances these two factions through problematizing how one reads the “lyric”; White

⁶⁵ “One of the broad premises of this book is that ‘expressive lyric’ is an abstraction that gets projected onto some writing.... The lyric shame I wish to expose and explore here is that of poetry idealized as ‘lyric,’ or the lyric shamed—shame attributed to, projected onto, and produced by readings that anthropomorphize poems as ‘lyric’ (4). Ultimately, White notes that “*Lyric Shame* proposes is that these writers, conventionally thought to be ‘lyric’ (whether defended or shamed for it), offer us new inroads through the problematic and interesting interpretive limit of the personal. They only awkwardly fit the ‘lyric’ ideal abstracted and projected on them by both their fans and detractors, and they can even be read to foreground writing and discourse as these disrupt the figure of the poetic speaker that is so often assumed as quintessentially ‘lyric’ (6).

notes how lyric poems, rather than being emotive, personal experiences, can also “emphasize craft’s artifice to the point of ironizing the illusion of poetry as spontaneous speech” (10). Throughout Waldrop’s sequence, the speaker never overtly emotes, or expresses overwhelming subjective experience; however, there are many moments where the speaker starts, catches her or himself, notes a personal aside, before quickly returning to the outwardly political. This method is the transgressive practice of the glimpse, and illustrates these moments as fluid, overlapping, and inseparable.

In a previous collection, *Love, Like Pronouns* (2003), Waldrop attempts something similar in her long(er) closing poem about 9/11, “Disaster.” Here, as in *Driven to Abstraction*, the speaker stutters, stops and starts, and is overwhelmingly befuddled with how to deal with the event: “Grief is began with. And disbelief. Went and looked and went / and looked. For what was no more. Scrutinized screens and / saw. Nothing. The papers in the land and. Took in nothing” (113). The speaker is struck, seemingly unable coherently to verbalize and take in the catastrophic attack. A little later, continuing this incomprehension, the speaker relates: “Like a movie. Like a comic strip. Please distinguish between. Crumbling towers and the image of crumbling towers. The / image, repeated, multiplies. Locks on the plural. Crowds” (113). The incomprehension is blurred and intensified from the viewing on screens, over and over, of the event. Then, finally, in the second section, there is a statement on how people react: “A hole is. A space for thought. We fill it with flags” (114). The speaker notes the collective rallying after the attack, most often signified by a collective jingoistic response to the Other. There are many moments in “Disaster” that echo the sequence, “By the Waters of Babylon”; however, “Disaster feels half-formed, an aching grasp, and this feeling is what

the speaker practices; image and language are its broken blocks. “Disaster” attempts to practice some of Maurice Blanchot’s tenets in his text *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980). Blanchot, in a poetic list, notes the many things a “disaster” engenders: “The disaster, whose blackness should be attenuated—through emphasis—exposes us to a certain idea of passivity. We are passive with respect to the disaster, but the disaster is perhaps passivity, and thus past, always past, even in the past, out of date” (3). Waldrop seems to have taken Blanchot’s notes in an attempt to write about 9/11. Blanchot, in a devastating moment, relates:

The disaster, depriving us of that refuge which is the thought of death,
dissuading us from the catastrophic or the tragic, dissolving our interest in
will and in all internal movement, does not allow us to entertain this
question either: what have you done to gain knowledge of the disaster? (3)

Waldrop’s “Disaster” engenders inertia, paralysis in the speaker; it nearly renders the speaker’s ability to talk and form coherent thoughts; it flails. In “By the Waters of Babylon,” the speaker, though hurt and affected by war, attempts to confront Blanchot’s question. Waldrop grimly answers: nothing, we have learned nothing. Yet it is not this ultimate statement that sticks. Andrew Mossin contends that Waldrop’s response to tragedy and war, particularly her “emphatically political gesture here [in “Disaster”] is a refusal of the fixatives of nationalist ideology and cultural othering that have been endemic to this nation’s outlook since the terrorist attacks of 9/11” (153). Mossin, in fact, links Waldrop with Denise Levertov’s call to public action against the Vietnam War. Waldrop, ultimately, fractures and combines many of the moves used by both Levertov and Robert Duncan, combining the practice into a unique, singular form.

Writing about the “disaster” of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion and involvement in Iraq involves Waldrop looking closely and philosophically balancing over an extremely murky terrain. The glimpse offered by Waldrop is brought about through the difficult experience with writing about war. Waldrop’s overt statement about 9/11 and the U.S.’s response makes her feelings clear:

(As for my own lowercase truth: I can’t imagine not grieving for the victims. I can’t imagine not being deeply shocked by this crime. But I also consider it criminal that our government uses the grief and anger of its people to retaliate against terrorism with more terrorism, worse because it is carried out with the arsenal of a superpower; that we are fighting a “war” that has not been declared and whose definition, like that of “terrorist,” can change from one day to the next as it suits President Bush.)
(275)

The slippery relationship to truth, the transgressive practice in attempting to look at the U.S.’s involvement in war, the personal balanced with the political, are all at work in Waldrop’s glimpse, an oblique investigation that is prescient for our contemporary moment.

Chapter 3

Egon Schiele's Hideous Phantom: Joanna Scott's *Arrogance* and Transgressive Artists

Joanna Scott's *Arrogance* (1990) is a transgressive kaleidoscope, blurring the life and work of the Austrian Expressionist, Egon Schiele (1890-1918), with the various women he encounters. *Arrogance* is also a text that stretches the limits of what art and storytelling can do. Scott's novel breaks from the traditional *künstlerroman* in that it does not center around the growth of the artist, instead it illustrates the tangled web of relationships and disorder that surround Schiele and engulf others. A major locus in these interactions is the notion of the criminal that haunts Schiele's transgressive art, and the multiple ways space influences and defines his painting and the writing of the text. In 1912 Schiele was charged with abduction of a minor, incitement to debauchery, and violations of decency and morality. The charges stemmed from a runaway girl, Tatiana Motzi, who showed up at Schiele's cottage. Schiele and his mistress, Walburga (Wally) Neuzil (referenced as Vallie in Scott's novel), took the girl in. The charges were subsequently dropped, and the only crime Schiele was convicted of was for having "pornographic" artwork in a place to which children had access. Awaiting trial in the prison for twenty-one days, Schiele is eventually sentenced to three days (including time served). Talking of the trial in a letter, Schiele exclaims:

At the hearing one of my confiscated drawings, the one that had hung in my bedroom, was solemnly burned over a candle flame by the judge in his robes! Auto-da-fé! Savonarola! Inquisition! Middle Ages! Castration. Hypocrisy! Go then to the museums and cut up the greatest works of art

into little pieces. He who denies sex is a filthy person who smears the lowest way his own parents who have begotten him. (71)

Schiele's attitude, his "arrogance," along with his monomaniacal belief in his art, is illustrated in this statement. As a consequence of Schiele's brief incarceration, this pivotal moment also showcases the intersection of the criminal, liminal spaces, and the transgressive artist that Scott constructs. *Arrogance* hints at this scene and renders it in full a few pages before the close of the text. What is most striking, however, is how Scott showcases this moment through the eyes and point of view of the young girl⁶⁶: "I had watched myself die and had felt something akin to terror as the portrait burned" (267). In the traditional *künstlerroman* the artist is the center of the text, key moments of maturation and construction are alluded to and celebrated, and the individuals the artist encounters serve as sycophants, merely ends to the creative process.⁶⁷ Instead, Scott's narration focuses on the inner life of the young girl, alongside other women in the text, such as his sister, Gertrude, an early muse and willing model, and Vallie Neuzil,⁶⁸ who after Schiele's marriage to Edith Harms, becomes a war-time nurse in Croatia. Aside from the first-person account of the young girl, throughout the text there is a floating, insouciant narrator, relaying various facts and anecdotes of Schiele's life from a seemingly detached distance.

Arrogance constructs transgression through Scott's break in the traditional form of the *künstlerroman*. The dizzying, maddening narrative shifts that run through the text

⁶⁶ Her name is never given in the text, and her life is imagined into adulthood.

⁶⁷ Patrick White's *The Vivisector* (1970), which follows the fictional painter, Hurtle Duffield, is a well-known example. Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* (1934) traces Van Gogh's life and was subsequently made into the popular film starring Kirk Douglas. John Berger's *A Painter of our Time* (1958) falls into this genre as well.

⁶⁸ Like Scott, in this paper I will refer to Walburga Neuzil as "Vallie."

dislocate a sense of time and space. The criminal aspects of the novel concern Schiele's portraits of underage girls and their reception; however, this is not the overarching focus. Instead, Scott centers the text around numerous women in Schiele's life and their influence on him. In many ways the artist works as an absent center who other individuals swirl around and brush up against. Whereas Schiele's twisted, writhing portraits violate traditional notions of beauty, Scott's text violates traditional notions of the artist's novel as well. Scott practices this violation through the rendering and reportage of the young girl, who visits and stalks Schiele, and who narrates a major portion of the text at various moments of her life. Similar to the gaze and its effects on David in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, and how the glimpse manifests itself as a new way of looking at war in Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction*, in *Arrogance*, looking overturns traditional notions of subject and artist. By giving the young girl narrative control, Scott allows her the ability to act and work on Schiele, subjecting the artist to her designs in order to get what she wants. Scott's dizzying, contorted, construction mimics and plays with Schiele's writhing, transgressive paintings, using liminal spaces, and a proliferation of criminality to create a powerful, new text.

Criminal Construction

Having studied under John Hawkes⁶⁹ at Brown, Joanna Scott has created one of the most singular bodies of work in contemporary literature. Her first novel, *Fading, My Parmacheene Belle* (1987), follows a 53-year-old recently widowed woodsman and

⁶⁹ Hawkes famously said, "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained" (7).

angler on a Beckettian journey through the forest, eventually teaming up with a fifteen-year-old runaway and amateur prostitute. Told in strange, dream-like archaic diction, an early reviewer describes the text as one where “[r]age alternates with the reflective stance of a man entering the final stage of his life...in this moving, wise novel” (Ramsey). Her second novel, *The Closest Possible Union* (1988), set in the nineteenth century, is told from the point of view of Tom, a fourteen-year-old cabin boy on board the *Charles Beauchamp*, which is advertised as a whaling vessel, yet turns out to be a slave ship, whose plot culminates in a violent mutiny. *Arrogance*, Scott’s third novel, is a complete break from these earlier novels.

Instead of a male, first-person point of view throughout the text, Scott chooses to relate much of the action from Tatiana Motzi’s lens, a young girl whose name is never mentioned in the text. Additionally, there is a separate narrator who reports various historical facts about Schiele, his family, his interactions, as well as imagining his artistic aims and desires. The text’s nonlinear narrative also breaks from Scott’s first two novels, and mimics Schiele’s abrasive, distorted paintings. This structure allows Scott to give certain historical details about Schiele while also viewing the artist from others’ perspectives. Though Schiele is distinctly the center of the text, the other individuals are not simply moths to his flame, there are as many glimpses, thoughts, and actions of the women involved with the artist, particularly the young girl, Vallie, and Egon’s sister, Gertrude. Scott’s form problematizes the traditional notion of artist and brings women to the forefront of creation and action. Because of the text’s many moving parts, early reviews were divided. Writing in *The New York Times*, Scott Bradfield hints at Scott’s aim: “Joanna Scott’s third novel does not tell the story of a man so much as it examines

our changing notions about the artist and his plan in society” (A14). Bradfield continues, “Ms. Scott’s novel is about the power of the gaze, the implicit arrogance of watching.... Because it seems designed more as a treatise than a novel, its often bulky with exposition, and perilously short on active characters and dramatic scenes” (A14). Bradfield, ultimately, points out Scott’s “sensuous, provocative patterns...[that]...resound with rich experiences and intriguing perceptions” (A14). This review echoes most critics in lauding Scott’s prose and immense attention to detail while simultaneously being frustrated with the structure and form of the text. Similarly, other reviews note that “Scott’s intricate approach to her subject(s) is fully imagined and authoritatively handled, yet the novel is finally cool and somehow hollow, more like an innovative treatise on impulse, pain, and love” (50). *Kirkus Reviews* contends that “Somehow the man and the artist get lost in the shuffle here. Scott is a talented writer, but this isn’t her best” (Kirkus). In a lukewarm response, the *Virginia Quarterly* notes that the “pyrotechnics of Scott’s work fully exploit and probably do full justice to the artist and the man, Egon Schiele” (22). In one of the lone positive reviews, Elise Chase relates that the “diverse narrative voices and shifting chronological perspectives create a potentially confusing structure; yet this story is so intriguing, and Scott’s richly textured style so mesmerizing, that one is completely captivated” (261). What many critics are lamenting is the absence of narrative coherence, and a fully developed portrait of the artist in bloom, characteristics portrayed in the traditional *künstlerroman*. This was never Scott’s project. Instead, the rendering of Schiele is illustrated from the shifting perspectives of various disparate female figures, each occupying a prominent place in the artist’s life.

The two main texts Joanna Scott consulted for *Arrogance* are *Egon Schiele* (1976) and *Schiele in Prison* (1973) by the art critic Alessandra Comini, the latter a translation of Arthur Roessler's version of Egon Schiele's prison diary from 1922, *Egon Schiele im Gefängnis*. According to Comini, "No one has ever seen Schiele's original prison 'diary,' and his friend Arthur Roessler, who published many of the artist's writings posthumously, has been shown to change, elaborate on, and possibly even fabricate some of Schiele's prose" (8). Opinions about the legitimacy of an actual diary are divided. Comini notes that there is no consensus, some see "it as a total forgery to believing that it does exist is some form. I am of the latter opinion" (8). Jean Louis Gallemin, on the other hand, argues that Arthur Roessler's version of Schiele's diary "contributed more than any other work to the image of the artist as a martyr and a victim of the incomprehension and rigidity of his time" (142). Gallemin contends that the text, "containing word-for-word commentaries on the drawings executed in prison, was in fact written by Roessler himself. In the light of this, the work can be seen as an interesting insight into the birth of the artist legend" (142). The fact that the very genesis and nature of the existence of Schiele's diary is dubious, or highly contested at best, lends another element of transgression and criminality to this swirling figure. The very basis of Schiele's diary is suspect, fugitive, its existence could be a hoax. Scott, in her rendering of individuals and events, especially through the guise of a detached, playful narrator, extends this air of "not-knowing" through her style, indirect form, and attention to mood in the text. Scott's construction of Schiele and the surrounding events are what frustrates critics who want a linear narrative, one relating facts about the maturation of an artist.

The dubiousness of Schiele's diary extends and is practiced with the playful, often mocking tone running through an otherwise dark text. Underneath this surface tone, though, are layers of diffuse meaning that problematize the traditional text of the artist. Linda Hutcheon's notion of "Historiographic Metafiction"⁷⁰ is one way to view Scott's practices. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction "works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" (4). Hutcheon contextualizes this turn as one relating to space, particularly post-modern architecture, and theft, noting how traditionally writers steal and "borrow" from preexisting texts. Citing Julia Kristeva's question of the idea of the author,⁷¹ Hutcheon contends that "intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself" (7). Scott practices some of these tactics through the use of other texts, imagined exchanges between historical individuals, and dizzying narrative play where voices, style, and tone overlap. Despite a seeming distance, one of Scott's aims is to build the narratives of women within Schiele's life. Hutcheon sees ironic intertextuality as "one of the major ways in which woman use and abuse, set up and then challenge male traditions in art" (19). Hutcheon notes how women can play with and rewrite history in order to decenter patriarchal dominance in storytelling and art. This reading of Scott, however, does not look to promulgate a covert feminine overturning of the patriarchy, what Eve

⁷⁰ Hutcheon mainly reads both canonical and critically covered texts, such as Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

⁷¹ The obvious, well known complication of the author by Foucault and Barthes are extended by Kristeva's "early reworking of the Bakhtinian notions of polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia—the multiple voicings of a text. Out of these ideas she developed a more strictly formalist theory of the irreducible plurality of texts within and behind any given text, thereby deflecting the critical focus away from the notion of the subject (here, the author) to the idea of textual productivity" (6).

Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “paranoid reading.” There is nothing substantially hidden that needs to be uncovered in Scott’s text; the practices of the women are always already at the forefront, and they do not come at the expense of Schiele; the text illustrates that Schiele’s art, ultimately, does not come at the expense of his female interlocutors, but is intricately bound and dependent upon them. Scott’s text dwells in an in-between space, where character, practice, and art are intricately intertwined with one another. This reading illustrates how the women in the text fluidly exchange and overlap with Schiele in each facet of life.

Scott’s *Arrogance* practices a number of characteristics described in Hutcheon’s theory, but it also occupies a separate space. Despite the practice of intertextual, historiographic play, the author seems to be more of a presence, albeit spectral, than in her first two novels. Benjamin Widiss’s *Obscure Invitations* (2011), posits that “neither the ostensible authorial evacuation that we read as the signature of the early part of the century nor the roiling self-portraiture of its close are as straightforward as they seem, and that they are at base quite similar strategies” (4). Both strategies, Widiss contends, draw attention to the author. In postmodern practice there is “[f]ar more often an apparent or incomplete authorial design; only in describing the content of such works do we fully relinquish euphemisms for, or interpretive circumlocutions taking us back to intimations of intentionality” (6).⁷² Scott’s *Arrogance* tarries in some of these spaces without fully

⁷² Widiss’s subjects, as Hutcheon’s earlier, are both popular and well-known canonical texts like Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, alongside the much reviewed/talked about contemporary memoir by Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and two, critically and popular acclaimed Kevin Spacey films, *Seven* and *The Usual Suspects*. Another writer that comes to mind, critically popular, though not in the public mainstream like Widiss’s texts, is William Gaddis. In particular his novel of greed and capitalism in America, *JR*, which is told exclusively through dialogue. Gaddis’s project of obliterating author / voice / style draws further attention to his unique, singular style.

being a part. The strangeness, the shifting narrator and narratives, its transgressive practices and content, especially regarding the narrator and character, are some of the major reasons why this text has been unexplored in literary studies and hard to place within a traditional framework. In an interview with the novelist Bradford Morrow, Joanna Scott mentions the impetus for writing about Schiele:

I was at the *fin-de-siècle* Vienna exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and I heard some people laughing at one of Schiele's drawings, a self-portrait of the artist—a beautiful, grotesque sketch of the artist standing naked. The people were laughing, the man asking the woman beside him, “Would you buy a used car from this guy?” That's a powerful kind of laughter, isn't it? Arrogant laughter, inspired by contempt, contempt inspired by indifference, indifference a defense against the artist's provocation. I went home and started reading about Schiele, and in my own arrogant fashion I decided I could write a novel about him. (Morrow)

Earlier in the interview, Scott notes the complete randomness in choosing a subject, and that one must be ready to notice coincidence. The moment above is recreated in the novel and related from the point of view of the young girl who ran away to Schiele's cottage, but now, as an elderly woman, in America. During a visit to an art show at a New York gallery with her adult nephew, she notices a couple, who “paused in front of a series of self-portraits by Egon Schiele, and their laughter came abruptly, the man's first, as though the woman had reached over and pinched him. ‘Would you let this guy shine your shoes?’ the man drawled, and the woman hooked her arm around his, giggles stupidly, and pulled him into the next room” (Scott *Arrogance* 192). The woman's response and

experience of this scene is layered and complicated. She feels immediate disdain toward the couple for their dismissal of Schiele's art, art the woman holds high and dear; she feels confronted again by the specters of Schiele and Vallie, running away to their house in Neuelengbach, which provokes a long stream of memory; she feels in on a secret she shares with Schiele, that what is missing from the exhibition is the scandalous portrait of her, burnt in the courtroom by Schiele's judge. The locus of Scott's text is intricately tied to this moment, and the multiple thoughts and feelings it conveys.

Schiele's Artistic Transgressions

Egon Schiele's painting and life as an artist is a transgressive turning point in Austrian art in the early twentieth century. Schiele is also the only artist in the history of Austria to be jailed for his art. What is immediately striking about Schiele's portraits are the contorted poses of the figures, represented in multiple guises. Bodies are gnarled in writhing agony, or at rest with long, skeletal fingers splayed in strange positions. The self serves as a major locus of creativity, and in numerous self-portraits Schiele depicts his body as twisted, in many different, inchoate poses, both naked and clothed. Facial features are shown in pained agony—as in *Grimacing Man* (Self-Portrait), 1910)—thoughtful concentration, frustration, curiosity, or insouciant disregard. In *Self-Portrait with Brown Hat* (1910), the artist appears bemused, with scarecrow contortions on a pale face with rosy cheeks. According to Christian Bauer, Schiele's "path to his art of expression included absorbing numerous medical perspectives that dominated the zeitgeist of Vienna around 1900" (47). Schiele witnessed first-hand the effects of syphilis on his father; he was interested in X-ray technology and other forms of cutting-edge

medicine. In 1910, the gynecologist Dr. Erwin von Graff, “allowed the young artist to make studies in the nude of women in advanced pregnancy, newborn babies, stillborn babies, and sickly young girls” (27). A key influence on Schiele’s facial expressions included the academic discipline of physiognomy, “namely the Bertillon system that was adopted for the modern police photo” (53). Another influence, mostly underexplored, is Schiele’s visit to a 1908 exhibition at Galerie Miethke of two artists: Hermann Haller and Max Mayrshofer. Mayrshofer’s paintings, according to Christian Bauer, were, “in all likelihood, the first portrayal of patients of a mental hospital in fin-de-siècle Vienna” (55). The “bedlam series” shows “persons with sweeping, expressive gestures, and grotesquely excessive facial expressions” (58). This experience helped formulate Schiele’s practice and draws attention to the transgressive nature of the work being created and experienced, depicting and displaying individuals on the fringes and outside of society. Schiele’s “new aesthetics of ugliness, which, ultimately, became the new beauty of modern art. Schiele’s brilliant achievement lies in his making no determination regarding the medical condition or state of health of the portrayed” (60). Schiele’s transgressive portraits practice this aesthetics of ugliness, a style of painting that better captures individuals in all of their various guises. Schiele’s art studies, defiance and ambition, alongside the burgeoning friendship with Gustav Klimt, set the stage for his career.

In 1909, Schiele founded the artists group, *The Neukunstgruppe* (New Art Group) to protest the Academy’s conservative attitude, with the underlying tenet of “carving out opposites to the art world, focusing it on the antipodes of ‘young against old,’ and equating old with the teaching methods of the academy” (42). A main reason this group

was formed was the threat of expulsion for certain individuals from the academy, based on different views of form and expression from their teachers. The group, “From a strategic perspective...created a rebel image that formed an important element in the pattern the artists made” (43). Permanently undergoing changes, the group adhered to no set program, no formal criteria, and no procedure for joining or leaving. Schiele’s art, initially, was met with befuddlement, perplexing reactions, and downright scorn. Adalbert Franz Seligmann wrote that Schiele “used his unusual skills exclusively to produce terribly mannered, perverse caricatures” (qtd in Bauer 57). On a positive note, Arthur Roessler comments that Schiele’s art is “monological, and from a certain point of view demonomaniacal. Many of his images are the materialization in a darkened consciousness of dazzling apparitions. Behind the warm life of the blood he senses destiny whispering and gives this feeling a palpable expression of almost pious naivete” (qtd in Gaillemain 43). F. Seligmann, in a review of an exhibition from 1912, remarks, “Egon Schiele’s cruelly fantastical caricatures are ghostly lemurs with bleeding, spider-like fingers, mutilated or half-decayed corpses which look as if they are being viewed in a distorting mirror” (145). At the time of his death, Schiele had become a well-known artist, and posthumous reviews of exhibitions assured his place in the canon. A. Friedmann, in 1918, notes that a “number of his portraits...show astonishing insight and force in their rendering of character.... It should be said again that what places Schiele head and shoulders above all other artists is the quality of his drawing” (147). And Werner Hofmann, in a 1985 review, draws attention to Schiele’s singularity of portraiture, particularly self-portraiture: “it is clear that it bears the stigmata of a painful mortification by which the body is viewed as one huge wound. Thus, the recognition of the flesh

acquires a new dimension of accusation; its sorrowful symbolic language becomes witness to the social taboos, which the artist knows he is in the habit of breaking” (149). What is interesting about Hofmann’s points are the indications of Schiele’s transgressive art, actions, and style. Though his art was often shocking, Schiele’s project was not simply to shock; his practice was a complicated, transgressive undertaking of painting and being. Similarly, the project of Joanna Scott’s text is not simply to portray the artist, but to look at the composition and relationships through many different stages. The fractured narrative coupled with abrupt breaks in both time and point of view mirror Schiele’s twisted, contorted portraits. Scott’s narrative writhes and seethes with gnarled individuals on the margins, locating art and pleasure as the reasons for living. These notes are integral for an opening view of Schiele’s composition and sets the stage for the multiple descriptions of his work in Scott’s novel.

The Girl’s Portraits of Schiele and Vallie

Schiele’s aura, coupled with his bohemian lifestyle, works as foreground to the actual encounters with the paintings from both the narrator and the girl’s point of view. The girl hears of him, his name a scandalous warning on the tips of the townfolks’ tongues; the gossip and rumors also work as enticement. The encounter between the girl and Schiele, a running thread throughout the text, serves several disparate purposes. The young girl is feverishly influenced by the freedom and devil-may-care attitude exhibited by Egon and Vallie; this, in turn, makes the young runaway want to become an artist, to live this lifestyle by capturing and following her interlocuter’s footsteps. The influence of Schiele can be gleaned from the recollection of her flight from home, and the distorted,

expressionistic, painterly descriptions used to convey feeling and flight. She mentions running away and walking: “I walked—for the first time in my life, it seemed—simply for the sake of walking.... I sat on the side of a canal, skimming my heels over the surface, my thoughts traveling a twisted course” (12). The word twisted is integral in this description in that it conveys the thoughts, the being of the girl at the present, and also depicts many of Schiele’s actual figures in his portraits, as well as Schiele’s and Vallie’s peripatetic existence. The reason for her flight is relayed through a criminal description of neglect for a daughter’s duty: “I had run away from home because I had ambition and didn’t want to waste my life caring for an invalid mother, squandering my youth in a sickroom” (13). The mother’s physical pain and specter of familial duty cause the girl to flee; the physical pain experienced by the mother and subsumed and articulated by the girl also mirrors the physical pain of contorted bodies in much of Schiele’s painting. The girl’s difficult familial relationship mirrors Schiele’s troubled youth, and the sickness of her mother echoes the agony Schiele witnessed with his father’s slow decline from syphilis, and the family’s many hardships. The location of the girl’s project in the text and the fact that she begins Scott’s novel is key in illustrating her importance. Her place as narrator also locates her as the focal point who views Schiele and starts to construct her portrait of him.

The girl’s agency leads to the idea that she uses and influences Schiele and Vallie as much as they attempt to use and influence her. Looking back on the night of escape, the girl recalls:

But on the night I slept in the school garden, I reached a pinnacle of contentment, a delicious freedom earned from exhaustion. I still remember that night vividly:

I lay on my back watching the stars, and as the evening wore on the flux of things increased, the sky throbbed and rocked above me, the limp asparagus shoots began to tremble, the earth itself seemed to tip, and soon, despite the cold, the precipitant motion put me to sleep. (13)⁷³

Here, the language used to describe this event is sexual and creative, learned and bombastic. It is important to note these recollections are told from the girl's point of view as a much older woman, looking back on this tumultuous period. As earlier, the language mirrors and mimics Schiele's bombast while incarcerated, and during many other moments of his creative expression. The girl has a premonition in a dream of her first meeting with the artist, with Vallie serving as equally important: "At my head, Egon Schiele himself. I knew little about the couple, except that they were renting a cottage in Au...the people resented them because they lived openly in sin, and the artist invited their young daughters to model for his lewd drawings: (14). The couple works in numerous ways: they serve as figures of mystery, romance, as living the artist lifestyle; they serve as a guide for the young girl, and, upon waking, she relates, "I wanted to find them and thank them for saving my life" (15).

These initial thoughts work as a base for the girl's interactions with the couple and with Schiele's painting. Hearing stories from neighborhood women, entreaties

⁷³ There are numerous moments throughout the text that linger on the sensuous, blissful feelings—the *jouissance*—experienced by the girl, by Egon's younger sister, Gertrude (Gerti), and on Vallie, particularly in the multiple, detailed descriptions of Vallie eating sweets, wanting, lusting after sweets, and drinking.

forbidding their daughters to visit the couple, the girl sets out to introduce herself. Having spied on Schiele, she knows the spots he likes to wander to and paint. The fact that the girl is already spying and watching the artist reconfigures their relationship before it even begins, lending a criminal element from her perspective. Obviously, Schiele has an upper hand; however, the girl appears to dictate the terms and conditions of their relationship, coming and going, and even setting up camp in their cottage when Egon and Vallie want her to leave. Approaching Egon unaware, she “studied the charcoal sketch in silence, and then I cleared my throat and commented on the visionary quality, the absorbing depth of the landscape” (27). Schiele ignores her and her goal of “hoping that he would perceive my inner melancholy and find me an inspiration” (27). Eventually Schiele addresses her; however, she remains silent, recalling through interior monologue how “[h]e spoke of his own art as if it were a mechanical invention that would change, fundamentally, irreversibly, the way we live in the world” (28). Her reaction is equally cool and self-transforming: “His vanity intrigued me. I would have liked to feel such confidence. Right then I decided that I too would become an artist” (28). Intrigued is a curious description in that it illustrates the main reaction of the girl running throughout the text. Schiele inspires a searching, an active change in the girl. And though she does not become a painter, she does, in fact, become an artist through her expressionistic recreations of her journey, people, and events, through her memory and retelling of these encounters and events.

The major influence Egon and Vallie have on the young girl is her outlook on life, and hope for something strange and different. What typifies her recollections of the encounters are similar to Schiele’s style of painting: feverish, edgy, helter-skelter,

disembodied; however, underneath these exteriors lurk self-doubt coupled with megalomania, alongside an iron purpose of vocation. These whirling impressions and the reverse portraiture of Schiele and Vallie make the young girl, if not the sole protagonist of Scott's text, an equal partner with the other narrator and Schiele and Vallie, who are given speech through third person. At a later point in time—1923—the girl, now a woman married to the owner of a bookstore, stumbles upon a new release, Arthur Roessler's version of Schiele's diary: "I picked up the thin book and turned it over in my hands as if it were a letter to me that I didn't want to open, a letter from a forgotten lover—as indeed it proved to be, a letter from Neulengbach's unwanted artist published for my indiscriminate eye" (114). This moment, like the later moment when she is in the museum looking at Schiele's work, brings a flood of memories. The locus of these memories hinge on the artist's time spent in prison, the portrait he paints of her, and the criminal depictions of this time through his watercolors. Whereas the text spends integral moments on Schiele's incarceration, narrated by an equally morose and playful speaker, it is through the swirling encounters and recollections of the girl, where a symbiosis occurs, and her role as creator is brought to light.

An integral way to view the relationship between the girl, Schiele, and Vallie is through the lens of Michel Serres's *The Parasite* (1980). Traditionally in art, and in the *künstlerroman*, the artist is viewed as supreme creator, one who takes, exploits, and feeds off those around; individuals, it is assumed, gravitate and cling to the artist, hoping for a semblance of attention and power. Serres's complex notion of the parasite⁷⁴ is not simply one who sucks the life from the other, larger, more powerful being—the host. Serres

⁷⁴ In French parasite means simultaneously a biological parasite, a social parasite, and static (noise).

argues that the relationship between the host and parasite becomes interdependent, they are fused with one another and a symbiosis is formed. The parasite acts as one who disturbs not simply a meal but a way of life, complicating and problematizing a singular system. Serres notes that both host and parasite equally feed off the other, without initially offering anything tangible in return. With this act, new relationships are formed, and new systems are constructed and lived in.⁷⁵ Schiele's seemingly stable system of art production, of being viewed as a deviant phenomenon who lives in scandal, albeit contained and at a distance, is disrupted and complicated by the arrival, the watching / noting, the refusal of the girl to leave, and, ultimately, when the police come calling. Through her skulking gaze, and her later recollections, her own creation illustrates Serres's notion of the parasite writ large. And this relationship troubles the predominant view of Schiele and his artwork as well. The scandal, at the time, one can argue, actually works in Schiele's favor to drum up talk about the artist and work.

A moment of struggle and exchange is articulated between Schiele and the girl in their first physical encounter. Coming upon the artist in his house, the girl—as before—does not speak, she only observes. Schiele implores, ““Who sent you here?”” (96), which is met with silence; then he asks, ““What do you want with me?”” (96). Though she does not utter a word, she keeps her “eyes focused on his puckered nipples and the few strands of hair curled on his thin chest” (96). At this moment, the girl's gaze and description replicates a number of Schiele's practices in his paintings: the quick, darting focus on frayed, emaciated physicalities, and the catching of an individual as an aggregate of these things, almost a painterly synecdoche. Schiele becomes the one wanting something: ““At

⁷⁵ Serres focuses on the word *hôte*—used for both “host” and “guest”—and looks at how the relations of a parasite is one of *hôte a hôte*.

least tell me your name;" (97), and the girl sees this request as an affront, an "objectionable demand, reminding me of my identity again, when there should have been no facts, no names, no identities" (97). Schiele grabs her, but she exclaims to herself: "I was in control," and "He had held me so firmly, yet it had been so easy to escape" (97). This scene illustrates how the girl acts and becomes the reverse aggressor, and despite the fact Egon grabs her, she thinks, "But too quickly he released me" (97), as if wanting to continue this game. The girl disrupts Schiele's "normal" routine; he gets to paint her portrait, and this painting becomes the one the judge lights on fire in court.

Vallie's relationship with the girl mirrors Serres's notion of the parasite as well. Schiele's mistress is every bit as important to the girl's project as Egon is. Initially, a main feature of the parasite is that the one encroaching, at first, takes something or benefits from the host without giving anything back; however, Serres illustrates⁷⁶ that the host "counter-parasites" his or her guest, and that, ultimately, the status is blurry and in a state of flux so one can no longer determine who is the host and who is the parasite.⁷⁷ The parasite also reiterates and exemplifies distinct notions of criminality and transgression as well. The parasite, essentially, is one who steals / takes without asking, transgressing

⁷⁶ Serres uses the fable of the country rat and city rat to show how this relationship works. Traditionally, the fable is understood as articulating that a humble existence is preferable to a life of excess and danger, Serres argues that a different theme running through the fable is "dining at another's table": Serres notes, "The tax farmer is a parasite, living off the fat of the land: a royal feast, ortolans, Persian rugs. The first rat is a parasite; for him, leftovers, the same Persian rug.... At the table of the first, the table of the farmer, the second rat is a parasite. He permits himself to be entertained in such a fashion, never missing a bite. But strictly speaking, they all interrupt: the custom house officer makes life hard for the working man, the rat taxes the farmer, the guest exploits the host" (3-4).

⁷⁷ James Burton and Daisy Tam note that "Serres is himself quick to admit that he is using words in an unusual way, and that from the perspective of scientific parasitology, rats, or hyenas, or humans who benefit at the expense of others are not parasites at all.... However, Serres refuses to privilege either such a scientific discourse *or* that of the fable: literary or fabricated applications of the term 'parasite,' he suggests, are not metaphorical uses of a scientific concept; rather, all of these discourses inherit their notions of parasitism from a shared origin.... The fable of the rats and the scientific understanding of a tapeworm alike entail, both in vocabulary and conception, an anthropomorphism belying their shared origins in this sphere of custom or habit" (105-106).

multiple boundaries of space, decorum, and action in the process; what is also transgressive is the idea of host as parasite, that this relationship is much more fluid and interdependent, and that the one who is initially parasited can, in turn, benefit or “get something,” albeit delayed. Attempting to take the girl back to her mother’s, Vallie instead proposes dinner and a night in a fancy hotel on Egon’s dime. Similar to Schiele’s physical interactions, Vallie “removed my hat pins, untwisted my hair, reached toward the top button of my blouse, then thought better of it and lay back” (234). Like Schiele before, Vallie is the one who speaks: “‘Trust me,’ she said. ‘You don’t trust anyone. You must learn to trust me.’ She slid the back of her hand along my cheek, just as the artist did the night he caught me peering through the window” (235). The girl’s silence holds power over Vallie like it does over Egon. Despite this power, there is a strong current of insecurity expressed by the girl: “No, I couldn’t trust him, I would never trust him. And I couldn’t trust her either. I was just a filthy, dull-witted peasant girl without a future” (235). What Egon wants from the girl, on the surface, is to replicate and interact with her in similar fashion as to other younger people in the village: as a model and fawning sycophant; Vallie, with an undercurrent of Sapphic desire, wants to care for, instruct, entertain and be entertained by her new, younger acquaintance. Vallie wants a partner in crime that mimics her behavior with Egon; however, she wants to be the one in control, guiding the relationship with the apparent upper hand. After this initial moment of self-doubt, the girl turns her expressionistic eye on Vallie Neuzil’s “naked torso as misshapen as a piece of wet clay pulled from either side. For this instant that the image existed whole in the window, before she pulled the nightgown over her head, I wanted to grab hold of it, to pull the reflection out of the glass” (235). The girl wishes to capture Vallie

in a still portrait, “I had wanted, I realized after she lay back again and the image disappeared, to catch the reflection, to keep this version of Vallie Neuzil with me forever” (236). She both does and does not. The girl “captures” Vallie in the recollection, but it can never be equal to the exact moment. In discussing Serres’s idea of the parasite, James Burton and Daisy Tam note “its productivity is to be found not in a direct return to those from which something is taken, but in its further passage elsewhere, or in the coexistence of multiple parasitic relations in which different agents play both host and parasite” (107). The girl wants things from Egon and Vallie and vice versa. Ultimately, through dining and talking Vallie gets a semi-willing participant in the girl. Egon paints her portrait that turns out to be the center of the Neulengbach Affair that leads to Egon’s temporary incarceration and further creation (and publicity). The girl receives interaction as well, and the expressionistic ability to reconstruct their remarkable lives together, and the moments of the text the reader engages.

The girl’s relationships with Vallie and Schiele are characterized through exchange and interactions. However, these interactions are much more diffuse than a linear, immediate exchange, or one of simple acting and being acted upon. Joanna Scott’s role in constructing the girl and the other, floating narrator, problematizes the otherwise straightforward reading and reaction to Schiele’s life and art. These relationships are paradoxical and extremely complicated; Serres notes a “parasite defends itself from being parasited” (131). Each side appears initially unyielding; layer upon layer of emotional, psychological, and philosophical subterfuge is at play. Serres exclaims: “The parasite intervenes, enters the system as an element of fluctuation. It excites it or incites it; it puts it into motion, or it paralyzes it. It changes its state, changes its energetic state, its

displacements and condensations” (191). This notion, coupled with Scott’s text, also problematizes the way one looks at Egon Schiele’s art in a contemporary setting.

Schiele’s art and exhibitions, at present, are mixtures of the criminal with transgression. In a recent exhibition I attended at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, entitled *Klimt and Schiele: Drawn*, a note, with the headline “Artists and Personal Conduct,” was displayed amidst Schiele’s art that reads in total:

Recently, Schiele has been mentioned in the context of sexual misconduct by artists, of the present and the past. This stems in part from specific charges (ultimately dropped as unfounded) of kidnapping and molestation. Schiele has long had a reputation as a transgressive at society’s edges.

That interpretation owes perhaps as much to the nature of his works—so often frank in their portrayals of the body and sexuality—as to elements of his biography, which, a century after his death, can be difficult or impossible to confirm or deny. Today’s discussions, however, speak powerfully to the complexity of each person’s experience of, and response to, the works and actions of the artist. And those discussions will continue to spark new research, interpretation, and critical dialogue, within museums and beyond. (Boston Museum of Fine Arts)

Adam Kirsch’s review of the exhibition takes the museum to task, stating the account of Schiele’s arrest and incarceration “minimizes Schiele’s culpability.... If Balthus’s ambiguous *Thérèse Dreaming* could recently become a subject for protest at the Metropolitan Museum, there is no reason why Schiele’s much more explicit drawings of children should escape controversy” (Kirsch). Schiele and Balthus are difficult,

somewhat impossible to compare, and work together in only the broadest sweeps; also, Schiele's exhibition and name has not gone without rumblings. Kirsch ends his review by stating that "[p]art of the purpose of exhibitions like 'Drawn' is to provide a contained environment in which such dangerous energies can be contemplated without being approved—a distinction upon which rests the very possibility of creating art" (Kirsch). An example of one of these portraits is *Sick Girl* (1910). In a review of Schiele's exhibition, *The Radical Nude*, at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, in 2014, Craig Raine zeros in on this portrait as the show's "greatest single work.... Its means are spartan in their restraint. It is primarily a drawing in black chalk with local colouring, beautifully judged. She is supine. Her hands are folded and raised to her mouth, masking it and hiding their own distracting detail" (57). Raine draws specific attention to the spare, singular details: "The gesture is almost prayer-like but equally anxious and simply tense. The simplification of the face is completely appropriate. The nose is too tiny, clean nostrils; the eyebrows are so fine they are nearly invisible; the expression in the black eye is heartbreaking, withdrawn, patient, waiting for things to improve, single-minded and self-absorbed" (57). *Sick Girl*, displayed at the Schiele/Klimt show in Boston, is the antithesis of Balthus. The girl's face is yellowish, gaunt; she looks like a phantom or a ghost; the body is emaciated, and the girl's hands are curved into her mouth as though seeking some form of agonized comfort. It is a ghastly / ghostly portrait capturing the essence of sickness, of physical pain, something Schiele knew and would come to know quite well, with his pregnant wife's death from influenza in 1918, and his death, from the same disease, three days later. Schiele's portraits and his rendering of individuals within the twisted throes of pain are powerful statements on the agonized body, statements that

supersede surface criticism that is concerned with who is being depicted. The goal in this chapter, though, is not to draw a jury and hold trial on Schiele's art, nor to vehemently defend his work against allegations,⁷⁸ but to further contextualize Joanna Scott's labyrinthine, troubling depictions of Schiele and all he touched through a transgressive rendering.

Scott's Transgressive Construction

William H. Gass, in his famous essay, "The Concept of Character in Fiction," discusses the construction of character, using a painting metaphor: "Characters in fiction are mostly empty canvas" (45). What Gass articulates in this essay is that characters are composites, bits of language, image, sounds, characteristics. Characters are fragments built by the writer, filled in by the reader, constructed, ultimately, of words.⁷⁹ "A

⁷⁸ Jonathan Jones, in a review of *The Radical Nude* exhibition, calls Schiele a feminist for the way he portrays women: "In Schiele's art, sex is beautiful, the body poetic. After all, he studied art in Sigmund Freud's Vienna. Schiele was born in Austria in 1890. In 1905, when the teenage Schiele was studying art in the imperial capital, Freud published *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. And it wasn't only Freud who celebrated sex in early 20th-century Vienna. Gustav Mahler was composing music that regularly collapses in exhausted post-coital luxuriance, while Gustav Klimt, Schiele's mentor, painted his golden rhapsodies of desire. Schiele, however, is different. Perhaps he saw these sensualist elders as slightly evasive liberals, all silk and no skin, for he is savagely direct. In his early drawings of the body, shown here, he ruthlessly exhibits the human form as a piece of flesh. Extreme angles, brutal croppings, twisted fingers and limbs, in his self-portraits as well as images of others, concentrate our eyes on the terrifying drama of physical existence. This art is atheist. Nothing is true for the artist except our own corporeal life. In one picture, he shows a newborn, naked and vulnerable. There is a desperation here." Jones, Jonathan. "Egon Schiele: The Radical Nude review—a feminist artist ahead of his time." *The Guardian*. 21 Oct. 2014. Another review describes the portraits as more perplexing, stating that "the fascinating point about Schiele's nudes of his sister, as of his mistresses and the prostitutes he later picked up in the street and persuaded to model for him, is how sympathetic they are. That they were the expressions of a young man with a very high sex drive cannot be doubted. They have an obsessive quality in their gaze that is totally masculine. And yet women—at least of my acquaintance—seem to find them entrancing, honest rather than lecherous." Hamilton, Adrian. "Egon Schiele: The Man Who Loved Women." *The Independent*. 23 May 2011. However, much has changed in the last few years that makes any definitive statement on Schiele's art, whether outright condemnation, or unabashed defense, problematic and in need of serious discussion.

⁷⁹ Gass looks at Mr. Cashmore from Henry James's *The Awkward Age* as "(1) a noise, (2) a proper name, (3) a complex system of ideas, (4) a controlling conception, (5) an instrument of verbal organization, (6) a pretended mode of referring, and (7) a source of verbal energy" (44).

character,” Gass notes, “first of all, is the noise of his name and all the sounds and rhythms that proceed from him” (49). What is interesting in Gass’s essay is how “character” and the notion of “character” is not relegated to individuals: “Characters are those primary substances to which everything else is attached” (49). Other things in texts can be characters: the white whale is a character; “[m]ountains are characters in Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*, so is a ravine, a movie, mescal or a boxing poster.... Character, in this sense, is a matter of degree, for the language of the novel may loop back seldom, often, or incessantly” (50).⁸⁰ Gass further explains his idea in the famous interview and argument with John Gardner. Gass explains “A character for me is a linguistic location of a book toward which a great part of the rest of the text stands as a modifier” (32). Gass’s explanation of character is worth looking to at length to illustrate and discuss many of Joanna Scott’s⁸¹ practices in *Arrogance*. Gass’s contentions, on the surface, are not dangerously transgressive, more of a fact of high postmodern aesthetics; however, Scott’s employment, and the very nature of these practices in *Arrogance*, lend a transgressive lens to how one views a text focusing on an artist. Scott further explores Gass’s project with an emphasis on “making” by quoting and speaking on a key moment

⁸⁰ Gass contends that the “idea that characters are like primary substances has to be taken in a double way, because if any thing becomes a character simply to the degree words of the novel qualify it, it also loses some of its substance, some of its primacy, to the extent that it, in turn, qualifies something else” (50).

⁸¹ In an interview with Bradford Morrow, Scott discusses Gass: “I’ve just been reading Elaine Scarry on this subject and my thoughts are in a bit of a flux about this. I find myself especially interested in the limits of the imagination. This is one of Scarry’s subjects in *Dreaming by the Book*. And William Gass has that brilliant essay, “The Concept of Character in Fiction,” in which he describes the way readers imagine a character. He points out that we can only imagine pieces of an image. When we’re reading fiction our imaginative involvement is so piecemeal, so circumscribed. As readers we participate in someone else’s dream. But there’s something about the broken quality of that dream that makes fiction unique. A character in *Anna Karenina* enjoys the cold air against her bare shoulder. Tolstoy is directing us to consider this single sensation, to imagine Kitty’s shoulder—only her shoulder. It’s such an effective moment because it is limited. The most memorable images of fiction stand out because they are surrounded by darkness.”

from the essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction”: “the task for a serious writer is twofold”:

‘He must show or exhibit his world, and to do this he must actually make something, not merely describe something that might be made.’ In his emphasis on making, Gass, is proposing that the meaning generated by a work of fiction goes beyond its mimetic familiarity. The purpose of an imaginative narrative isn’t to confirm what we think we already know about reality; rather, it offers ‘a record of the choices, inadvertent or deliberate, the author has made from all the possibilities of language.’

(Scott)

Whereas everything in *Arrogance* touches or is touched by Schiele, he is not simply the main character, or even the overarching protagonist in the text. Obvious other examples are the women mentioned and who will be looked at further in this chapter, particularly Egon’s muses: his mistress Vallie, and his younger sister, Gertrude. But there are many other “characters” and “elements” within the text constantly at work and influence: the prison cell where Schiele is housed and paints; the changing nature of art and aesthetics serve as characters as well. These characters are brought forth through myriad descriptions relayed by the floating narrator. Scott’s use of this narrative technique is both entrancing and beguiling. The floating narrator is unreliable, never to be trusted; however, the narrator relates many facts about Schiele’s life that do check out. This narrator both laughs at and mocks Schiele’s pretentious posturing at many times throughout the text, but also appears to hold his art and practice in high reverence. In a sense, Schiele is a god the narrator both worships and pokes fun at. In many ways, Scott’s

form in the guise of this narrator echoes Schiele's twisted, contorted shapes on display in his portraits.

In describing Schiele's art work and form, the narrator touches upon the idea of creation affected by and affecting individuals with whom the artist interacts. All of these people and work are intricately entangled and connected. The narrator hints at Schiele's practice and being, with a split description: "To be aware of the double nature of things and to use this knowledge to his advantage: this is Egon's style, and his obsession with cruelty has provoked condemnation" (53). However, the narrator continues, "But those who know him best understand that Egon is vulnerable, they see the fear in his eyes wavering like undulations of heat above a smokestack" (53). The narrator, here, also hints at an intimate relationship, that the narrator "knows" Egon "best," and that he is spurred on by a dual desire of self-belief, megalomania, and intense self-doubt. The leading Schiele art critic, Jane Kallir, notes this duality as well: "He [Schiele] is a self-confident dandy one day and a confused boy-man the next" (13). Egon's exploratory nature, according to Kallir, contains and battles with "the bittersweet, eternally insoluble duality of life and death" (13). This observation speaks to much of Schiele's practice and content, oscillating between grotesque portraits and self-portraits and more beatific arrangements. Again, this duality is hinted at when the narrator in *Arrogance* reveals Egon's inner thoughts: "he was a unique and accidental as a two-headed sheep, and like any freak must resign himself to being a spectacle? Martyrs, saviors, and emperors were spectacles, and Egon comforted himself by identifying with them," and the narrator continues, "but he felt even more affinity with the world's monsters—though he wanted to be admired for his honesty, it seemed inevitable that he would provoke only fear and

disgust” (186). The narrator illustrates Schiele’s neediness, his want of fame and admiration, alongside his self-loathing. Kallir notes that in many of Egon’s portraits and self-portraits, “fear and passion are expressed...in raw, unresolved form. All the confused emotions of adolescent sexuality are exposed in Schiele’s nude studies. Sex is seen to be painful and tortured, but also wondrous and enticing” (13). The narrator’s syntax and description capture these oscillations. Schiele’s form, his practiced duality, is articulated through thought, speech, and the construction of art. Scott’s telling, then, is equally exhilarating and maddening, crystal clear at moments, then quickly muddy and opaque.

The apparent transgression exemplified by Scott’s narrator, and rendered through Schiele’s paintings, focuses on the contorted, gnarled nature of bodies and landscapes in pain. After a long description of artists, frustration, and influence,⁸² the narrator describes Schiele: “Egon was a new artist, a new hunter using lines as his weapons, killing images in the world and smearing blood on his face” (213). Violence is spoken of; pain and suffering are modes of creation. These descriptions in the forming and practice of Schiele’s art further exemplify some of the notions William H. Gass alluded to in his notes on character. In *Arrogance* painting is a character that feeds and touches everything it encounters. A part of this transgressive aesthetic is built upon the notion of pain. Elaine

⁸² “Little men are too weak to be proud, Egon thought as he observed them, and so they are vain. He admired these artists—Klimt, Moser, Hoffman—who were dragging a reluctant Vienna into the twentieth century, yet they also frustrated him, and Egon would have liked to ask them to look through the binoculars at him so they would recognize his difference and his importance. He would lead Vienna beyond the twentieth century, beyond the Secessionists’ simple, logical lines and byzantine patterns. There were other alternatives to gaudy baroque than these rational designs. Van Gogh was an alternative. Hodler and Munch were alternatives. The Klimtgruppe valued these foreigners, but they didn’t worship them with sufficient reverence and were unwilling to revise their own styles in any radical way. Klimt even refused to paint his self-portrait. Egon had entered the art world of Vienna when he was young and tractable, easily influenced, and he considered pliancy not just a quality of youth but an advantage. ‘There is no new art,’ he had written in a draft of a manifesto for a show at Pisko’s gallery. ‘There are only new artists’” (213).

Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985)⁸³ examines the idea of pain's inexpressibility, how physical pain actively destroys language and simultaneously reduces sufferers to inarticulate cries and moans. Scarry focuses on torture and war as sites of conflict and how pain "unmakes," and how individuals can possibly move toward "making." If one thinks about Egon Schiele's portrait, *Sick Girl*, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, coupled with Scott's narrator's attempts at articulating Schiele's aesthetics, the attempt at representing pain comes to the surface. This idea also pushes the duality mentioned further into other realms of representation as well. Physical pain touches and defines many of the women in *Arrogance* as well. The young girl runs from the contorted figure of her sick and dying mother to experience more of life. She asks about her sick mother: "Why did the frail, bludgeoned form cling to life...?" (Scott 52). Once Egon marries Edith Harms, his mistress, Vallie, becomes a nurse caring for soldiers suffering from extreme physical scarring and pain. Considering Scarry's three notions of "making"⁸⁴ Scott's and Schiele's project can be further explored. This lens, however, is not an all-encompassing view of either Schiele or the text, nor is it an attempt at a

⁸³ Scarry's important text hits and references several of my concerns, particularly criminality in terms of the courtroom, as well as liminal spaces in pain existing in-between two thoughts. Scarry mentions the difficulty in expressing physical pain; she mentions that "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (4). It exists in another, separate, liminal space. Scarry also mentions one arena where physical pain begins to enter language as "the courtroom," when someone has been viciously injured and must recount through testimony. This lends to the idea of criminal.

⁸⁴ "First, the phenomenon of creating resides in and arises out of the framing intentional relation between physical pain on the one hand and imagined objects on the other, a framing relation that as it enters the visible world from the privacy of the human interior becomes work and its worked object. Second, the now freestanding made object is a projection of the live body that itself reciprocates the live body...it will be found to contain within its interior a material record of the nature of human sentience out of which it in turn derives its power to act on sentience and recreate it. Third, as is implicit in the overlay of the first two statements, the created object itself takes two different forms, the imagined object and the materialized object that is, 'making' entails the two conceptually distinct stages of 'making-up' and 'making-real'" (280).

physical / psychological explanation for the work; instead, it adds another layer of thought and inquiry to the complicated project and practice in Scott's text.

Pain is also a huge impetus in how Schiele depicts individuals in portraits within Scott's text. Throughout Schiele's life he encountered and dealt with the physical suffering of those closest to him; as mentioned, his father's syphilis wracked the family, and there were numerous miscarriages before Egon and his two sisters came along. While caught in the influenza epidemic of 1918, Egon witnesses and records the death of his wife and their unborn child: "Edith's throat became inflamed before Egon could even begin to make arrangements.... Now he had only to fill his sketch pad with illustrations of the dying Edith Schiele, biding time until it was his own turn" (Scott 255-256). The narrator focuses on Egon's last drawings before his death, three days after his wife, experiencing and contemplating the physical suffering and deaths of those close to him. The narrator imagines Schiele imagining his unborn child who will soon die: "he focused again on the family portrait—his family—smearing the brush with flake white,⁸⁵ paling the child's face with impasto strokes" (254). Egon's goal in fixing, depicting his unborn son alive in a painting is to "make" a portrait of a family that will never be: "His child would never feel his father's agony.... The infant would serve as the father's recantation, an admission that Egon could conceive of joy, despite his obsession with pain" (254). The narrator in *Arrogance* assumes this portrait, *The Family* (1918), is about Egon's actual family and a rendering of Egon and Edith's unborn son. The painting shows a naked Egon with a greenish-blue hue to his face; his forehead wrinkled, and an overall look of exhaustion haunts his bent, contorted frame. Edith, also naked, looks downcast,

⁸⁵ White, often a yellowish-white, is used to depict many of Schiele's sick, ghostly subjects.

anguished, her face jutting off to the side. Both Egon and Edith are crouching; his legs spread seeming to encompass both wife and son; the child is sickly white, clutching his hands together in preparation of pain. Jane Kallir, however, notes that the “painting was completed before Edith learned of her pregnancy.... This is not a depiction of a real relationship.... Only the self-portrait is truly animated; the other two figures are wholly symbolic” (161). The narrator’s presence throughout *Arrogance*, the oscillating jumps through time and space are showcasing Schiele’s development and relationship to craft, revolving, in many instances, around the artist’s relationship to physical pain. The jagged, contoured bodies; the ghostly, spectral presence of illness, like those depicted in *Sick Girl*, are practices and attempts to capture and to “make.” Before Schiele succumbs to influenza, the narrator reflects on the artist’s lifelong project: “He tried to depict authentic emotions in his art, he tried to be honest, yet the finished images were always dangerously different, presenting not the man he was but the broken man he would become” (255). These “pieces,” “images” relay Gass’s idea of character and further showcases art and practice as a major character at work in the text. For the narrator, Schiele’s distorted depictions are phantoms, grasped loosely before slipping away.

The theme of transgression, breaking with tradition and forging a new artistic aesthetic, are keys to the narrator’s depiction of Schiele’s art. This thought is illustrated through the narrator’s attention to Egon’s mode of looking and seeing things in a different way. After purchasing a pair of binoculars, Egon’s vision is heightened and distorted: “With his binoculars Egon could even see the crumbled ash. There were secrets in the cigar ash—secrets of greed and impotence” (214). Things and places take on a new, tactile quality: “There were secrets in the granite blocks of the building—chips, ruts,

cracks in the mortar” (214); and people are seen differently: “And there were even secrets in the beard of the worn old man.... The binoculars showed Egon how the reflexes of the city were constrained by secrecy, by guilt, they revealed damaged skin and stone, gray hair and paunches” (214-215). The focus of these descriptions draws attention to the physicality depicted in Schiele’s paintings and the many secret spaces and places at work throughout the novel. These visions lead Egon to ultimately think that “an artist should toy with the most dangerous taboos but he must never let himself be distracted from his art” (220). Scott’s narrator, however, is not simply focused on Schiele’s practice, acts, law breaking, and relaying his story. If the narrator’s main goal was to render Schiele’s life the book would neatly fit within the traditional mode of *künstlerroman*; instead, the narrator’s highly stylized, dizzying portraits work as many of Schiele’s painting do: disorienting, frustrating, giving one a glimpse before pulling it away.

The narrator uses the material from Schiele’s life, molding and manipulating it to fit the aims of the narrator: a portrait of Schiele painted by the narrator equal and always distorted, sick, gaunt, and triumphant. This is one of the reason’s Scott’s text is difficult to talk about and categorize. There is a tremendous amount of activity at work; just as the narrator describes Schiele’s aesthetics as grasping and slipping, as trying to construct a form from many jagged, disparate pieces, the narrator mimics this in voice and construction. This practice has frustrated critics who have thus far engaged with *Arrogance* wholly on a surface level. The narrator has access to all of Schiele’s thoughts, many horrible, grave, and many poke fun and lightheartedly mock the artist: “But in recent months he had become something shat by the devil” (188); “Yes, Egon has given them his semen to drink, pure, undiluted semen. And to be undiluted in Vienna is to be

unwanted, shunned, deliberately ignored” (197); “He hung like a limp carcass from the man’s claws, secretly proud of his own apathy...his hatred so immense he began to relish the emotion” (21); Also, the narrator comments on Egon’s propensity for self-description, gazing: “he finds himself drawing the line that will become the edge of his face in yet another self-portrait” (27); and hyperbolize thoughts of creation: “he imagines how he would slit open the bellies of the swans and extract the bloody pulp and glue it onto cardboard matting” (29). The narrator’s view and descriptions of Schiele is equal to, and many times surpasses Schiele’s art and outlandish attitude. The narrator is both serious and playful, austere and effusive. Many of these sections are littered with exclamation points to drive home exaggerated statements, and also filled with many imploring questions that poke and tease Schiele, especially during his trial and brief imprisonment: “What if Egon resists when the guards try to drag him from the courtroom after the judge has sentenced him to prison? What if he snatches the gavel and with one powerful strike splits the judge’s bald head wide open” (198). The narrator takes this parlor comedy a step further: “Then one of the guards will be forced to shoot Egon Schiele. With any luck, a photographer will be present to take a picture of Egon Schiele’s bloody, bullet-pocked body slumped over the rail of the defendant’s box” (198). Here, the narrator is not only in full, manipulative control, but has equally run wild and amok. The repetition of the artist’s full name—“Egon Schiele”—draws attention to his narcissistic self-gaze exhibited by Schiele’s countless self-portraits; in many ways this last description is the ultimate self-portrait. Earlier, poking fun again, the narrator relates, “And now, ever more then he needs little girls, our hero needs watercolors, black chalk, oils, canvas, pencils, paper, India ink. He needs absolute silence and natural light” (34). This constant

oscillation between funereal gravity and insouciant levity captures the artist's practice of creation: he seems simultaneously to want to be the high priest of art and its court jester.

The apotheosis of the narrator's transgression takes place with an imagined homosexual encounter between Egon Schiele and a tongueless goatherd. This scene fixes Egon in a vulnerable portrait where he physically clings to another in hope of alleviating fear, anger, and loneliness. The description of Egon is eerily similar, again, to many of his paintings:

He woke curled on his side and as he reached inside his trousers to comfort his cramped, stiff penis he heard a shuffling noise nearby....

Squatting on his heels a few yards from Egon was one of the Gypsies he had been searching for—a Gypsy, a goatherd, it didn't matter who he was or what he did, at that moment nothing mattered except the boy's exquisite manila skin and windblown hair, his slight frame, the long fingers intertwined, the wide-set crescent eyes focused on Egon's crotch. (85)

There are many similarities to this description and characteristics from Schiele's portraits: the crouching figure; manila skin; windblown hair, long fingers. Egon kisses the receptive goatherd and as he runs his tongue inside the stranger's mouth he notices no tongue. Egon begins to fellate the goatherd, according to the narrator, to show "what a tongue could do" (86). After this dazzling scene, described as a "strange dream," Egon falls asleep and wakes to find that "he was alone again—the nameless mute had disappeared forever, leaving nothing behind, not a strand of hair, not a red slipper, not a patch of dried semen on Egon's chin" (87), and Egon wonders what "he despised more: the tongueless boy, the memory, or the darkness" (87). This unsettling scene nearly leaps

from the text, becoming its own entity, creating a completely different world. The speaker, in depicting this apocryphal adventure, is practicing many complicated things with character, history, and narration. The narrator is layering Schiele as though constructing a multifaceted portrait that is equally beautiful and frightening. This painterly approach in form transcends strict historical reportage, giving free-reign to wild imaginings and juxtapositions. There is, however, an actual connection with Schiele's art. There are a handful of Schiele portraits that depict same-sex encounters amongst women; a few famous examples are *Reclining Girls Embracing* (1911), *Two Nudes Embracing* (1911), and *Two Women* (1915); these show women's bodies contorted and intertwined in distorted, sharp angles. There are no depictions of men embracing in Schiele's oeuvre. However, *Double Self-Portrait* (1915) shows two Egon Heads reclining in the crook of one another, one with a wane expression, the other an angry, disconcerting face. *The Hermits* (1912) portrays Schiele being clutched by a sickly-looking Gustav Klimt, but this portrait illustrates more a passing of the guard than any sexual connotation. This scene in *Arrogance* is so riotously disconcerting, so different that it could be read as flipping over and complicating some of Schiele's paintings of women; it can be read as Schiele's narcissism and self-love manifest in a strange, auto-masturbatory hallucination with a figure seemingly dropped from the sky; it is also the narrator out-Schieleing Schiele, with a narratively wondrous imagining that is at once predatory, frightening, odd, comical, tender, memorable, and excessive.⁸⁶ According to Georges Bataille, "excess" is simultaneously an adjective of the abhorrent but also the scared, symbolic,

⁸⁶ Georges Bataille's *Visions of Excess* and the notion of "excess" is a helpful way to read this scene. Based off Bataille's notion of heterology/heterodoxy (of the other), which dwells at the limits and abides in the marginal and the outcast, it lingers in the non-discursive and the often ignored.

erotic, and the luxurious. There are many ways to look at this moment, but at its base is the notion of transgression illustrated by the narrator and enacted by Schiele. At this moment, the narrator's transgression is going beyond what is both depicted in Schiele's art and his life. Instead of Schiele pulling the strings and placing willing participants in a *danse macabre*, the narrator is in full control. This scene, occurring relatively early in the text, coupled with the focus on women's points of view, further illustrates their importance to Schiele's life and development. Many of the moments articulated at length are not drawn from Schiele's interior thoughts and actual painting, but from others, most often the women who are the subject of his work.

Transgressive Women and Criminal Spaces

The criminal, transgression, and liminal spaces are intricately tied to Egon Schiele's interactions with women in the text. These interactions are shaped and defined by various liminal spaces at work. Having focused on the young girl at length and her central role in Schiele's life in the text, I want to return to her as an opening for this last section. Looking at Schiele's diary, the girl (now an older, married woman), comes across a troubling phrase by the artist: "I, by nature one of the freest, bound only to the law which is not that of the masses" (115). Intrigued at first, she thinks:

What law did he mean? "One of the freest," he wrote, asserting his birthright as iconoclast, as rebel, when the very phrase "by nature" suggests the worst prison, the kind that lures the moth into the flue of a lamp or a lemming into the sea. The surest truth is silence. A blank page.

An empty cell. Not a cell with Egon Schiele inside, his “place of the damned,” as he called it. (115).

She draws attention to Schiele’s habit of attracting willing models for his work; she also illustrates how she has occupied a separate place—both drawn toward and able to hold back. She also frames Schiele’s transgression and reinterprets it to fit her life. This scene of reading whisks her back to the courtroom, the trial, and has her teetering between keeping the secret of their relationship and sharing the story with her husband: “I would tell him about the artist and his mistress and how I had run away from home when I was fifteen.... Of course I wouldn’t have told my husband everything” (117). She never tells him, yet what she is alluding at and concealing is what transpired in the Schiele cottage and inside the courtroom. This scene though brought about by Schiele’s diary, and based on the relationship with the artist, is recovered and framed through the girl’s point of view. Whereas Schiele is the center of the drama in court, and through his art, the girl’s recollection of events places her feelings front and center. After the judge burns Schiele’s portrait of the girl,⁸⁷ she thinks: “So the sacrifice pleased all—the judge, the prosecutor, the public, the criminal—all except for me, the girl in the coffin” (267). Thinking intensely of this moment, the girl contemplates, “And had I lost? In a sense, I had watched myself die and had felt something akin to terror as the portrait burned. The drawing had made it possible for me to laugh; without me it would have never existed” (267). Because of this specific moment in the courtroom the girl, many years later,

⁸⁷ “‘You claim you are an artist, sir?’ the judged whispered, his voice the only sound in the room, the words sputtering like hot grease. ‘This is what we think of your art.’ With that, he lit a match and held the flame steady while he lowered the sketch. The bottom of the paper arched away from the match, fire crept along its edge. Egon Schiele’s eyelids drooped in sulky resistance, but his lips curled as the paper burned until he looked quite pleased, his self-possession fueled by the flame” (267). This detailed description attests to the girl’s power of looking, of describing.

decides to write and record this transfixing narrative that has haunted her: “Perhaps it strikes you as odd, then, that after all these years I have taken it upon myself to tell the story behind the drawing that the judge of St. Pölten destroyed on May 8, 1912.... Since they [Egon and Vallie] are long dead, it is up to me” (267). The liminal space of the courtroom affects both Egon and the girl in multiple, different ways. There would be no “text,” no narrative without this pivotal moment in the girl’s life; similarly, there would be no notorious Egon Schiele without the criminal actions swirling around this moment in time. This frame is important for looking at the trial, Schiele’s brief imprisonment, and the art that landed him there.

The girl’s thoughts, impressions, and reactions are what frames Schiele’s trial, and how events are relayed to the reader. The girl, who tangentially is the cause of the case, watches and fixes Schiele on the stand: “His eyelids were covered with a buttery crust...he had a canker on the side of his mouth” (265). These grotesque descriptions mirror the portrait of the girl drawn by Schiele. In a sense, this is her portrait of the artist. Her role at the trial is watcher and curious onlooker; she feels not pity, sorrow, anger, or hope in anything that transpires: “There must have been others in the crowd who had come to support the artist, wondered about their relationship to him wondered whether they believed in him as passionately as he believed in himself” (265). Here, as throughout the greater part of the text, her attitude is curious, searching. Her feelings quickly turn to anger, rage, and loss when the judge burns one of Schiele’s offending pictures, which turns out to be her portrait. The culmination of burning the portrait coupled with the girl’s relationship with Schiele, works as a kaleidoscopic *mise en abyme* throughout the text. There is a constant repetition, multiple reoccurring allusions to the burning of pictures,

and the girl's relationship to the artists, as though they are inextricably linked to one another and from the moment she meets him their lives are changed and forever altered. In many ways this device mimics Schiele's obsession with self-portraiture, and many of the reoccurring motifs in his artwork.

The portrait of the girl works as a fulcrum point in the narrative, defining her relationship to Egon Schiele and various spaces. The courtroom (and jail cell) work as in-between spaces in that the artist appears in limbo, his life is forever altered after incarceration and the trial. Homi Bhabha, in talking about "in-between spaces," mainly focuses on interactions between colonizer and colonized; however, if a part of this notion is applied to Scott's text, a more nuanced reading is experienced. Bhabha argues that "[w]hat is so graphically enacted in the moment of colonial identification is the splitting of the subject in its historical place of utterance" (66). Scott's play with history and narrative in *Arrogance* relates to these notions. There is an abrupt, political dance being enacted between the girl and Schiele in their movement through various spaces. These instances occur in the courtroom with the girl's description of events and how the artist is viewed and portrayed. A splitting also occurs within Schiele's cottage during and after the composition of the portrait. However, both the girl and Schiele are split and subsequently dissemble because of their interactions. Schiele's supposed role as artist and one on control is complicated by the girl's actions, point of view, and narrative.⁸⁸ What

⁸⁸ The girl occupies numerous "liminal spaces," spaces that appear to be working outside regulated boundaries, and / or working in many different ways at once—particularly in Egon's cottage as a model and trespasser, in the courtroom as a curious, invisible onlooker, and, most broadly, as a woman in early twentieth century Vienna. The girl resists and redefines many of these spaces through her being, actions, and narrative. Many feminist writers have talked explicitly about African American women and marginal spaces, some example include bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984., and recently in Ceron L. Bryant's articles, "Seeking Peace: The Application of Third Space Theory in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." *CLA Journal*, vol. 56, no. 3, Mar. 2013, pp. 251-266., and "(Re)Locating the 'Debil Woman': Using Orality for Transcendence and a Free 'In-Between' Space in Sherley Anne

Scott renders through the girl's memory is a stark juxtaposition in time and feeling between the girl—as an elderly woman in New York—and the girl at the moment of composition. Much later, as she notices the portrait missing from the exhibition in New York, she muses: “I tried to convince myself that though Egon Schiele had found his fame, I had the advantage over him. He had made it across the ocean, yes, but as a shoeshiner,⁸⁹ while I had escaped quietly, blending into the masses of immigrants” (192). The woman enjoys her anonymity, the fact she “escaped,” and views, if momentarily, Egon as one who did not, dying young, and seemingly trapped in his art. She is equally visible and invisible. These musings flood the woman's memory: “But even as I walked toward Broadway, the young girl I had been in Neulengbach walked with me” (192). This moment is a specific reference to the splitting taking place. The fact she mentions in name the town of “Neulengbach” is important on drawing attention to the cottage, Egon and Vallie, and the criminal elements swirling around their relationship, and specifically the portrait of her composed by Schiele:

During my first night in cottage forty-five, I had let Egon Schiele draw my portrait. Eyes closed, hands folded on my lap, I listened to the sound of pencil against paper and to Vallie Neuzil's pointed nails against her skin when she scratched her wrist. As the minutes passed I lost all sense of caution and unfastened the top two buttons of my blouse. With my eyes still shut I unfastened a third button, for I assumed this was what they

Williams's *Dessa Rose*.” *Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity*, vol. 16, no. 1, July 2015, pp. 1-10. The girl in *Arrogance*, even though she is “white,” because of her class and status as woman, moves as a secondary individual in the text and therefore can be looked at with some of these similar lenses.

⁸⁹ This note refers to the description of Schiele's artwork by two individuals in the text that opens this chapter.

wanted, but Egon Schiele kept working with indifferent ease, and every time I opened my eyes Vallie was adding spoonfuls of cocoa to her milk until the drink was the consistency of soft toffee. (193)

The narrative turn performed by the girl is practicing her vision of Egon and Vallie. She is the object of their attention and art, but what is accomplished through this narrative control is the turning back and looking at the artist and his mistress, placing them within the scene. The girl, initially, seems to be in control; however, she notes that her actions are what she expects Egon and Vallie to want.⁹⁰

The girl experiences equal feelings of power and violation as she first lays eyes on the portrait. Echoing an earlier scene during Egon's childhood, where his father burnt a portrait of the artist's sister, Gertrude, and also mimicking the judge eventually burning this very picture, the girl brought the drawings "near the grate of the stove and blew on the embers until they cast sufficient light. On the first sheet the artist had drawn various parts of the female anatomy—legs that were too narrow, armpits and sunken buttocks" (194). The girl is encountering Schiele's rendering of her and she is disoriented and disheveled. Then she looks at "the second sheet [where] he concentrated on a single sketch of the naked corpse of a girl packed into a coffin, her shoulders hunched forward, and her legs folded beneath her." Schiele had "sewn the lips shut with tiny slashes of a pencil, and her nipples were the same size as the coins over her eyes. With the fingers of both hands she pulled open the flaps of her vagina" (194). What is striking about the girl's reaction is that she thinks "the girl in the coffin looked nothing like me" (194), as

⁹⁰ Many of the girl's actions, in a distant way, practice some of what Homi Bhabha calls "sly civility" (*The Location of Culture* 132-144), in that the girl mimics and practices behavior from Egon and Vallie, at times acquiescing, but with the ultimate goal of getting something in return, and using some of these learned tactics against them, as in her "painting" through her descriptions of Egon and Vallie throughout the text.

though Schiele has failed to render her as she thought herself to be. This scene is integral to examine on many levels. As an echo of the courtroom, the cottage equally works as a liminal space where identities shift, are broken down and built up, and where power and narrative are jockeyed for. The girl initially trespasses, ensconcing herself within the cottage, and with Egon and Vallie's lives. She is hoping to gain a new, different, substantial identity from interacting with the two bohemians. Egon, as indicated in the text, is equally intrigued and distant. While the actual drawing is taking place, various identities are being carved and explored. Egon is depicting the girl how he sees her; the girl is expecting a different portrait. Here, the space/border of the picture adds another layer. The girl is dismayed, initially, at her rendering in the picture: "For a moment I considered feeding the drawings to the stove and fleeing the cottage" (194). Again, this echoes the burning motif running throughout except this moment illustrates the girl's willingness to engage with the art, even though she does not at first agree with it, and, in a sense, save the art. Thinking about this moment at the present, the girl, now an older woman, remarks, "Instead I decided to make a worthwhile portrait to replace the sketch by Egon Schiele" (194). Though the girl, at first, feels unchanged and let down by her interactions with Schiele and Vallie, ultimately, it is through her exchange with the portrait that spurs her on to attempt to create this narrative. The "portrait" the girl / woman mentions works as the many sections told from her point of view. Whereas Schiele "fixed" the girl in one image in the portrait he sketched, the girl now fixes Schiele in her narrative; however, both portrait and narrative, and all the individuals involved are blurred, slippery, and work in more ways than each person thinks. The text hints that Schiele would not be Schiele without the girl's intervention, her thrusting

herself into the lives of Egon and Vallie, the subsequent arrest and incarceration, and the burning of the portrait that brings scandalous notoriety to the artist. Similarly, the girl would not relate her “portrait” and narrative if not for encountering Schiele.⁹¹

Schiele’s Muses

The space constantly at work in the relationship between Egon Schiele and his younger sister, and first muse, Gertrude, defines and troubles the life of the artist. Strangely, in a text filled with women⁹²—their thoughts, hopes, desires, beliefs—it is easy to overlook the importance of Gertrude Schiele. Gertrude, or Gerti, as Egon affectionately calls her, works as both Schiele’s first partner-in-crime and coconspirator, his muse for many portraits that would define his early work; she is also a willing interlocutor on Egon’s quest for artistic immortality. In *Arrogance*, Gerti’s presence and influence are illustrated through her relationship with Egon in three distinct spaces: in their childhood home, where Egon begins to sketch, and where Gerti acts as first model, the environs and hotel room on a sojourn to Trieste the pair makes when Egon is sixteen and Gerti twelve, and, finally, the room in which Egon dies. In a family plagued by sickness and miscarriage, Egon and Gerti cling to one another, with their mother Marie commenting, “he and his younger sister are inseparable” (42). There hints of incest in the relationship when their father rips “a blanket away from his nine-year-old daughter, revealing her naked, hairless body splotted with red paint.... Adolph pulls his son

⁹¹ There are many moments in the text where the girl intricately relates her life and aims absent any mention of Schiele. For example, long passages explore her tumultuous relationship and flight from her sick mother, and subsequent interactions with her grandmother.

⁹² There are also long sections that focus on Egon’s mother, Marie, and her interior thoughts and desires as well.

roughly to his feet, scattering the colored pencils and the pile of failed sketches” (43). Adolph, in a fit of rage, succumbing to madness by the worsening syphilis, and the scandalous behavior of Egon, throws the family’s railroad bonds into the fire, thus destroying their future. This moment echoes the judge burning Egon’s portrait of the girl, and also Adolph’s earlier act against the young artist, when discovering Egon’s early self-portraits, the father “rolled the sheet into a narrow tube and thrust one end into the firebox of the stove, and puffed until the glowing edge flamed...with the other hand he rolled the next portrait and ignited it” (21). Egon, though initially upset, “felt an odd triumph, a smug, private, pleasurable surge of pride” (21). The space of the house, the liminal surroundings and combative atmosphere, drive Egon and Gerti even closer. This dangerous abode engenders both a recurrent blossoming of the young artist and his sister, as well as a constant state of frightened panic, of clinging to and wanting to please. In many ways the space of the house echoes the later space in the courtroom in that it works for Egon as a place where individuals judge him, condemn him, and where he learns self-belief and resistance.

Gerti’s control of the young artist is further illustrated through his constant seeking of both her attention and approval, first developed in the space of the house. Upon giving her some of his early self-portraits (the ones his father would burn), “she didn’t exclaim in wonder and admiration as Egon had hoped; instead...she began to laugh so heartily that she had to wipe spittle from the corner of her mouth” (20). This reaction crushes Egon. Unlike his silent swelling of inner triumph after his father burns his pictures, Egon is constantly seeking Gerti’s approval of his early work. At the close of

the text, this note is echoed, when on his deathbed, Egon thinks of childhood, his sister, and his early beginnings as an artist:

Even if he could never replicate the exquisite golds of the natural world, he could replicate his little sister. Sweet Gerti Schiele. Why hadn't he ever done Gerti's portrait?.... With pencils and watercolors and crayons he would put Gerti on paper, if she would consent to sit for him. Egon would teach her how to model. But would she be willing...? First he would have to convince her that art was worthy, then he would reveal how desperately he needed her. Without Gerti's admiration, his life had no meaning. (282)

These interactions are specifically fomented because of their proximity, and the riotous environment they are raised in. This long reverie also illustrates the importance of Gerti to Schiele's development of an artistic life. The text indicates that Egon's artistic beginnings and subsequent trajectory are because of Gerti's willing involvement and influence. This point complicates the idea of Gerti as passive portrait model and gives her the power in this complicated relationship, a relationship dictated from the common spaces they move in and inhabit. This power is especially evident on a joint trip Egon and Gerti take to Trieste when the young artist is sixteen and his sister twelve. Amid tumult at home, Egon wants to return to the place where his parents celebrated their honeymoon. The two siblings leave without permission, cloaking their flight in secrecy, traveling by train, another spatial locus of change. Once in Trieste, Gerti leads and Egon follows; the younger sister's attitude is characterized by insouciant teasing, cajoling, and withholding affection. Egon, on the other hand, sulks the whole trip, imploring his younger sister to

pose, wishing to grasp and pull her close.⁹³ In turn, Gerti takes on the adult role: “And Gerti, as though she were older than him, much older...did not question him at all.... She helped him move from the chair onto the bed, wiped his face with the loose cuff of her nightgown” (221). At this point Gerti takes on the role of caretaker, administering to Egon’s melodramatic moods as she “continued to stroke his back until the shuddering stopped and he lay still, not quite sleeping but drained of all despair” (221). The narrator further imbues Gerti with a preternatural power over Egon, “How wise and sensitive Gerti proved herself to be that night, respecting Egon’s emotion, demanding no explanation, no confession, sensing, somehow, that speech would destroy him” (221). Here, the artist appears delicate, in need of nursing and nurturing; Gerti, at twelve years old, illustrates both her maturity and importance to Egon’s tempestuous moods and ultimate calling as artist.

Gerti, though, does not simply revel in the role of helpmeet, but also illustrates her desires and carefree attitude in the constant playing of tricks on her older brother. These roles are illustrated through the strange space of the shared hotel room and the environs of Trieste. Whereas Egon wishes to recreate a structured familial environment, based on a lost / false dream of his parents’ courtship, Gerti constantly subverts and complicates his aims. Upon waking from a night of hysterics, Egon notices that “Gerti was gone” (222), having run off to play, leaving Egon alone. In another instance it is noted that Gerti “had brought her brother there to frighten him” (128). Gerti, being in a new environment, realizes different emotions, a stirring: “On this trip to Trieste...Gerti

⁹³ During the Trieste sections the narrator hints at Egon’s feelings of passion toward his younger sister: “And maybe exhaustion was the simple cause of what he would later refer to cynically as his Trieste fit. He felt so tired of life, unable to contain his criminal desires, exhausted by ambition” (221).

had realized that through the first twelve years of her life she had been deprived of a crucial emotion...the thrill of danger, that special panic a person feels when time comes close to stopping” (129). This integral realization showcases the importance placed on Gerti’s burgeoning identity and emotions; she is not simply like one of Egon’s passive models who pose silently and tends to the artist in one of his reveries, she is a unique individual, essential to Egon’s being and development. Gerti’s realization precipitates her ignoring Egon when he calls and also lends itself to a major role in one of her tricks. Gerti pretends to fall in the water outside their hotel room, Egon, in a panic, begins to shout her name until he sees “the pale, sluglike fingers on either side of the beam...the thin wrists disappearing into striped sleeves” (130). Egon, “astonished that his sister could be so cruel...wormed back toward shore, ashamed at the tears that came now that he knew she was safe” (130). The Trieste trip, alluded to and remembered in numerous flashbacks throughout the text, works as an integral space for Gerti’s agency and works to illustrate Egon’s debt to her.

This dichotomy remains intact until the end of Egon’s short life, as many of these early moments echo Schiele’s death bed scene, articulating how rooms and spaces have influenced and remained a large part of their lives. “Gerti” is what Egon screamed in Trieste when he was scared, and he echoes this shout of “Gerti,” on his deathbed in October 1918. After Egon’s pregnant wife dies from influenza, and suffering from the disease himself, the artist is left with his younger sister to care for him: “Gerti,” he cries, and she replies, “I am here, Egon. Try to sleep” (131). Gerti’s presence in the text is ubiquitous, and like the young girl who steals into Egon’s cabin, and the artist’s mistress, Vallie, Gerti’s presence is what fosters Egon’s talent. How Gerti interacts and influences

Schiele is specifically related to these in-between spaces and the multitude of identities experienced; this relationship extends to the in-between space experienced by Gerti in the many portraits Egon paints as well. In an instructive impressionistic encounter with Schiele's artwork, the French writer Patrick Grainville, in looking at Egon's *Nude Girl with Folded Arms* (Gertrude Schiele) 1910, remarks, "Perhaps it's this very blend of intimacy and mobility, this conspiratorial liberty which give birth to his desire to paint his sister in the nude" (22). Grainville further notes that "[d]uring the same period Schiele paints himself in his sister's likeness. This produces his most intense, his most secret portraits. A naked man emaciated, emasculated, with a bony, scarlet body" (23). However, Grainville exclaims, "But he has a girl's breasts. This hermaphroditic theme is repeated several times. Egon and Gerti merged in their red androgyny" (22). The portraits of Gerti are troubling and transcendent. Egon's self-portraits⁹⁴ that Grainville alludes to are equally disconcerting. In many ways these portraits are beatific, looking at both individuals as immortal, god-like figures. The artist, through these self-portraits, appears to fuse his body with his sibling's in a strange, macabre dance of flesh. Jane Kallir remarks that Gerti remained one of Egon's "principle models throughout 1910, in part because she did not have to be paid, but also in part because the artist found her sexuality comparatively unthreatening. The turned-head gesture so common in Schiele's nudes from this time suggests a pervasive reluctance to confront the female personality" (59). A predominant view holds Gerti as passive recipient of Egon's artistic gaze and aesthetic advances; however, *Arrogance* complicates this notion throughout the text. Gerti is the

⁹⁴ Some of these self-portraits include *Male Figure* (1910), *Standing Male Nude with Hands on Hips* (1910), *Standing Male Nude with Arms Crossed* (1911), *Male Nude with Raised Arms* (1911), and *Self-Portrait* (1911).

last person Schiele sees before death, and in the text, Gerti occupies his final thoughts as the novel closes and he drifts off to a childhood reverie: “Every breath that creaked in the wind became Gerti: Gerti stealing toward him through the woods; Gerti climbing a tree so she could drop on him from above; Gerti running like a rabbit from dogs; Gerti flinging herself into his arms...” and Egon concludes before drifting off, “Vulnerable Gerti. Vain, vulnerable Gerti. Everything depended upon her consent” (283). The focus on Gerti, and women in total, illustrates their hold over Egon. Gerti’s lasting influence is defined by the spaces they move through and inhabit at different moments of their lives.

Women and Schiele

Scott’s project to illustrate the significance of women in Schiele’s life is further examined by the long, curious meditation on Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1903),⁹⁵ occurring half-way through the novel. At first glance, this note appears a random intrusion that could easily be glossed over; however, it works as one of many keys to Scott’s dense, labyrinthine text. It is noteworthy that the narrator mentions that *Sex and Character* “was in its seventeenth printing by 1918,” (139), drawing attention to its immense popularity. Further, the narrator relates that “Weininger blames feminine values for destroying high Viennese culture, for corrupting industry and art. Woman, after all, defaces pristine flesh with her powders and lipsticks, she hikes up her skirts and shows off her legs, woman flicks her tongue, spreads her thighs, struts, flaunts, dances, teases, jilts” (139). Weininger views the feminine and “woman’ as temptress, a one-

⁹⁵ *Sex and Character* argues that there is a mix of male and female substance within each individual. Weininger argues that the male/masculine aspect is active, productive, conscious and moral/logical, while the female aspect is passive, unproductive, unconscious, and also amoral/illogical.

dimensional harpie infecting men with their charms. In a lesser novel than *Arrogance*, an overtly political polemic would be at work specifically to write against this type of thinking, both the ideas in Weininger's text and the social milieu of *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth century Vienna. Scott's text is subtle, sly, masterful and complicated; however, impossible to pigeon-hole and specifically define, particularly in its illustration of the unfolding of female agency. The fact that the women in Schiele's life, in the novel, are every bit as singular, with their contradictory thoughts, beliefs, and desires, illustrates the subtle nuance at work in Scott's form, and her use of space in the text. Gerald N. Izenberg looks specifically at both the artist's penchant for painting young female nudes and Egon Schiele's tortured self-portraits. Izenberg notes that no matter what the work "seems to reveal about feminine sexuality, it of course represents the male painter's vision" (465). However, Schiele's "vision is complicated and contradictory, there is nothing conventionally beautiful about the young bodies. They are not rounded and well-proportioned; they are not 'romantic'" (465). Even though many appear "ugly," they simultaneously "radiate an unmistakable sexual power" (466). Schiele's self-portraits, on the other hand, "portray anything but masculine power.... They are not just 'ugly' by conventional standards; they are grotesque: contorted, truncated, dismembered—bodies preternaturally long and emaciated, limbs at bizarre angles, torsos without limbs at all, expressions vacant and wild" (466). Izenberg argues that these self-portraits are, in their own strange way, feminized, that they represent "a bold, almost theatrically defiant deviation from the ideal of masculine, physical beauty" (467). The fact that the portraits "bear some striking resemblances to his images of females" (469), indicate a simultaneous crisis in male identity, an "effort to refashion masculinity," which is

characterized by Schiele's relationship to the feminine (471). This reading complicates Schiele's art and helps to illustrate further Joanna Scott's dense play of women intertwined with the artist throughout *Arrogance*.

Vallie Neuzil, Egon's mistress and second muse, further and ultimately illustrates this complication. Unlike the young girl who later grows into an older woman relating her sections of the novel, and Gerti, who also grows old, Vallie Neuzil succumbs to scarlet fever on Christmas Day, 1917, at the age of twenty four, and is laid to rest in Sinj, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Croatia, where she went to become a nurse during the first world war.⁹⁶ Schiele's portrait, *Portrait of Wally Neuzil* (1912), is considered the *Mona Lisa* of Vienna, but it is also Vallie's interior thoughts coupled with her obsession with sweets, her ability to assuage Egon's despair while in prison, and her role as nurse that Scott intricately looks at in the text. Each of these identities are fostered in specific spaces that engender reflection and change. Toward the close of the novel, and knowing she is sick, Vallie works as a nurse during the war with multiple duties: "The men on her ward must have their supper and their medicines, she has responsibilities" (275). This occupation is an abrupt change from her previous life with Egon as his muse, showcasing Vallie's constant ability throughout the text to adapt and make herself new depending on the situation. Traditionally viewed as an artist's model and mistress, from an early age Vallie has displayed a singular agency: "She was stronger than most other

⁹⁶ There is a website—www.wallyneuzil.net—devoted to her life and a Wally Neuzil Society. The purpose of the society, whose activity is not aimed at profit, is to (1) remember the life of Walburga ("Wally") Neuzil (born on August 19, 1894 in Tattendorf, Lower Austria, deceased on December 25, 1917 in Sinj, Croatia); (2) to repair and sustain the tomb of Wally Neuzil in Sinj (Croatia); (3) to carry out, promote and publish research and publications on the life of Wally Neuzil, her personal environment and the reception of her biography and the fate of her portraits painted by the painter Egon Schiele in 1912, and (4) to carry out research and publications on those developments, which has provoked the provenance of Egon Schiele's painting *Portrait of Wally Neuzil* (1912).

children her age and often called upon to initiate and lead their games” (237). Vallie’s life is illustrated as one of constant change and movement, typified through her relationship to a variety of disparate spaces, and exemplified by her singular ability to adapt to different environments and individuals. This is noted with her final career as a nurse—the space of the hospital—and also how she becomes, first, Gustav Klimt’s model, and later Egon Schiele’s model and mistress. Sixteen-year-old Vallie first gets a job “selling expensive dresses to corpulent widows and society girls—a respectable job, but within a week the routine had become oppressive and Vallie decided that she deserved more” (75). Like Gerti, Vallie wants more out of life—adventure and danger—and finds the space of the dress shop claustrophobic. However, it is in the shop where Klimt introduces himself and declares that “he would make her famous throughout Vienna if she would consent to be his model” (75). From the space of the store to the space of Klimt’s carriage a transformation takes place, when “Klimt pressed his mouth against Vallie’s ear...[and]...pushed her skirt up and ran a fingertip beneath a garter...[then]...slid two fingers into her” (77). Always in control and aware of what she is doing, Vallie, in the space of the carriage, uses her wiles to get out of an oppressive predicament. She thinks: “How life could change so drastically, so quickly, she thought, feeling wise, even nostalgic” (77). At sixteen Vallie, despite her position and class, uses cunning to lift out of a dead-end job.

Vallie’s individuality is also exemplified through her relationship with Egon while he sits in prison awaiting trial. Whereas she works at bringing Egon food,⁹⁷

⁹⁷ An orange brought by Vallie becomes the centerpiece for the picture, *The Single Orange Was the Only Light*.

materials for his painting, and comfort,⁹⁸ Vallie is still in a constant state of flux, always “she suspects...about to undergo some extraordinary transformation” (64). In order to deliver materials to Egon, she lets a guard kiss her, and she feels “a slightly sheepish pride” (65). Much has been written about Schiele’s time spent in prison and its subsequent effect on his art. As noted earlier, Alessandra Comini’s *Schiele in Prison* covers the diary, letters, and the thirteen watercolors painted while incarcerated. However, there is an absence of work on Vallie Neuzil’s experience during this time. Joanna Scott provides numerous clues, and interior thoughts on the Neulengbach Affair. Vallie, in these criminal spaces, must adjust and constantly remake herself in order to assist Egon, and like Gerti before, Egon begins to lean heavily on Vallie throughout this tumultuous time and even more after release. This reliance is further explored after Egon attempts to break off the relationship with Vallie to “marry up” with the respectable and financially well-off Edith Harms. Egon, noting Vallie’s individuality, relates that she “had even ridden a bicycle through the Prater” (209). Edith feared that “Vallie Neuzil was the only girl who belonged in his life” (209). When Egon breaks with Vallie at a café, she feels jilted: ““someday there will be another trial. Next time I hope they lock you away for good!”” (204). Egon attempts to play the middle, to have both Edith as wife and Vallie as mistress: ““I’ve drawn up a contract,”” Egon says, ““And I’ll ask Edith to sign it. We’ll spend two weeks together, every summer, just you and I. Edith will have to accept you”” (204). Vallie spits in his face and walks out; she “continues to savor her own amazement at her courage...she has come out the victor and has sealed up five years

⁹⁸ Vallie is described by Alessandra Comini, as making “daily visits—at first not to the cell, since she was prevented from entering—but to the rear of the prison building.... Vallie attempted—and sometimes succeeded—to throw fruit, presents, and notes of encouragement to her Egon. Schiele afterward referred to her behavior at Neulengbach as ‘noble’” (33).

with a climactic, unforgettable memory: a poisonous kiss” (205). Here, in the space of the café, like each space she has traveled through, Vallie asserts her independence. In a short life of constant change, illustrated through a deft negotiation of different spaces, the café serves as a place where Vallie “has succeeded in spitting out her hate. Now she can devote herself to a neutral cause, she can become a Red Cross nurse” (205). Schiele is distraught and paints *Death and the Maiden* (1915), which portrays a sickly, disheveled Egon clutching tightly to Vallie. In an exhibition dedicated to her, *Wally Neuzil: Her Life with Egon Schiele*, curator Stefan Pumberger comments that “[i]t’s interesting that she was at the bottom of society, and a couple of years later she was a nurse in the First World War. This turned out to be very heroic. She made her way into society even after the breakup” (Bradley). From aiding Egon in prison to their final break in the café, Vallie exhibits a singular drive and a life of constant change brought about through her relationship with different spaces.

The most integral locus of liminal space in *Arrogance* centers around Egon Schiele’s twenty-four days spent in prison. A main area of concentration focuses on the artist’s incarceration and its subsequent influence on his art. Like his oeuvre, his thoughts in the cell swirl around women and the self: “In his cell in Neulengbach he thinks of the women in his life: his mother, his sister Gerti, Vallie. He would like to make a huge mural and include them all in it”; however, “he finds himself drawing the line that will become the edge of his face in yet another self-portrait as a prisoner” (29). Egon’s time in prison is spent in three spaces: his cell in Neulengbach and the cell and yard where he walks and interacts with other prisoners once he is transferred to St. Pölten. The criminal environs give Schiele fuel for thinking about art: “Egon imagines painting the St. Pölten

prison yard and then cutting the canvas into monochromatic jigsaw grays” (133). His thoughts, his interactions with others in this space, are always tinged with the lean toward creating art.⁹⁹ After being questioned by the other inmates as to his incarceration, Egon innocently replies, “I don’t know” (133); he is informed of the rumors that he seduced a girl. Immediately Egon sees the prison strangely transform: “the prison itself suddenly seems a haven of light. Egon sees colors where he saw only gray—burnt umber in the sky, ocher streaks on his white shoes, and the old man’s lips are livid red” (134). Egon spends his time in prison creating a number of distinct watercolors addressing his incarceration, and what he feels to be his wrongful accusation. A patron who visits, Heinrich Benesch, sees the pictures as melodramatic and narcissistic. Similarly, Adam Kirsch sees the prison pictures as “bathetic and self-pitying in the extreme.... Schiele seems so confident in the script he is acting out—the modern morality play of the persecuted artist—that he leaves no room for genuine exploration of his plight” (Kirsch). However, in *Arrogance*, Egon thinks that the basis of aesthetic judgement “should be not appreciation but empathy—he wants his viewers to feel what he feels, he wants them to share his desire and pain. And he wants to help them recognize themselves” (136). These portraits not only show the contorted painter in writhing agony, but also depict his cell, *The Door into the Open!*, and studies of the few objects in his cell, *Organic Movement of the Chair and Pitcher* and *Two of My Handkerchiefs*.

⁹⁹ Many of Egon’s thoughts in prison are echoed later while he serves in the military, another liminal space, working as a sketch artist in an Austrian prison camp housing Russian prisoners of war: “He walks along outside of the compound, examining the snow clinging to the barbed wire, and he thinks to himself about how his life is structured by repetition and variation...” (176). He also thinks about having “all the time he needs to work on his art, along wit willing models—hollow-cheeked, hopeless Russians who sit on the frozen ground breaking open pine cones and chewing absent-mindedly on the bark” (176).

Egon formulates many of his artistic statements and ideas while in prison. His emotions alternate between deep melancholy and gallows humor, “Anything is possible in prison” (138). What prison represents is an odd, liminal space where Schiele exists equally inside and outside of time. Like the young girl, who seems to be both visible and invisible, Egon, strangely, mirrors this while in prison. They haunt and are haunted; Egon’s portraits are poignantly described in one instance as “hideous phantoms, openmouthed, as though about to break into a moan” (91); Phantoms swirl and hover throughout: “Yes, he had painted a phantom, snatched the invisible presence from the air” (228); “phantom boys, dead now, both of them” (229); “Death in life. Egon Schiele—a phantom of himself, a gray, porous replica of all the Egon Schieles who had lived in the past, all obliterated by time” (229). Egon’s incarceration ultimately defines his being, his outlook: “Ever since he spent twenty-four days locked up in Neulengbach and St Pölten, Egon had considered prison the most adequate standard metaphor to describe life” (176). The artist reflects, “Prison is a source full of inspiring faces, pinched, angry faces and faces as serene and pale as death masks” (176). This Genet-like reverie extends to his painting after release. Prison, to Schiele, has become a mythical place where he tapped into a new way to think about art. Alessandra Comini notes that “arrest and confinement in a crude country jail permanently affected the young artist” (33). This change is illustrated throughout the different spaces of *Arrogance* where fragments of Schiele’s prison diary and letters are sprinkled throughout. The final words of the text echo the opening of this chapter and refer to the episode in court when the judge burns the portrait of the young girl: “Egon Schiele in his diary of May 8, 1912: ‘Auto-da-Fé!

Savonarola! Inquisition! Middle Ages! Castration, hypocrisy!’” (283). The final phrase frames Schiele in his outrage, arrogance, and his ultimate belief in his art.

Joanna Scott’s *Arrogance* showcases an artist and the individuals encountered in a new, transgressive way. Scott, in a complete break of her earlier practice, illustrates transgressive elements through tarrying with a controversial artist and extending the form of the artistic novel in multiple directions. This text also problematizes the traditional *künstlerroman* in its multi-faceted focus on the different individuals involved with the artist, through the use of disparate style and form. The leaps in time and place throughout the novel echo the contorted bodies and places depicted in Egon Schiele’s paintings. The many views of art are also extended by decentering the locus of action and thought; when it is Egon Schiele—through the narrator—thinking of and contemplating his work, a more complicated, nuanced view is gleaned. Unlike David, the first-person protagonist in Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, who is suffocated and equally suffocating in his thoughts and actions, and Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction*, where the speaker(s) in many of the poems deal with and attempt to construct art about war from a distance, *Arrogance* portrays a dizzying cast of voices thinking about art and criminality. As in the previous two chapters, liminal spaces occupy a central role in the transgressive unfolding, where men and women travel, interact; how they frustrate perceived roles in these spaces, how previous identities are troubled, and how new identities are formed. Where these intersections take place in *Arrogance* are numerous: cottages, dwellings, prison cells, courtroom, hotel rooms, different countries, even the contested space of the canvas. The swirling intersections of transgression, criminality, and space connects and segues to my

final section on C.D. Wright's *One Big Self*, where the voices of prisoners locked away work and perform as the text of the poems.

Scott's *Arrogance*, though focused and concerned with women throughout, is not a straight-forward feminist text; it is much too slippery for that. It makes no grand statements; it neither defends nor condemns Schiele; instead, it offers a new way to engage with Schiele's art in a contemporary setting. Schiele is a difficult, complicated, "criminal" artist in many aspects, but also an artist whose work transformed fin-de siècle and early twentieth century Vienna, art that is still powerful, controversial, and transgressive today. Looking at *Arrogance* in a diffuse, nuanced way asks one to look not only at Schiele's art through a nuanced lens, but art and the novel as a whole. Whereas "criminality" in *Giovanni's Room* centers around David's homosexuality within the milieu of 1950s Paris and America, and Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction* focuses on the effects of war on different countries, individuals, art, and the artist as criminal is explored and complicated in Scott's *Arrogance*. This disparate, groundbreaking, labyrinthine text shutters between prison, painting, various rooms and spaces, the myriad, floating thoughts of women and criminals to encapsulate a brief period in the transformation of art, and the relationships between artists and those around them, that is prescient of the present moment.

Chapter 4

The Prisoner as Poet: Transgressive Spaces in C.D. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation*

C.D. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007) is a dense, mesmerizing, poetic encounter with prison life in Louisiana. This book was originally constructed as a collaboration with photographer Deborah Luster titled *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2003) and composed of various portraits of male and female prisoners from three¹⁰⁰ Louisiana prisons, interspersed with text composed by C.D. Wright, and lines taken from talking with the prisoners and lineated into a poetic sequence. This final chapter builds on the idea of the criminal regarding art that is raised in the previous chapter, on Joanna Scott's *Arrogance*. Whereas Egon Schiele stood accused of inappropriate relationships with younger girls and was recently taken to task for his portraits of young girls, Wright's text focuses on the notion of criminal collaboration. In *One Big Self* Wright interviews and lineates prisoners' speech to construct a book of poems. Initially, this chapter asks the question: what is accomplished by journeying into the prison, speaking with individuals, and then constructing art from it? What are some of Wright's and Luster's ultimate goals? This final chapter also ties together threads running through this study. It connects back to David, in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* through its emphasis on confession and the multiple ways individuals are defined and / or confined by space. Wright's text echoes many of the concerns from Waldrop's poetic sequence, specifically the criminal apparatus that places individuals within a system. Whereas Waldrop investigates the United States' right to declare war, invade, and occupy,

¹⁰⁰ Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women; the East Carroll Parish Prison Farm; the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

Wright's text looks to situate prisoners' lives. Throughout these texts the criminal interplay with liminal spaces is at work. These ideas are practiced through a transgressive break in each artists' oeuvre.

Wright's stand-alone poetic text was released in 2007 and consists of the "poem(s)" from the artist's book, with a portrait on the front and back covers. In the back of both texts a bibliography of sorts is listed with the heading, "Why not check it out and lock it down," which references a number of texts—literary, non-fiction, poetry, film, and philosophical—about prison life, such as Gramsci's *Prison Letters*, Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, the film *Shawshank Redemption*, and the poetry of Etheridge Knight, to name a few. Though the two texts are separate, it is impossible to think of Wright's book without the context of Luster's unsettling portraits. An engagement with both is beyond the scope of this chapter, so I will mainly be focusing on Wright's text, yet throughout I will refer to Luster's portraits as well. The major locus of Wright's project is set up in her introduction:

Not to idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize
immeasurable levels of pain. Not to demonize, not anathematize. What I
wanted was to unequivocally lay out the real feel of hard time. I wanted it
given to understand that when you pass four prisons in less than an hour,
the countryside's apparent emptiness is more legible. It is an open running
comment when the only spike in employment statistics is being created by
the people crossing the line. (xiv)

An initial impression of Wright's text is a harrowing journey into and through a horrific place. Some of the questions raised are what is specifically illustrated through the text?

Can the “real feel of hard time” be echoed through a poetic sequence? Who, exactly, is the text for? One could view the project as walking a fine line toward becoming slightly problematic in its representation of inmates. The focus of Wright’s text and Luster’s portraits are marginalized individuals, many African American, disenfranchised, from a lower educational and socioeconomic sphere. Despite Wright’s claim “not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain” there is a distinct aesthetic component at work; through the prisoner’s lineated lines the text engages and extends the realm of prison literature; however, these are difficult, dizzying poems that use abstract constructions, white space, and repetitive, intertextual echoes to work through Wright’s project. Susan Stewart claims *One Big Self* as an “exemplary possibility of care” in response to confinement. The text also balances potentially problematic aspects, such as who can speak for whom? What stories are being told and how is the telling portrayed? Much of these concerns are illustrated in Wright’s introduction, and in various comments on the project.

The form of Wright’s text is the locus of encounter that investigates the criminal and lays the groundwork for talking to incarcerated individuals in order to relate moments of speech. One could read the text as a single poem, looking at it through the lens of the criminal as “one long sentence” that is being served. There are also many moments within the book that read as singular, stand-alone poems (serving as “shorter sentences” or “cells” perhaps?) that capture mood, confinement, and a wish to go back and / or be somewhere else. Even more than in Waldrop’s sequence, the spatial configurations of the poems are integral to the project. There are multiple instances of lines floating in white space, lines left dangling like suspended sentences. There are broken syntax and fragmented thoughts that mimic incarcerated individuals’ sense of

limbo while being trapped in a space. However, Wright's project is not simply mimetic. Her main goal is to locate the "real feel of hard time." This difficult, impossible task is practiced through a dense play of voice and speech. Speech that is determined by and determines individuals' specific relationship with various spaces. There are also many instances where speakers appear to be uninhibited by space; this mode is accomplished by the disparate verbal patterns, dislocation of voice, and varied lineation of thought and speech into a variety of forms. Though the text is based on people in prison, the physical prison is not central. Luster's portraits exemplify this construction in that one sees only the individual posing and / or dressed up in front of a black backdrop. The physical prison is never viewed; neither are any immediate confining spaces.

Wright's formal practices investigate disparate notions of time and place. For example, a running poem throughout the text focuses on counting. Another poetic sequence complicates the idea of confession and interrogation. Wright's delineation of prisoners' speech into poetic lines works as another moment that destabilizes the criminal by giving voice to others. What is transgressive about these sections is that Wright does not attempt to fully narrate or place the prisoners' lives within the frame of a coherent story. Rather, the floating lines exist (like the prisoners) within their own disembodied space, momentarily "free" through their dislocation of form while simultaneously held within Wright's text. Wright's transgressive work in the text is performed through looking, witness, and poetic reconfigurations of space. *One Big Self*, ultimately, ties together intricate notions of criminality, in both its construction and depiction, to look closer at the often invisible, forgotten lives of incarcerated individuals. It accomplishes

these ideas, however, not by laying things bare, but through oblique poetic engagement, and difficult, disorienting practice.

Criminal Constructions and Writing the Prison

In many ways, C.D. Wright (who sadly, suddenly passed away in January of 2016) is somewhat of an outsider poet,¹⁰¹ one occupying a separate space, away from the mainstream and any particular school. In an interview with Kent Johnson, Wright talks about these aspects: “As to my own aesthetic associations / affiliations / sympathies: I have never belonged to a notable element of writers who identified with one another partly because I come from Arkansas, specifically that part of Arkansas known for its resistance-to-joining,” Wright continues, “a non-urban environment where readily identifiable groups and sub-groups are less likely to form” (Johnson). Initially, Wright sees herself as “a poet from Arkansas,” and Nadia Herman Colburn locates Wright’s route as disparate and circuitous: “Memphis, Fayetteville, San Francisco, New York, Atlanta, Mexico, and finally Providence” (204). While pursuing her M.F.A. at the University of Arkansas, Wright met Frank Stanford, who “helped her see that people like her—young people, people from Arkansas, people with the same lexicon, not only the European or Northern or dead writers that she had read growing up—could be writers, too” (204). In the preface to Stanford’s *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I love You* (2000), Wright says of Stanford, “Here was poetry by someone barely five months older than me whose geography I knew, whose lexicon I could grasp,” Wright continues, “He

¹⁰¹ Wright, however, is also the recipient of many awards: a MacArthur Fellowship, a Lannan Literary Award, a Robert Creeley Award, and membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2013, she was elected as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. These are just a few.

had put the intensity of his mind to the task. I felt absolutely helpless to so much wildness of heart, so much fury and hilarity, such language. My skin burned, my insides hurt, I wanted to bury myself in the snow, pull the pages down on top of me.... Never was I to be this innocent again” (Stanford). Like Rosmarie Waldrop, Wright’s poetry is uncategorizable; it is steeped in the personal and peculiar, the esoteric and political. Early poems hint at being immersed in a regional Southern tradition; however, place is often felt through mood and atmosphere more so than specific reference to particular locales. In “Tours,” an early poem from *Translations of the Gospel Back into Tongues* (1982), setting is secondary to impression:

A girl on the stairs listens to her father
Beat up her mother.
Doors bang.
She comes down in her nightgown.

The piano stands there in the dark
Like a boy with an orchid.

She plays what she can
Then turns the lamp on.

Her mother’s music is spread out
On the floor like brochures.

She hears her father
Running through the leaves.

The last black key
She presses stays down, makes no sound,
Someone putting their tongue where their tooth had been. (8)

This poem’s impetus is violence, yet violence is not at the center. Similarly, in *One Big Self*, the specter of violence hovers, but is never given sustained attention. Instead, in “Tours,” the speaker traces the young girl’s reaction to violence and how she

subsequently deals with it. This scene has played before as the girl listens and then moves to momentarily assuage her fear through playing a few notes on the piano. So much is predicated on the girl's senses: listening and hearing the fight, then the doors bang; the music from the piano and the father running through the leaves; lastly, there is the abrupt silence of the key that makes no sound. What is striking about the poem is the pronoun disagreement—"Someone" and "their"—used in the last line. This brilliant use takes the poem out of the immediate space of personal and domestic, and locates it with the wider connotation, that this scene could be playing anywhere in the country or world—all with a few words. This poem is bound in image, a snapshot, not unlike the image from a camera. Though *One Big Self* offers a distinct break from earlier poetry, this disparate engagement is still at work. Wright, from the beginning, has been a poet with multiple gifts, one whose poems occupy a variety of different intellectual and aesthetic spaces.

Stephanie Burt locates Wright's art within a group of poets he calls "The Ellipticals." Speaking on contemporary poetry, Burt relates "the new North American poets I've liked lately share a surface difficulty: they tease or demand or frustrate; they're hard or impossible to paraphrase; and they try not to tell stories" (6). On the Ellipticals specifically, Burt argues that they

reject: poems written in order to demonstrate theories; scene painting and prettiness as its own end; slogans; authenticity and wholeheartedness; mysticism; straight-up narrative; and extended abstraction (their most obvious difference from [Jorie] Graham). Ellipticals are uneasy about (less often, hostile to) inherited elites and privileges, but they are not populists,

and won't write down to, or, connect the dots for their readers; their difficulty conveys respect. (353)

Cole Swensen has taken the moniker "Ellipticals" to task, arguing it pigeonholes and attempts to prescribe a like group of gestures and ideals to a disparate group of writers. Whereas Burt's categorization can seem broad, it is initially helpful to locate some of the moves Wright makes in her later poetry; moves that are quite different from her earlier work. Wright's project(s) in *One Big Self* take up some of Burt's claims: the poems are difficult but not overtly abstract; they do not "scene paint" or practice any "prettiness as its own end"; however, the text is also separate from many things on Burt's list. Though always aware of its artistic aims, *One Big Self* is nothing but authentic and wholehearted; these traits are the text's most salient features.

In attempting to look at, comprehend, and give voice to the prisoners, Wright's project is one of deep regard. One of her projects is to "authenticate" the prisoners as actual individuals, not simply forgotten and shut away figures, existing on the margins of society.¹⁰² Kent Johnson asks Wright if she thinks the project will change anything. Wright replies, "Did I think what we were doing could change anything? Well of course not" (6). She continues, "Politics, politics: they are an aspect of everything, and I make no effort to purge them, every effort to comprehend the implications of my work and my messy part in every messy situation" (6). Here, Wright locates the extreme difficulty in

¹⁰² Michelle Alexander's groundbreaking study, *The New Jim Crow* (2012), locates the rise of mass incarceration and how it was brought about by the war on drugs. She labels mass incarceration the new "Jim Crow," and argues that what "has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it.... Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans.... As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it" (2).

balancing the project; she continues, “The rate of incarceration is an American phenomenon.... The erosion of public support for any possibility of and thus programs that would implement the possibility of ‘rehabilitation’ is effectively buried under the rubble of vengeful rhetoric and active indifference” (6). Ultimately, though, Wright wonders what there is to do, before, emphatically saying “Well, go there, auscultate, poke around, come back and report, and put it on view.... But on the ground, face to face, it was the prisoners’ view; these individuals forcibly separated from the larger world, I sought to share something with them” (6). Initially, Wright does not name what it is she hopes to share; is it the recognition of these cast-offs as actual individuals? Is it to illustrate to an uncaring culture what is happening? Wright notes, “Perhaps the gain is mine alone.... I know everybody you meet is a whole person” (6). Wright’s long, twisted answer illustrates the complicated project and the myriad emotions surrounding the text. Obviously, what is at the forefront of both the artist’s book of photographs, composed with Luster, and Wright’s stand-alone text, is the notion of looking, seeing, and recognizing the individuality of others.

Burt, in his chapter on Wright from *Close Calls with Nonsense*, also likens Wright’s poetic turn in her middle and later career to a more photographic approach. Beginning with her book-length poem, *Just Whistle: A Valentine* (1993), Wright’s photographic approach reaches its apotheosis in *One Big Self* where Wright’s style, according to Burt, “describes apertures, lenses, frames, light levels, and sight lines; lists facts; and presents poetic lines as if they were photographic captions, in order to evoke real persons whom she wants her work to acknowledge” (42). This mode of photographic practice is at work in the opening of *One Big Self* as Wright describes the landscape:

“Driving through this part of Louisiana you can pass four prisons in less than an hour” (ix), and later, when Angola is “where the topsoil is measured not in inches but in feet... Grey pelicans nest on the two prison lakes, alongside the airstrip, the grading sheds, the endless fields of okra and corn” (x). These moments draw specific attention to the landscape, situating the looker and the relationship between the prisoner and the scenery, noting, as one “enters” the prisons of the text, how cut off these individuals are. Wright also situates herself within relationship to the prisoner and the landscape. The speaker, in the beginning, attempts to look back at the person she was during the composition of the text: “Try to remember it the way it was. Try to remember what I wore when I visited the prisons. Trying to remember how tall was my boy then.” Wright continues, “What books I was teaching. Trying to remember how I hoped to add one true and lonely word to the host of texts that bear upon incarceration” (ix). Wright’s use of “you” in the initial quote, like Rosmarie Waldrop’s use in the beginning of her sequence, both invites and places the reader in viewing distance of the four prisons. The reader, now, is in the uncomfortable position, alongside Wright, of witness. The flashback employed in the quote above attempts to place Wright in the unaltered state inhabited before journeying into the prisons and composing this text. Wright, however, is not simply mimicking the “prisoner’s journey” of irrevocable change but noting—along with the reader—that once one enters, one becomes a part of the environment, and even if it is just on the periphery, one is not the same. This complicated work is practiced throughout the text by a distinct mode of poetic looking, and how poet, reader, and prisoner navigate disparate spaces.

Wright’s opening of *One Big Self* and her situating of the text is predicated on looking and witness, and is one undertaken with a note of disturbance. Disturbance, as

well, is the main impetus for both the artist's book and the poetic text. Deborah Luster's mother was murdered and this lead her to take photographs of prisoners in 1998.¹⁰³ C.D. Wright relates this: "Vivid to me is Debbie saying that at the trial of her mother's murderer, she looked around and saw the people sitting on separate sides of the courtroom...and she tried to take in the damage radiating through the distinct lines—the perpetrator's side, the victim's side" (x). Wright mulls on this thought then takes it a step further: "Equally, the damage is never limited to perpetrator and victim. Also, that the crimes are not the sum of the criminal any more than anyone is entirely separable from their acts" (xi). This tarrying of the in-between space is based on disturbance and situates Wright's relationship with the prisoners and her construction of the text. David Bergman's wonderfully insightful *The Poetry of Disturbance* (2015) helps view Wright's project. In Bergman's preface, he insouciantly states: "I hope this book argues nothing. I hate arguments. Nor will it 'interrogate' the subject or these texts. The poem is not a witness or the perpetrator of a crime who needs interrogation.... What I hope this book does is engage in conversation with poetry" (ix). In many ways, Wright's text is a conversation, or many conversations: she is in conversation with Luster; with herself; with the prisoners; with other prison literature; with the history of poetry. Bergman

¹⁰³ "I stood in the courtroom following the conviction of the man hired to kill my mother. I looked around the room. Here sat the remnants of my family. There, across the aisle, sat the family of the convicted. So many lives destroyed or damaged by this greedy, stupid act. I wondered if there remained a single soul untouched by violence. Violence in the name of hatred and in the name of love: violence in the name of righteousness and the almighty buck. No contact. In the fall of 1998 the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities funded a group of photographers sent out to document the state's northeast parishes. I was one of those photographers driving around on Delta roads looking for inspiration. I was rounding a long curve and wondering where all the people were when I saw a small prison. Maybe this is where the people live, I thought. I parked the truck, got out, and knocked on the gate. Large birds circled high overhead. Warden Ray Dixon walked out of his office. 'Fine with me,' said the warden. I photographed at the East Carroll Parish Prison Farm. I developed the portraits. Convergence. Louisiana incarcerates more of its population than any other state in the union. The United States incarcerates more of its population than any other country in the free world. For three and a half years I photographed at three Louisiana prisons."

relates that through conversing with poems he hopes to mimic the “meals in so many Jewish and Italian households in which several people are talking at the same time while the children run around the table screaming” (ix). This description of joyous cacophony relates to the polyvocal characteristics of many powerful poems. Important skills for this engagement, notes Bergman, are the “ability to listen to more than one conversation at a time [and] also to develop the knack translators develop, that is, to speak and listen simultaneously” (ix). Bergman’s set-up is integral in situating Wright’s project in that in many ways *One Big Self* practices some of the tenets in *The Poetry of Disturbance*. Many voices are at play; balancing this tricky terrain, Wright never offers her voice as stand-in for the prisoners, simply one among others. And neither are the prisoners’ voices the only ones heard, stripped, or laid bare; there is a unique cacophony, a singular overlap purposefully at work, where Wright’s voices are intertwined and weaved in and out with the voices of the prisoners, guards, and others.

What simultaneously shadows and showcases the individuals in the text are the many silences enacted by the poet.¹⁰⁴ The speaker recalls “watching the men plait each other’s hair between sets at the weight bench. When I asked about a man whose face was severely scarred, a very specific face, with large, direct aquamarine eyes,” Wright continues, “a guard told me that the man’s brother had thrown a tire over his head and set it on fire. This I did not know how to absorb. It was a steaming day; the men were lifting weights and plaiting their hair” (xi). Here, the poet is seemingly struck speechless, and this inability to “absorb” is rendered on multiple levels: first, there is the tenderly brutal

¹⁰⁴ The gaps, aporias, stutters, silences in this chapter mimic and extend many of these practices that have been looked at in this study. For example, David’s stutter and silence throughout *Giovanni’s Room*; the speaker’s inability and flailing attempts to speak about war in Waldrop’s poetic sequence; the many silences and refusals experienced by the girl (and Egon Schiele) in Joanna Scott’s *Arrogance*.

incongruity of men lifting weights while plaiting each other's hair. This image is a striking moment and sets the tone for the rest of the text. The criminalized, brutal space of prison is often subverted, momentarily humanized; however, the moment is broken when the violence is explained by the guard. Second, the relation of the violence is itself matter-of-fact, a part of the everyday that the prisoners (and the guards) are used to, but one for which the poet is not. As in Waldrop's sequence, Wright swerves between multiple spaces, never wholly apart or belonging to one. Once Wright crosses the threshold she can never go back; similarly, she can never belong to the prisoner's world either. Wright, though, *is* physically in the mix, in the prisons; she is observing first-hand and interacting. The poet, throughout, is torn by this thought. Wright notes that when she and Luster were at the women's prison on Easter and there were children visiting: "A trampoline had been rented, a cotton-candy machine; someone dressed in a bunny suit was organizing an egg hunt.... The women were dressed up, too, even the ones shackled at the ankle and waist," Wright continues, "We left before visiting hours ended. It wasn't our place to be there. It wasn't really in us to be there" (xi). Wright is struck by the intimacy of the day, of parents and children interacting as though, even momentarily, they are not in prison. She feels like an intruder, as if she is taking something from the individuals. She is there, in the space, but wishing to be elsewhere, while also being unable to divest herself of the project. Wright is disturbed, not by the prisoners, but by herself.

Bergman initially describes "the poetry of disturbance" through what it does not do. He notes, "Disturbing poems are not the ones we turn to for comfort or reassurance.... They are not even the ones we turn to for shock or to express our anger or

outrage. They are generally sneaky poems that look safe enough at first but unsettle us later” (1). Wright’s text works in some of these ways, but also extends this notion. One may initially be drawn to *One Big Self* with the expectation of shock and outright condemnation. Wright’s text, though an indictment on the criminal justice system and mass incarceration, is not a polemic; it is political yet oddly a text where construction and aesthetics are at the forefront. Similarly, aside from Wright’s “disturbance” within the text, the actual poetic sequence is mostly void of the graphic detail of crimes and/or encounters. A disturbing poem, Bergman contends, “presents certain challenges: it won’t provide consolation it won’t resolve to a neat conclusion; it won’t give the nice protective space we want as readers, and it doesn’t give us the signals we need to arm ourselves properly” (5). There is no catharsis once the reader finishes Wright’s text; no positive feeling for undertaking the journey. One is simply struck, left a little empty. “Disturbing poems,” Bergman argues, “unlike poems meant to shock—leave the reader exposed without the reader even aware of the exposure” (5). Wright’s introduction is subtle yet striking; she walks through the book’s origin, interspersing her thoughts with the prisoners she encounters; many times, Wright gives a glimpse into the prisoner’s life, sometimes this glimpse points elsewhere, as when Wright thinks of one woman: “She thought she was going to be an astronomer when she grew up. Not a felon” (xii). Here, and at other moments in the Introduction, Wright walks a line, inhabits the in-between space—she is active participant through chronicling and construction of the text, yet is also a listener and observer. Of this same woman Wright notes: “Both parents are dead now. Of her three sons, one disappeared, one died of suicide, and the third severed contact” (xii). Notes like this, scattered throughout the text, portray both the immense toll

prison life takes on individuals and their families, usually cutting them off, while also showing the difficult backgrounds many of the inmates have come from.

Wright's Disturbing Poetics

Wright's text and her project transgresses through its many discomfiting encounters. Bergman contends that "[p]oems disturb not just because they offer no consolation but also because they allow no comforting aesthetic distance from the intractable" (11). Wright offers no distance, no aesthetic barrier that shields readers from the facts. A single floating line in the intro reads, "The grease burns, I am told by another inmate, are courtesy of her sister" (xii); and what can be extremely discomfiting, Wright notes, stepping back for a moment, is that most of the prisoners turn into the forgotten, individuals shut away from society and left behind by friends and family: "After a time. A lot of time. They stop coming. The free-worlders. They are too poor or too busy working or are already looking after others on the outside or their car is broken or they are too worn down or they move too far off or they get old, sick, and die. So, the inmates wait their turn" (xiii). Despite these harrowing observations, Wright does not look to beatify or place the prisoners in abject positions of pity. As the passage confesses at the beginning of this chapter: "not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain.... What I wanted was to unequivocally lay out the real feel of hard time" (xiv). Wright also "wanted the banter, the idiom, the soft-spoken cadence of Louisiana speech to cut through the mass-media myopia" (xiv). This detail notes that Wright wishes to

portray these individuals as singular entities, separate from news-reel caricatures and the public's idea, influenced through popular TV shows such as *Law & Order*, etc.¹⁰⁵

How Wright's disturbing poetics extends some of Bergman's precepts is indicated through the final two paragraphs of the introduction. Whereas one of Bergman's notes is that "disturbing poetry" does not immediately draw attention to what disturbs, Wright does, in fact, call out the contemporary state of incarceration within America: "The interrelation of poverty, illiteracy, substance and physical abuse, mental illness, race, and gender to the prison population is blaring to the naked eye and borne out in the statistics" (xiv). Wright continues this indictment of the U.S.'s current prison system: "of the developed nations, only Russia approaches our rate of incarceration. And the Big Bear is a distant second. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, the warp in the mirror is of our making" (xiv). As in Waldrop's sequence, the particular use of pronoun is integral to viewing Wright's introduction and subsequent text. "Our" indicates that Wright sees herself ensconced within society, every bit a part, not separate or outside. Here, too, she observes some of the blame. The prose ending of Wright's introduction is important to look at closely to further examine her set-up and overall project:

The popular perception is that art is apart. I insist it is a part of. Something not in dispute is that people in prison are apart from. If you can accept—whatever level of discipline and punishment you adhere to momentarily

¹⁰⁵ According to Michelle Alexander, "Most Americans only come to 'know' about the people cycling in and out of prisons through fictional police dramas, music videos, gangsta rap, and 'true' accounts of ghetto experience on the evening news. These racialized narratives tend to confirm and reinforce the prevailing public consensus that we need not care about 'those people'; they deserve what they get" (183). These shows, according to Alexander, "perpetuates the myth that the primary function of the system is to keep our streets safe and our homes secure by rooting out dangerous criminals and punishing them. These television shows, especially those that romanticize drug-law enforcement, are the modern-day equivalent of the old movies portraying happy slaves, the fictional gloss placed on a brutal system of racialized oppression and control" (59).

aside—that the ultimate goal should be to reunite the separated with the larger human enterprise, it might behoove us to see prisoners, among others, as they elect to be seen, in their larger selves. If we go there, if not with our bodies then at least our minds, we are more likely to register the implications. (xiv)

Wright’s wish for others to register these “implications” is a big-shouldered project. One aim is to “see” the prisoners as whole individuals, not composites. Another aim is to register the ultimate effect of mass incarceration on people and society. The speaker tarries toward the in-between space on multiple levels as well; obviously, there is the physical level of entering prisons, encountering individuals, taking notes and constructing a text; there is a point where art overlaps and intertwines with the political; there are the spatialized components of transgression at work in that this project marks a distinct break in Wright’s practice; and there is the direct engagement with the criminal on multiple levels: the individuals caught in the web of incarceration; their guilt and crimes; and the attempt of the poet to balance the difficult subject matter and register these implications in a book of poems.

The overall goals and poetic practice of Wright’s project disturbs on multiple levels. The purposely prosaic poem that acts as a bridge between the intro and the text struggles with many of these issues. The untitled, seventeen-line poem opens with the direct statement “I am going to prison. / I am going to visit three prisons in Louisiana. / I am going on the heels of my longtime friend Deborah Luster, a / photographer” (xv). The anaphora used in the first three lines—the “I”—is a startling juxtaposition with the second-person pronouns at the end of the prose section of the intro. This jarring switch

locates the speaker—at this in-between moment—in the present, the point of immersion and of no turning back. The next few lines continue the journey: “It is a summons. / All roads are turning into prison roads. / I already feel guilty. / I haven’t done anything. / But I allow the mental pull in both directions” (xv). The note of “guilt” is telling, and also the plead of innocence. What is the speaker feeling guilty for? Why must the speaker verbalize and plead that “I haven’t done anything”? Wright, in the poem, notes a pang of conscience: is the poetry, is the text adequate, can it represent the overall project? The last two lines of the poem attempt to answer: “It is an almost imperceptible gesture, a flick of the conscience, to go, to / see, but I will be wakeful. / It is a summons” (xv). The end line repeats the earlier call—the poet feels summoned, called to go into the prisons and speak with the individuals, and to construct the text being read. This summons leads to an interesting question: who, exactly, is the text for?

Both texts—the artist’s book constructed with Luster and the poetic text—are intricate, difficult engagements and encounters with prisoners that attempts to balance the tricky terrain of representation. In an interview with Wright, Kent Johnson raises this concern: “There’s a complex tension, always, in any art of human portraiture, between the subject’s awareness and the artist’s intent.” Johnson continues, “Sometimes there is a large gap, and the danger exists that the artist’s aesthetic ambitions are realized through a kind of ‘going beyond’ the subject’s participation in, and understanding of, the collaboration. For sure, this raises ethical questions” (4). Johnson’s insight leads to this probing question about *One Big Self*: “I wonder if you could talk about how you and Luster might have perceived *the prisoner’s perception* of their role in posing as subjects. What is their relationship to the total *art* of this project?” (4). This is a telling moment in

the interview, one that pushes Wright to answer that “[p]hotographing incarcerated people on a visitor’s pass for an art book is definitely on the brink. My own contact with any project entails a couple of cardinal rules: in the first place, everyone you meet is a whole person; secondly, the guest should honor her host. It’s a start” (5). Here, Wright describes the trepidation and her mode of working through the project at hand. One’s first encounter with the portraits is harrowing, to say the least. The first portrait in the artist’s book is of “Hustleman,” a stocky, African American male, with downcast eyes and a look of deep contemplation. Many of the opening portraits portray African American inmates, both men and women, in various poses; interspersed, however, are portraits of white inmates as well. What is striking is that many of the individuals are dressed in celebration for Mardi Gras and for Halloween.¹⁰⁶ This option gives the individuals choice on how they want to be represented in the text. Wright puts forth an important question of her own that further looks at the book: “So, who the hell are we; what can we possibly expect to achieve besides indulging in our artsy version of voyeurism?” (5). In the interview, as in the introduction to the text, Wright struggles with the subject matter, what to make of it, how to present it.

These questions, though extremely important at the date of composition, are even more pressing in our current milieu. The contemporary landscape of poetry and art is one of immense division, policed and guarded when it comes to who can speak and represent whom. A different poetic example is from John Berryman’s sequence, *The Dream Songs*, and his use of black vernacular through the Mr. Bones persona.¹⁰⁷ Kevin Young, a

¹⁰⁶ This site of dress will be discussed further in the final section of this chapter.

¹⁰⁷ “—Mr Bones, I sees that. / They for these operations thanks you, what? / not pays you. —Right.” “Dream Song 67.

multiple award winning African American poet, and editor of *John Berryman: Selected Poems* (2004), comments that Berryman's use of "black dialect is frustrating and even offensive at times, as many noted, and deserves examination at length. Nonetheless, the poems are, in part, about an American light that is not as pure as we may wish; or whose purity may rely not just on success (the dream) but on failure (the song)," Young continues, "In turn, the poems are not a 'song of myself' but a song of 'multiple selves.' Instead of a cult of personality we have a clash of personalities—the poems' protagonist Henry speaks not just as 'I' but as 'he,' 'we,' and 'you.'" (Young). Berryman's poetics, though disturbing at times, appear much more layered and nuanced than recent conceptual acts by Kenneth Goldsmith¹⁰⁸ and Vanessa Place,¹⁰⁹ as well as Michael Derrick Hudson.¹¹⁰ Cathy Park Hong has famously argued that "avant-garde's most social, self-aggrandizing stars," such as Kenneth Goldsmith, "spout the expired snake oil that poetry should be 'against expression' and 'post identity.'" (Hong). The versions of representation attempted by Goldsmith and Place were immediately called out by the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringo (MCAG), a group "made up of writers and artists of color who challenge the literary world's ongoing appropriation of Black and Brown bodies, histories, and narratives" (Shakur).¹¹¹ Aaron Kunin provides one of the most

¹⁰⁸ In March of 2015 at Brown University Kenneth Goldsmith read the reordered autopsy of Michael Brown, performing it as a poem.

¹⁰⁹ Vanessa Place tweeted *Gone with the Wind*, and because of protest was removed as panel organizer at the 2015 AWP conference.

¹¹⁰ Michael Derrick Hudson writes under the pseudonym Yi-Fen Chou. "After a poem of mine has been rejected a multitude of times under my real name, I put Yi-Fen's name on it and send it out again. As a strategy for 'placing' poems this has been quite successful ... The poem in question ... was rejected under my real name forty times before I sent it out as Yi-Fen Chou (I keep detailed records). As Yi-Fen the poem was rejected nine times before *Prairie Schooner* took it. The poem in question, "The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve," was chosen by Sherman Alexie to be included in *The Best American Poetry 2015*.

¹¹¹ "In this monochromatic landscape, the [Association of Writers and Writing Programs](#) (AWP) has long been critiqued as failing to implement meaningful attempts at inclusion, in particular in planning its annual conference and selecting which proposed panels will be included. When the AWP16 proposal selection

nuanced critiques of Place's Twitter debacle, complicating the way the Mongrel Coalition went about dismantling Place from AWP. Kunin argues that "Place describes her project as antiracist. Her framing of Mitchell's language is intended to highlight the racist attitudes in a cherished work of popular art; she would also like to provoke Mitchell's estate to take responsibility for these attitudes (Kunin). Kunin looks at the layers of Place's project, and then notes: "It may be objected that anyone can profess antiracism.... However, by the same argument, one might just as easily question the motives of the writers who accuse Place of racism. In fact," Kunin continues, "Place's ideas about racism are almost impossible to distinguish from the ideas of her accusers.... Place accuses Mitchell not only of creating vicious stereotypes but also of exploiting the bodies of 19th-century slaves in order to do so; and, thus, Place's accusers say the same thing about her victimization of the same enslaved people and their descendants" (Kunin). Kunin, here, sees the Coalition of attacking Place for the very same reasons Place attacks the estate of Margaret Mitchell.

Kunin argues that accusing Place of racism is intellectually irresponsible, and that Place's art, ultimately, is a lazy representation of what she is trying to express. Kunin notes,

The idea behind this accusation seems to be that any writing that uses racist language or imagery is itself racist, and, if the writer is white, white supremacist. By that logic, any representation of racism would be racist.

The study of racism would become impossible. At best, the study of

committee was announced last week, people noticed quickly that it included conceptual poet Vanessa Place. On May 16 a [Change.org petition](#) was created to ask AWP to remove her, pointing to her [latest Twitter-based project](#) as a racist line-by-line retelling of *Gone with the Wind*." Shakur, Aminah. "Why a White Poet Should Not Be Attempting to Reclaim the 'N-Word.'" *Hyperallergic*. 22 May. 2015.

racism could proceed only by further inflicting or exploiting the pain of what it studies. (Kunin)

Kunin sees Place's failure as an aesthetic problem. He argues that the Twitter texts, and the project as a whole, is "poorly written." Kunin quotes Trisha Low's contention that the "provocation is really actually too easy—painfully easy," and exclaims, "The project is easy because it involves no original composition, just the transcription of an already existing work.... Even more...Place's thinking about the project seems rather vague and careless" (Kunin). Kunin, in a series of questions, asks: "what is her argument? What is she saying about contemporary racism, or about the history of the systematic oppression of black people?" (Kunin). Place's¹¹² failure to grapple with these difficult questions, according to Kunin, illustrate her project as aesthetically weak, and as a failure.¹¹³ What Kunin's assessment and critique does is take away some of the knee-jerk reaction that accompanies a great deal of contemporary art that traverses difficult and seemingly touchy political subject matter. Instead, a nuanced look and assessment is required. The key with this statement is looking; one must be able to interact and assess the art.

The Dana Schutz controversy adds another layer to this debate. Schutz's painting, *Open Casket* (2016), which abstractly depicts the corpse of Emmett Till, was shown at

¹¹² Vanessa Place's *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (2010), however, is a powerful, conceptual poetic text that takes court cases and renders them almost verbatim to look at and investigate the differences between "fact" and "truth."

¹¹³ Kunin lists a series of successful examples: The real masterpieces of conceptual poetry tell a different story. In "Via," Caroline Bergvall transcribes English translations of the opening tercet of Dante's *Inferno*. In *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and *Insomnia and the Aunt*, Tan Lin writes a fictional autobiography using journalese from the obituary and cooking pages of *The New York Times* in place of personal information. The source texts lend a shape to these works, which is unity; meanwhile, the tension between different translations in Bergvall's work, and between Lin's life and the stories adapted from the newspaper, create a gallery of changing shapes, which is variety. Despite my familiarity with the source texts, Bergvall and Lin show me something in them that I had not seen before, which is novelty. In other works, such as M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and Christian Bök's *Eunoia*, the poets revel in their ability to express complex ideas using the resistant material of limited vocabularies; they are delighting in their own skill, and "delight in skill" is William Morris's definition of art.

the Whitney Biennial in 2017 and caused a firestorm around whether white artists have the right to portray black experience and pain. An African American artist, Parker Bright, conducted peaceful protests against the painting, “positioning himself, sometimes with a few other protesters, in front of the work to partly block its view,” also Bright “engaged museum visitors in discussions about the painting, while wearing a T-shirt with the words ‘Black Death Spectacle’ on the back” (Kennedy). Another protester, Hannah Black, wrote “a letter to the biennials curators...urging that the painting be not only removed from the show but also destroyed” (Kennedy). In one Instagram post, the artist Rafia Santana, over a photograph of Schutz, wrote: “BURN THiS SHiT, BiTCH” (qtd in Boucher). Cathy Park Hong tweeted: “Dana Schutz should have read Saidiya Hartman before she turned Emmett Till into a bad Francis Bacon painting” (qtd in Kennedy). Schutz, however, had defenders as well. Kara Walker, in an Instagram post, responded: “The history of painting is full of graphic violence and narratives that don’t necessarily belong to the artists own life, or perhaps, when we are feeling generous we can ascribe the artists one human feeling, some empathy toward her subject” (qtd in Boucher). Walker’s post echoes some of Kunin’s notes in his long essay on Vanessa Place: that one should look at the history and context of art. Walker ends her message by arguing that

I am more than a woman, more than the descendant of Africa, more than my father’s daughter. More than black more than the sum of my experiences thus far. I experience painting too as a site of potentiality, of query, a space to join physical and emotional energy, political and allegorical forms. Painting—and a lot of art often lasts longer than the controversies that greet it. I say this as a shout to every artist and artwork

that gives rise to vocal outrage. Perhaps it too gives rise to deeper inquiries and better art. It can only do this when it is seen. (qtd in Boucher)

Walker argues for the visibility of Schutz's painting and that it has the potential to spark debate and lead to greater conversation around these topics. Debate and speech would not be available with censure. Gorman Beauchamp reads the attack on Schutz as invoking the central tenet of identity aesthetics: that "we are unable to understand the experiences and *mentalité* of any identity group other than our own" (458-459). Beauchamp does not argue that one group can, in fact, wholly identify with another, but posits that censoring art on these grounds is extremely slippery terrain. Beauchamp traces the term, cultural appropriation,¹¹⁴ and looks at the notion of "[w]hat lurks behind either definition is the inescapable inference—without permission, unauthorized use—that some permission granting entity exists that can authorize use. What is this entity? How does one gain its approval—and on what grounds? How is one to recognize its authority?" (464). So, after all of this talk on rights, art, and appropriation, where does C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster's texts fall?

Both were published long before the contemporary storm; the artist's book, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2003), and *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007), side step much of this controversy through many levels. The painstaking introduction, for one; the struggle expressed by Wright in the construction of the text and in talking about the

¹¹⁴ "A term popularized in university social science departments in the late 1970s and 1980s, its operative definition...is provided by law professor Susan Scofidi in *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (2005): 'taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expression, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc.' Or you might prefer this one from the online *Urban Dictionary*: 'The ridiculous notion that being of a different culture or race means that you are not allowed to adopt things from other cultures'" (463).

text, is another. Though Wright and Luster had no control over how their books would be received and how they will be interpreted over time, both seem preternaturally aware of the construction, its ramifications, and what each wanted to encounter in the telling. Reviews of both were glowing; Peter Gizzi notes, “Wright’s remarkably flexible poem, an extended *sprechstimme* collage, performs the broken tale of this crisis, which is at once institutional and spiritual, public and private, and which touches us all” (2). Gizzi then adds, “Some might argue that producing a coffee table book based in prison life is inappropriate...I would say the subject has been suppressed from public discourse that however it comes into contact with the outside world is not only valid but necessary” (3). Martin Earl showcases how “Wright confronts [a] dichotomy (lack of freedom/ time on your hands) by showing us how prisoners narrate their experience, how they fill the time by talking about where they are, what they’re missing, and what they’ll do when they get out” (Earl). Alan Gilbert, in a review for the *Boston Review*, notes “Wright’s awareness of the project’s ethical precariousness,” before relaying that “[w]hile Wright’s poems at times explicitly address the racism and classism undergirding U.S. society, the lacunae surrounding each broken line of *One Big Self* silently attest to what remains unsaid and unacknowledged in the larger culture” (Gilbert). Wright’s introduction relays many moments where the poet sets out to look at and articulate the prisoners as singular individuals: “What I wanted was to convey the sense of normalcy for which humans strive under conditions that are anything but what we in the free world call normal, no matter what we may have done for which we were never in charge” (xiv). Wright’s “work,” meticulously illustrated in the intro, allows *One Big Self* to practice a mode of

aesthetic politics that allow the individuals being interviewed and photographed to exist as individuals.

The introduction also allows Wright to occupy and set up the in-between spaces at work throughout the text as well. Her overall project calls out mass incarceration, the subjugation of the individual; however, as noted in the interview with Kent Johnson, Wright relates, “Did I think what we were doing could change anything? Well of course not” (6). So, to return to the question of who the book is for, the answer would be many. Initially, the text appears to be for Luster and Wright, particularly in the bridge poem, where the speaker reiterates, “It is a summons” (xv). A summons is an order to appear in court; to summon is also to instruct someone to be present; to urgently ask for help; to call on people to attend a meeting; and to make an effort to produce a quality or reaction from within yourself. Wright’s “summons” is worked out through the intro and opening poem. The book is, obviously, for other poets and readers of poetry, many of whom will already agree with Wright’s tenets. Another obvious audience are the prisoners, who had the opportunity to receive the portraits, and for many this was the only likeness of themselves they owned. Does Wright’s project—calling out mass incarceration and its effects—reach other individuals who could care less, or profit from these things? As far as poems go, the bridge poem, between the intro and the text, is not aesthetically beautiful, eye-catching, or pleasing as a poetic artifact. It is singular in its content and delivery. Wright’s opening poem sets out the project in plainest terms, using stark mostly monosyllabic words; the poem invokes the poet’s trepidation, the struggle, as two lines mention: “Also: behind every anonymous number, a very specific face. / Also: there are more than two million individuals in this country, whose / sentences have rendered them

more or less invisible. Many of them / permanently” (xv). Wright’s main project throughout *One Big Self* is to render the prisoners as individuals, to show each prisoner’s “one big self,” that they are not forgotten. What the text accomplishes is a stark intervention and addition to prison literature; the text is one apart as well. The disparate, transgressive poetic practices are illustrated through multiple encounters with criminality and liminal spaces.

Spaces of Looking, Spaces of Writing

The interplay of liminal spaces is at its height in *One Big Self*, extending and breaking free from the study of space in earlier chapters. Wright’s text, other than Egon Schiele’s brief time spent behind bars in the previous chapter on Joanna Scott, is the only actual text where individuals are incarcerated, trapped, and must deal with day-to-day life locked away. In Baldwin’s text, Giovanni is imprisoned but we get his impressions filtered through David’s imagining. The first section of this chapter looked at myriad configurations of the criminal: from the obvious physical incarceration to what it means to create art with and about disparate groups of people, many of whom cannot speak for themselves. Now, looking at the liminal spaces throughout *One Big Self*, and Wright’s oblique encounters, John Wrighton’s notion of “poethical trajectory” helps to illuminate certain parts. Wrighton’s *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry* (2010) locates a number of experimental poets whose work “has been motivated by an ethical concern for others as a social responsibility” (1-2). Wrighton notes, however, that the “political agenda [in the study] does not take the form of a didactic presentation of an alternative social order or modality of being, but the democratising self-reflexivity of an ethical

saying” (2). Basing the study on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,¹¹⁵ Wrighton contends that the “civilisation of the western world, where power and injustice are so often co-joined, has been oriented according to this totalitarian axis and is suffering the consequences,” Wrighton continues, “the issuing violence is not directed only towards the other; in fact, the perpetrator is also the victim.... The ethical subject has a social responsibility (that inaugurates its being otherwise) in the face of alterity, the radical heterogeneity, of the other” (9). This deep-set responsibility can be practiced, notes Wrighton, “In the locus of the face-to-face, the possibility for an ethical subject that is ‘otherwise than being,’ or ‘beyond essence’ emerges” (12). Wright’s work in *One Big Self* is predicated on the face-to-face, on looking, observing, interacting, and exchanging; however, the work that Wright does is not simply a laying bare, showing the other as wholly transparent. A delicate balance is enacted in the space of the prison, the space of the text, and the space of the portrait, where both prisoners and Wright work with one another.

Counting Space, Counting Time

The first “poem,” or opening text of the sequence, thrusts the reader into a disorienting, disturbing, repetitive space. The fourteen-line poem—the sonnet—repeats the first word in each line, drawing attention to what one has, and also what one often overlooks: “Count your fingers / Count your toes / Count your nose holes / Count your blessings” (3). The three lines point toward the body. There is no distinct “space” the speaker inhabits, nor the addressee; when one is incarcerated, when one walks through

¹¹⁵ Wrighton looks at Levinas’s *Ethics and Infinity* (1985), *Difficult Freedom* (1990), *Otherwise than Being* (1999), and *Entre-Nous, Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998), to name a few.

these doors, all one has is one's body. Again, like the end of the intro, the second-person pronoun is integral to the poem and provides a break from the "I" used in the bridge poem. "Your" invites the reader to imagine, become a part of, enter the space as well. When the poem commands, "Count your blessings," the reader, in fact, does. One is here, not there. The next four lines continue this directive: "Count your stars (lucky or not) / Count your loose change / Count the cars at the crossing / Count the miles to the state line" (3). These scattered images suggest the in-between spaces one inhabits, relative to place and situation. One may count stars if one escapes a harrowing predicament; one can note that the situation can always be worse. The other images speak to the fringe: loose change cobbled together, cars at a crossing, leaving the state behind when one crosses the line. What is striking about this initial poem that is not specifically mentioned, yet the anaphora "Count" hints at, is the counting of time. This is the first thing one, perhaps, thinks about: counting the minutes, days, years—all of the time ahead, waiting. The next four lines continue, "Count the ticks you pulled off the dog / Count your calluses / Count your shells / Count the points on the antlers" (3). Again, the concrete images abstract both the time and space of the poem. The speaker, and individuals, and reader are all over, inhabiting many different thoughts, "counting" and mulling over an array of images. How does one, in fact, pass time? What does one do when all one has is time? Pull ticks off a dog; study the calluses from work; make a note of shells—sea shells? Gun shells?—stare at a deer head on the wall.

What Wright masterfully connotes with the initial poem is the continuation of her goal: "to lay out the real feel of time." Wright's opening poem, as well, frustrates and combats the traditional, popular notion of prison life most often depicted on TV, as a

space of non-stop violence and action. It is a violent space, no doubt, but it is also a space of immense swaths of time; the nothingness that awaits one day after day. In many ways, Wright's spatial play with time in *One Big Self* echoes many of the asides and the grappling with time from Waldrop's sequence. These startlingly transgressive nuances are what makes Wright's text so captivating, so difficult to discuss, and marks a complete break in her practice as a poet. Where Wright would never again encounter incarceration within her work at this level, the mark has been made, as she notes, in one of her later texts,¹¹⁶ quoting Simone Weil: "a mind enclosed in language is in prison" (128). This quote can be taken as an intellectually aesthetic statement regarding how one can be trapped in one's mind, in one's thoughts. It can also apply to the individuals in *One Big Self*, who Wright talks with, interviews, and uses their words to lineate poems, and how they feel, think and interact with their structures. Early in *The Poet, the Lion...*, Wright, in one of the sections entitled, "Nuptials & Violence," reflects on *One Big Self*: Individuals emerge from these places in their particular lineaments. Every picture strives to shorten the distance between 'us' and 'them,'" and continues, quoting Allen Grossman, that the "true function of poetry [art]...is to keep the image of persons as precious in the world. Everywhere there is has everything there is to look at" (8). Whereas Wright takes this maxim to heart, the individuals she portrays never come off as "precious" per se; this aspect is more in the deft, complicated, nuanced handling of the troublesome material. The initial poem practices these notes. The final two lines of the sonnet read, "Count the newjack's keys / Count your cards; cut them again" (3). The semicolon—working as caesura—is the only punctuation in the poem. The fact the poem

¹¹⁶ *The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All.*

ends without a period denotes the counting will never end; the time will never end. One's relationship to the space never ends. A reader might be quick to blow through this poem and get to the "meatier" parts of the text, where prisoners' lines are delineated, and momentary hints of a lyrical narrative can be gleaned. The impetus for the text, though, is in the first poem, and connects and reconnects throughout.

The notion of counting, which is so integral to prison life and *One Big Self*, is echoed later in the text. It is almost as though Wright, who has reiterated that she thinks "nothing will change" because of this project, is specifically attuned to the abstract minutiae of time and space. This focus draws attention to aspects that are often overlooked in works about prison, and this minute attention to detail and habitus are what separates Wright's poems from many of the more lazily constructed conceptual projects of a political nature, meant simply to shock. The second counting poem continues the attention to the body while also showcasing the body as a site of violence, physical pain, and decay. The first five lines read: "Count your grey hairs / Count your chigger bites / Count your pills / Count the times the phone rings / Count your T cells" (14). Here, the speaker is commanding the other to take note of the ravages of time (grey hairs, pills, T cells), indicating how a body ages and decomposes. One counts the phone rings, or watches the phone closely, if one is waiting on important news, a call from a loved one, contact from the outside of any sort. One grows old, grows sick, waiting. The next lines continue the assault on the body: "Count your mosquito bites / Count the days since your last menses / Count the chickens you've eaten / Count your cankers" (14). As before, the *sturm* and *drang* ravages not only one's emotional and psychological state but one's physical well-being. As an earlier, floating couplet, notes: "When I handed Franklin his

prints, his face broke. / *Damn*, he said to no one, *I done got old*" (6). The spatial confines of prison both emphasize and destroy time. Time crawls; it never moves; one counts—over and over—as the sequence suggests. On the other hand, time flies; it moves quickly, especially for individuals on the outside; prisoners are forgotten about, left behind; prisoners exist in limbo, floating, waiting. The poem ends, "Count your storm candles / Count your stitches / Count your broken bones / Count the flies you killed before noon" (14). The physical assault on the body—stitches, broken bones—is juxtaposed with the quotidian task of killing flies "before noon"; as in the first counting poem, this one sets up the assault on the body that is continued in the text and locates it with the assault on time.

Midway through the text, one must take stock, one must count again: "Count your notches / Count your condoms / before you go out / Saturday night / Satisfaction guaranteed / Count your folding money / Count the times you said you wouldn't go back" (45). One of the most obvious facts of prison, though one often overlooked, is that even though these individuals are confined within the walls, they are often "elsewhere," thinking about the "outside." This abstract concept is predicated on liminal spaces and spatiality. The individuals think of "before," and despite the inherent danger, the mental, emotional drain, one often thinks of "after." Wright's attention to counting registers these thoughts. One could make "notches" on the wall to mark time; "notches" can also be seen as a thing one marks as reaching the next level (another notch on the belt), a rite of passage (we think of all of the "rites of passage" encountered in prison). Condoms can point toward a time before, entering spaces where sexual freedom is less constrained, but a space where one must use protection nonetheless. And there is the strikingly cliché

refrain, “never again,” or “not again,” as in I will never return to prison / jail again; however, it is more likely than not that the individual will return. The next lines continue: “Count your debts / Count the roaches when the light comes on / Count your kids after the housefire / Count your cousins on your mother’s side” (45). In “Just Looking:” from *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* (2005), Wright relates, “Practically speaking every image has to be contained and the design respect the boundaries whether effortlessly or reluctantly. And while the images be thoroughly executed in the given spaces—that they should continue to burn not so much beyond as through the borders” (48). The images in the “counting” poems from *One Big Self* are disparate and disorienting. Instead of plainly conducted speech and poetic practice, Wright, in these moments, uses oblique juxtapositions that scatters thoughts, where the focus on various images proliferate, zeroing in and out. The “real feel of hard time” is felt when one counts one’s debts, to take stock of everything a person owes: debts to others, debts to organizations; once one leaves prison the debt is never wholly paid, the stigma remains, the mark, the space haunts each individual. On the practical side one falls into debt once one is caught within the criminal justice system.¹¹⁷ Counting the roaches can refer to a dilapidated space, a derelict environment and connects back to “count the flies you killed” in the previous poem. Counting “your kids” after the housefire is a poetic swerve, a taking stock, making sure the family is all right after a catastrophe, one where everything else is lost. The poem concludes, “Count your worrisome moles / Count your dead:” (45). The penultimate line deflates the gravity of the poem; a person expects the body for signs of cancer, for sickness, before the knock-out final line. Like the

¹¹⁷ Michelle Alexander likens the revolving door of incarceration to a “debtor’s prison,” where probation, parole, fines, and meeting the court’s expectation result in a return (85-91).

“counting” poem that opens the text, the only punctuation is the colon at the close of the poem, noting that the list goes on and on. “Count your dead” also brings attention to time and space. There is the “dead time” of nothing happening; the dead family members prisoners lose while on the inside—the refused mourning—and also the scary realization that the prisoners may wind up dead, either through violence or old age. These thoughts and fears are constant, they never go away, as the end punctuation of the poem reiterates.

C.D. Wright’s nuanced project, and the relationship to space and time, can also be illustrated through Michael W. Clune’s *Writing Against Time* (2013). At the open of his study, Clune contends that a “description of a house, person, or landscape in a novel or poem, and our experience of an actual house, person, or landscape, are not essentially different” (1).¹¹⁸ Clune argues that “[t]ime poisons perception” (3), that the more one sees or encounters an object, the duller our experience becomes. Clune, though, argues that “if humans lack the power to stop time, we can slow it” (4). Clune looks at a number of writers¹¹⁹ who attempt to defeat time through their practice, noting these writers “create images of more powerful images; they fashion techniques for imagining better techniques.... Fragments of the real world are brought inside and scrutinized for any hint

¹¹⁸ Clune notes that “[c]ritics and philosophers have drawn on recent neuro-scientific research to argue that the brain processes the images prompted by literature in much the same way as it processes any other image” (1). Clune continues, “To say that our brains process fictional images in much the same way as they process actual images is not, however, to say that there are no differences. Three are particularly salient. First, the experience of a novelistic description of a thunderstorm, compared with the experience of an actual thunderstorm, requires a different kind of interpretation. The reader draws on various linguistic and cultural competencies and assumptions in order to turn the marks on the page into the image he understands the author to intend to project. The second obvious difference between real and literary experiences is that the latter do not typically entail the same kinds of actions as the former. I will not run from Shirley Jackson’s ghosts. This may be, as some speculate, because my belief that an image is fictional severs it from action consequences (running for my life) but not from affective consequences (I shiver, my hair stands on edge). Or my failure to run may be due to the third difference between life and literature: literary images are less vivid than actual images” (2).

¹¹⁹ Marcel Proust, John Keats, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas De Quincey, Vladimir Nabokov, George Orwell, and John Ashbery to name a few.

of insight” (20). Clune’s argument looks at methods that stretch time and enable a different relationship with time.¹²⁰ Clune quotes Proust, who suggests “that the difference between a great artist and an ordinary person has nothing to do with personality, but is entirely due to the artist’s preternatural ability to ‘exteriorize’ his [or her] perceptual organization such that another can see through his [or her] eyes” (31). What C.D. Wright practices in *One Big Self*, and in the “counting” poems, recontextualizes one’s relationship with time; this way of seeing “new” is predicated on each individual’s relationship with space. Clune also notes that “literature produces its most valuable knowledge not by what it does, but as a by-product of its failure to do what is impossible” (63). *One Big Self* does not dull with time. Each reading, each experience produces different thoughts and encounters; however, these are harrowing journeys to undertake. Wright’s “counting” sections illustrate the impossibility of the “real feel of hard time,” but, through the lack of punctuation, the juxtapositions of disparate images, the oblique hints, they point toward a never-ending, of time going on.

The fourth “counting” section portrays bodily violence and draws specific attention to the spatial elements of time. The first line: “Count her bruises and contusions” (65), is a distinct turn in that the gendered pronoun draws attention to another, this time a physically abused woman; this abuse could be from the hands of a partner; it could also hint at violence in prison, from other inmates or guards; the referents may not even indicate someone in prison at all. The progression from the first

¹²⁰ Clune argues that John Ashbery’s “poetic career consists of a rigorous and sustained effort to take something you have never seen before, and show you what it would look like if you had seen it every day of your life” (116). Clune notes that “Ashbery’s poems are elaborately constructed theaters where alien and unfamiliar objects appear as they would to someone who is familiar with them.... [and] that Ashbery develops the descriptive conventions of novelistic realism to show us things that have the same kind of shape as Austen’s ‘handsome modern house.’ As he puts it in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” his descriptions are examples of “unfamiliar stereotype[s]” (*Self-Portrait* 73 qtd in Clune 117).

three “counting” poems, to the specific violence in the third, is jarring. This spatial disambiguation is part of the way these sections practice some of Clune’s “writing against time.” The next few lines continue: “Count your baby’s teeth / Count your bills / Count the birds you bagged / Count the pups Sissy had” (65). These moments release the violent tension, briefly, and locate the poem somewhere within the domestic, the ordinary. One counts the “baby’s teeth” to see the passing of time: what teeth are coming in; the bills stacked up are counted, taken note of. All of the “counting” poems obliquely echo one another and continue themes that pervade the text. The bills look back at the “debts” from the second “counting” poem. “Counting the pups” echoes the ticks and dogs from the first poem. The final two lines, as before, emphasize decay and time: “Count your cavities / Count the years” (65). Again, no punctuation indicates the continuous nature of the counting.

Criminal Form

Wright’s construction of *One Big Self*, its spatial layout, also adds layers to the speakers’, and the individuals’ relationship with time. Much of the text is influenced by Muriel Rukeyser’s documentary-oriented *U.S. 1* (1938) and James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941); the obvious examples are the moments when prisoners’ speech is rendered into lineated lines, the counting poems, on the other hand, are the moments from the text that most proliferate the spaces, the “big selves” at work. The title of the second to last “counting” poem is “After the Housefire,” and begins “Count your children / Count them again / Count the reasons why you came into being in the first place” (70). The title echoes the line from the second counting poem—“Count

your kids after the housefire” (45)—and emphasizes a relationship between parents and children, the constant worry parents have for their children; also, the way prisoners “lose” their children through being locked away. Another saying for when some bad stuff is going down is “The House is on Fire”; then, one runs. The third line works as an existential moment—“why you came into being...”—again, the second-person pronoun adds layers of meaning. One is the prisoner’s lament: why am I here? Was I born¹²¹ to suffer? Second, the reader ponders this question as well; then, the poet, before finally stepping back and asking the overall question to everyone. As in Rosmarie Waldrop’s sequence, where philosophically dense questions were posited throughout, then undercut by the quotidian, in a similar way, the counting poems practice the same modes. The final four lines read: “Count your nickels / Count the days you’ve got before your next check / Count the wrong turns you took to get here” (70). In many ways, the counting sections work as an *ars poetica* and a map for the text: what these moments illustrate is a difficult, often horrible journey; a journey that in many ways never ends. Again, the speaker implores to “[c]ount your nickels,” the spare change that adds up to nothing, along with the waiting, the struggling before the next check. There are also hints of extreme violence that can also be looked at as surgery and repair (“staples in the back of your head”); the final line dwells on time, space, and mistakes: individuals are constantly replaying the movie of their life, wishing to have made the right turn instead of mistake after mistake, wishing to have gone there instead of ending up here, in this space. The devastating final line recalls the final lines from the previous poems as well, locating the endless thought of a different life within the realm of space and time.

¹²¹ One thinks of the Billie Holiday song, “Why was I born?”

The last of the counting poems consists of three lines floating inside another poem, entitled “Weapon of Opportunity,” and the short moment drives home the pounding notion of time and four walls closing in. They read: “Count the nights you lay awake waiting / Count the nights you lay awake wondering / Count the ways you rewrote the ending” (71). The idea of “waiting”—waiting as a practice, waiting as an exercise, waiting as an art form, waiting as a punishment—is probably the most integral aspect of incarceration.¹²² One is always waiting, and what is frightening is that most times one does not know what one waits for. Time to pass? Something, another bad thing to happen? Coming to the end of the counting sections and the title of the last poem, one could ask: is “counting” a “weapon of opportunity”? Wright’s project, predicated on looking and witness, utilized and defined by space, looks at counting as a form of practice for individuals, a form that most take for granted. Now, this is not to say that it helps, or alleviates immediate suffering. However, an argument can be made that “passing the time” is the most difficult part, and one in which counting helps.

There is no sustained scholarly study of *One Big Self*. There are reviews; it is discussed whenever Wright is profiled in a literary journal, newspaper, or scholarly text. Stephen Burt’s chapter on Wright mentions the text toward the end, locating it within a strain of photographic looking. Partly this is because critics do not know what to make of it, how to look at it. It continues a long line of prison literature yet also creates something unique. Most descriptions look at the text as a book-length poem, which it is; yet sections and stand-alone poems can be looked at in depth as well. What *One Big Self* calls for is a

¹²² Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953), was a failure in Miami, FL, when it was staged in 1956, with many patrons walking out, but was a success at San Quentin, when it was performed in 1957. Many of the inmates could relate to the various notions of waiting portrayed.

single study, meticulously close reading and situating each moment, each sequence from the text. Unfortunately, this study allows only a glimpse at a few integral moments, spaces that summons, that call for attention and close reading. Three other parts of *One Big Self* help illustrate Wright's project and locate the text within my current study as well as practice some of Clune's "writing against time": a poem toward the end that works as "Q & A" in the text and problematizes the notion of confession and interrogation; the portraits and descriptions of individuals, particularly in costume, that situate a unique mode of performance; and, sections of the text that connect and reconnect specifically with the counting poems. The next section, a series of letters, or epistolary moments, further reinscribe spatial components of both the text, and individuals involved.

Criminal Correspondence

The "letter" sections, or poems, echo the counting parts through different engagements with space and time, and locate the reader alongside the poet and prisoners. The first letter poem, "My Dear Conflicted Reader," reads

If you will grant me that most of us have an equivocal nature, and that when we waken we have not made up our minds which direction we're headed; so that—you might see a man driving to work in a perfume-and dye-free shirt, and a woman with an overdone tan hold up an orange flag in one hand, a Virginia Slim in the other—as if this were their predestination. Grant me that both of them were likely contemplating a different scheme of things. WHERE DO YOU WANT TO SPEND ETERNITY the church marquee demands on the way to my boy's school, SMOKING OR NON-SMOKING. I admit I had not thought of where or which direction in exactly those terms. The radio ministry says g-o-d has

a wrong-answer button and we are all waiting for it to go off... (14)

“Conflicted” is a telling word in the title. It describes the project as a whole, especially a number of the elements touched upon in the first section. The poet speaks about the minutiae, the drive to school, the passing of construction workers, the church sign. It also breaks the space between reader and text, the way one might think of the other, the individual. What this prose block conveys through its elliptical swerves and imagistic side-steps, is that each person is a wrong turn from somewhere else, that the space that separates is negligible at best. That life is random, chance, and despite the church’s marquee and “the radio ministry,” one can end up somewhere unexpected. The second “letter” poem doubles down on the first, calling attention to the reader through the title in a more aggressive manner: “Dear Affluent Reader.” Here, as in the intro, the speaker portrays Louisiana’s landscape, the empty spaces, the natural, destroyed and replaced with the structure: “Welcome to the Pecanland Mall. Sadly, the pecan grove had to be / dozed to build it. Home Depot razed another grove. There is just the one / grove left and the creeper and the ivy have blunted its sun. The uglification of your landscape is all but concluded” (24). The poem draws attention to the reader, who shops, who goes about the day-to-day activity oblivious to surroundings, oblivious to prisons and prisoners. This chord is struck without any mention of incarceration, only the speaker, who notes, “We are driving around the shorn / suburb of your intelligence, the photographer and her factotum” (24). The speaker, as self-described “factotum” does, in fact, do all kinds of various work. These lines make the reader aware of the surrounding spaces: the landscape, the space of privilege.

The epistolary poems also work as a bridge to prison literature and enable the prisoner a possibility of a separate space. In the middle of the text, two poems address the prisoners. The first, “Dear Unbidden, Unbred,” opens, “This is a flock of sorrows, of unoriginal sins, a litany of obscenities. / This is a festering of hateful questions. Your only mirror is one of stainless steel. The image it affords will not tell whether you are young still / or even real” (38). Here, in one of the most harrowing poetic moments from the text, the speaker addresses the prisoners in desultory images of subjectivity and lament. These words illustrate how prisoners are viewed and treated. The poem imitates the prison’s “claustral space, Hours of lead, air of lead. The sound, / metallic and amped. You will know the force of this confinement as / none other. You have been sentenced for worthlessness. In other eyes, / crucifixion is barely good enough” (38). Similar to the counting poem midway, this moment brutalizes, dehumanizes, and showcases the horrific spatial journey prisoners undertake. The speaker looks at the “schadenfreudes, the sons of schadenfreudes, [who] will witness your end with / ‘howls of execration.’ Followed by the burning of your worthless body on / a pile of old tires. None will claim your remains or your worthless effects: soapdish, Vaseline, comb, paperback” (38). The speaker emphasizes and reiterates how prisoners are forgotten, deemed worthless. The heightened language and brutal images drive these points home. One has nothing and is forgotten as nothing. A startling aspect of *One Big Self* is how Wright swerves from prosaic and stripped-down literal language, as in the poem connecting the intro to the text, and then juxtaposes with imagistic leaps of terror that sear the mind. Many of these moments echo Dostoevsky’s *The House of the Dead* (1861), particularly his description, “These were criminals entirely deprived of all rights or property, fragments cut off from society, with

branded faces to bear witness for ever that they were outcasts” (14). Wright’s middle poem works in this manner in that one who is “unbidden” is one who is uninvited, left out of society. The poem ends with how prisoners are often viewed: “You brought this on yourself. You and no one / else. You with the dirty blond hair, backcountry scars, and the lazy dog- / eye. You shot the law and the law won. You become a reject of hell” (38). The playful inversion of the famous Bobby Fuller song, “I Fought the Law,” is undercut by the final sentence. This poem illustrates a living hell; however, within hell there can be moments of transcendence; these aspects are what the letter poems convey as well.

The next letter poem, a few pages later, works as another *ars poetica*, and a *mea culpa* of sorts for the poet. Plainly titled, “Dear Prisoner,” it incorporates a Waldrop-like fracturing of language, with sentence fragments and blocks of white space:

I too love. Faces. Hands. The circumference
 Of the oaks. I confess. To nothing
 You could use. In a court of law. I found.
 That sickly sweet ambrosia of hope. Unmendable
 Seine of sadness. Experience taken away.
 From you. I would open. The mystery
 Of your birth. To you. I know. We can
 Change. Knowing. Full well. Knowing

It is not enough.

Poetry Time Space Death
 I thought. I could write. An exculpatory note.
 I cannot. Yes, it is bitter. Every bit of it, bitter.
 The course taken by blood. All thinking
 Deceives us. Lead (kindly) light.
 Notwithstanding this grave. Your garden
 This cell. Your dwelling. Who is unaccountably free. (42)

Here the poet is balancing, midway through the text, on a precipice. The whole project is bent to breaking; the spatial layout of the poem, the stopping and starting, echoes the difficult, impossible task. In the second part of the poem, the speaker muses on writing an exculpatory note—the book? Some of the poems?—but admits defeat. The line floating in white space, “It is not enough,” also notes the text; that at the halfway point the poet registers failure. And really, how could a book do justice, actually portray “the real feel of hard time”? However, within this letter there is hope. What is so masterful about *One Big Self* is how it balances these difficult topics in such diffuse, nuanced ways, and also how the poems look at and attempt to witness the prisoners’ struggles. The text never infantilizes, never takes the easy way out. The hope conveyed in this section is the hope of letter writing. Letter writing and prison, like waiting and prison, are inextricable. Letters and mail time are, usually, the most important objects and most important part of the prisoners’ day; letters represent a connection to an outside space; letters deliver news from the outside world; letters help communicate with loved ones; they can give hope. Wright’s epistolary poems run the gamut from hellish to hopeful. The act of composing a letter allows a momentary reprieve, an escape of sorts, a second of peace. As Gaston Bachelard notes in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), “Yet even in this prison, there is peace.... And to get out of prison all means are good ones. If need be, mere absurdity can be a source of freedom” (103, 104). What, ultimately, can be more absurd than expecting to write one’s self free? Yet people attempt this feat all the time.

The “Dear Prisoner” poem, coming on the heels of the brutal previous poem, “Dear Unbidden...” marks a distinct turning point in *One Big Self*. This poem, as well, marks a turning point in this study in that notions of transgression that have seemingly

proliferated, dispersed, worked on and practiced throughout all the texts, must also be checked. I have argued that each of these writers and each of these singular texts have performed various modes of artistic transgression; modes that have signaled a complete shift in each writer's oeuvre, and in the practice of the art; to transgress, to go beyond the limits of what is morally, socially, or legally acceptable, can only be temporary. And, as I write this study, I am left to wonder how "transgressive" each of these writers actually are. All, at one time or another held (or hold) university positions; all have been the recipients of numerous awards. If this is the case, how transgressive can one be? Now, at this point, I contend that even if the writers studied cannot be worked into a completely transgressive mode of artistic being—and really, who could? Once something is noted as transgressive, it becomes included, part of the mainstream—I argue that these texts, however momentarily, do in fact, offer practices of transgression that go beyond and mark a singular turning point. Wright, after the previous two poems, constructs a promise and a salve of sorts in "Dear Child of God." The speaker opens with a question and declaration of art: "If you will allow me time. To make a dove. I will spend it / Well. A half success is more than can be hoped for" (61). The speaker's tone is quite different from the anguished statements in the previous two poems. It is almost as if the speaker has assessed the failure, that the text cannot possibly accommodate all the hopes and plans, and now one must cull together what is left and make something from it. The addressees, again, are multiple. As the close of the text is immanent, the speaker wants, needs more time to "make a dove," the bird of peace. This time, also, will be spent well. The moment, however, is not an overwhelmingly positive turn, as the poem continues, "And / Turning on the hope machine is dangerous to contemplate. First / I have to find a

solid bottom.... One requires ideal tools: a huge suitcase / Of love a set of de- iced wings the ghost of a flea” (61). The space between some of the words, after some of the lines, indicate the thoughtfulness, the spacing and pacing the speaker is going through in thinking the rest of the project into being. The speaker also looks for a mooring, a “solid bottom.” Despite the intense attention to physical space—the prison, the structure—many of the poems up to this point float, are untethered. The speaker requires a new space, “Music intermittent or ongoing” (61), and repeats “Here” and “Here” at various points in the poem. The speaker promises, “Working from my best memory. Of a bird I first saw nesting In the razor wire” (61). The end, with its juxtaposition of bird with barbed-wire, offers a turn, a chance of working in the in-between space.

The final letter poems, on opposite pages, coming a few pages from the close of the text, are brief warnings and echoes. Three consist of one line each; the first, “Dear Errant Kid,” reads, “Remember the almighty finger on the wrong-answer button” (76), and refers back to the opening letter poem, when the speaker drives to school and sees the sign on the church marquee. The next, “Dear Damned Doomed and Forgotten,” connotes unease: “Mother Helen has a bad feeling—the rehearsals for your execution / have already begun” (76). Hints of Sister Helen Prejean, who worked tirelessly against the death penalty, and who is the author of *Dead Man Walking* (1993), are at work. The third, titled “Dear Fugitive,” simply warns “No one’s beat the dogs yet” (76), which repeats an earlier line from a prison guard. These short, clipped, uneasy moments illustrate multiple facets of time and space: they work as warnings and remonstrances; their spatial construction is set against a back drop of mostly white space on the page. The last letter poem, “Dear Virtual Life,” absurdly puts forth a proposition: “What if I were to trade my

manumission for your incarceration. If only / for a day. At the end of which the shoes must be left at the main gate to / be filled by their original occupants. There is no point and we will not / shrink from it. There is only this day to reinvent everything and lose it all / over again. Nothing will be settled or made easy” (77). The choice of “manumission” is striking; here, the speaker likens the project to holding the prisoners captive.

Manumission also has overtly racial tones in that the term is used to describe a slaveholder freeing slaves. These notes are intense; the poem also provides the cliché, “what if,” as in walking in another’s shoes for a day, or trading places. How, then, would the other individual view life? The text, coming to a close, has “walked” this fine line throughout; the poem inhabits a multitude of disparate spaces; the poem, as well, works in a different space to convey the difficulty of these encounters. The last section looks briefly at the “Q & A” poem and also the portraits and direct speech in *One Big Self* and situates this chapter and the project as a whole.

Constructing Transgression

The “Q & A” poem toward the close of *One Big Self* marks a turning point in the spatial components of the text and problematize the traditional notion of confession and interrogation. The title of the poem reads as a court case: “Lines of Defense Including Proceedings from the State of *Louisiane* vs. The Convergence of the Ur-real and the Unreal,” with the opening as follows:

Q: Where were you on the night in question

A: Watching reruns

Q: What did you do before

A: Fattened frogs for snakes

Q: Before that

A: Sold Monkeys door-to-door

Q: Did you ever imagine yourself doing something really useful

A: N/A

Q: What's your DOC #

Q: What's your idea of Love, Loss, Mercy, etc.

A: N/A

This surreal question and answer note the limits of confession and pushes them further.

The fact that the title includes “Un-real and the Unreal,” and that many of the answers are absurd illustrate a push back against the confession, the interrogation. Famously, Michel Foucault has noted how “the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth” (59). The confession is played out through a vast network of power dynamics as well: “The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship...” (61).¹²³ Ultimately, according to Foucault, the “confession lends itself...at least to new ways of exploring the existing ones...” (63). In *One Big Self*, in the “Q & A” section, confession and interrogation is subverted. Most often, the one in power, the one who questions the other to extract information, remains mostly silent; here the one being questioned remains silent, or answers with absurdist statements: “Q: When did your troubles with the revenue service begin / A: On Kafka’s birthday, Your Honor” (62). The “Q & A” segment also disorients and confuses who is actually questioning and who

¹²³ Foucault continues, “for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it; it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (61-62).

is answering. The above reply indicates someone of power, an interrogator, someone holding something over the confessor's head.

The confessee, the one being interrogated, at different times, reads as if it is Wright speaking, reads as though the speaker/poet from many of the other sections is speaking; many of the answers are repetitions of earlier speech and moments from the text, where prisoners' language is meted into poetic lines: "Q: How do you get rid of the stains / A: I know hot water sets blood" (63). The confessor also cuts through the formality of the interrogation with light-hearted moments of bawdy repartee: "Q: Is that the tattoo that says Utopia / A: No, that's the tattoo that says Real Men Eat Pussy" (63). What the "Q & A" poem also reiterates is John Wrighton's "poethical turn," through its attention to the confessor's language and predicament, and also Michael Clune's "writing against time," through its spatial back and forth and seeming absence of linear structure; in these ways, the "Q & A" overturns, momentarily, the traditional idea of confession and interrogation by transforming the criminal space into one of subversion and play, indicated through the insouciant replies and refusal to answer certain questions. These moments, however, are undercut by intense feelings of dread and fear. The poem closes

Q: Whom do you see in the mirror
What is your favorite body of water, and why
What is your idea of a good car
Do you liked fried pickles
How long were you in school, what was your favorite subject
How old were you when you began to mutilate yourself
What is the nicest thing anyone ever did for you
Did you ever have your own room
Did you wet the bed
Did you pour salt on the slugs
Did he touch you there
Did you ever make something you were proud of
Can you carry a tune

Do you like okra
Have you ever been scared to the core

Q: What did she say

A: Say, Your Honor, she say oh my godohmygodohmygod
Say, Your Honor, she say oh honey ohhoneyohhoney (64)

This litany of terrifying questions evokes the cry, the scream at the end of the poem.

What these questions also do is force the reader (and poet/speaker) to reflect and run them through the mind as well. They are personal questions of horror and abuse, undercut by seemingly quotidian questions (“Do you like fried pickles”). The questions also locate the body as a site of struggle within the space of confession and interrogation. Judith Butler argues that the spaces of the subject and abject are formed through repeated practices that leads to a productive paradox as it relates to any resistance to the norms, one which could inspire agency within the normative spaces (15). Butler’s study is located within the realm of heteronormative society, one in which “sex” is codified and inscribed; Butler, in her preface, also questions what are “the constraints by which bodies are materialized as “sexed,” and how are we to understand the “matter” of sex, and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility? Which bodies come to matter—and why? (xi-xii).¹²⁴ Is it possible to take Butler’s ideas and locate them with the subjugated bodies in prison, in Wright’s *One Big Self*?

Bodies in prison are overlooked, viewed as less than, and / or uncared for; no one worries much about prison violence; it comes with the territory, most people think. Is

¹²⁴ Butler’s argument continues the notion of gender performativity put forth in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and contends that bodies and gender are separate things, gender is something acquired, not something one is born with.

Wright's project—looking, talking, the speech she lineates into poems—forms of resistance? Are the portraits Luster takes, develops, and disperses ways to reinscribe and look at the subjugated body differently? One must be wary, as well, of contending the portraits, the speech, the poems, the books, as overturning the political apparatus completely. Despite the fact these moments take place, the prisoners are still in prison, and Wright and Luster will go back to their lives. Pheng Cheah notes how Butler cautions against politicizing as well: “since all agency is enabled by the reiteration of hegemonic discursive norms, there are no guarantees that acts such as passing and drag do not end up reinforcing these very norms. This is a valuable caution that political critique must be interminable” (118). Wright's text, in many ways, is endless. It begs for rereading, though each journey through is more and more difficult. The text, in this way, practices Clune's “writing against time” in that it does not dull or become less enthralling or disturbing as time passes. This is part of the project as well. I wonder, though, what is reinforced within the frame of *One Big Self*? Obviously, Wright and Luster are exerting their final control and power over what gets published and seen. Both, through their care and attention, though, appear to want to give as much, or almost as much as they take. The confessee's cry of anguish illustrates the subjectivity of the body at work. The “Q & A” poetic sequence, particularly the end of the first poem, with its emphasis on questioning the body, locating the body as a site of abuse and damage, works as looking at the body in a different light, and serves as connector to the portraits and the speech Wright forms into poems.

Luster's portraits and Wright's poems using the prisoners' speech are the most transgressive parts of the text(s), and ones that illustrate the prisoners' momentary

attempts at agency through performance. In a highly political, albeit swerving and oblique engagement, these two sites are the most prescient as well. The cover of C.D. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation*, portrays an African American woman, sitting; the background is black, and she is dressed in a white sheet, a costume not unlike a Pierrot outfit, with a pointed, floppy white hat and a black eye mask. It is difficult to describe the look on her face; she appears imploring, questioning, staring dead-straight into the camera. The same portrait appears a quarter of the way through Deborah Luster and C.D. Wright's unpaginated artist's book, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Under the portrait reads: "doc # 298170 / dob. 7.26.68 / pob. New Orleans / sentence. 7 years / 4 children / work. chair plant / Halloween / Haunted House / LCIW 10.27.00," directly under the portrait is the caption, "St. Gabriel, Louisiana"; this is the women's prison. To say the portrait is haunting would be an understatement and would not do it justice. The prisoners had the option to include their names with the portrait, and many of them do; this woman, however, chose not to. In her introduction, Deborah Luster relates:

I cannot explain the need I felt to produce these portraits, because I do not fully understand it myself. I only know that it has something to do with the formal quality of loss and the way we cannot speak directly to those who have gone—how to touch the disappeared. I cannot explain my need to produce these portraits in such numbers except to say that I needed an aesthetic equivalent to the endless and indirect formality of loss. I also needed rules to support my intentions as to keep from being trapped by them. (Luster, Wright)

The loss Luster mentions could be her own, indicating her mother who was murdered. The loss is also the prisoners'; how their lives are seemingly over. Further in the intro, Luster mentions "return[ing] over twenty-five thousand prints to inmates,"¹²⁵ Many choose to dress up; to pose in different ways; to make various facial expressions. Stephen Burt notes that "Luster depicts the prisoners, never the prison; portraits have no backdrops or settings, just costumes and props. Inmates wear Carnival hats, step back from the camera, pose in pairs, hold boards or signs ('missing you'), scowl, smile, or flaunt tattoos" (51). Another portrait shows three young African American men posing together. One individual stands off to the side, in the background, holding a black sheet for the backdrop, behind the two men in front, who stand, one with arms crossed, the other flexing his biceps; the look on each of their faces is jarringly different; the man in back has a slight smile; the two in front have insouciant looks of playfulness and, what appears to be momentary happiness. They are all young: thirty, twenty, and nineteen; the picture could have been taken anywhere, any time. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), Roland Barthes confesses, "If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents" (99). A practice that *One Big Self* relates and instills within the encounter, is wanting to know more. The *punctum* in the above portrait consists of the belt worn by James "Shake Back" Jackson, the ring on Brian "Lil' Collins's" right ring finger, and the way Quinten

¹²⁵ "Each person photographed received an average of ten to fifteen wallet-sized prints. I have returned over twenty-five thousand prints to inmates. For the inmates and their families these photographs can be magic things in ways that a letter or a visit cannot be. One woman, whose nineteen children had not written or visited her in the fifteen years of her incarceration, wanted to send photos home to 'soften the hearts' of her children. A few months later, four of her children came to St. Gabriel for a reunion with their mother, down for ninety-nine years. An Angola inmate sent his photos to his sister in Florida. She had not seen him in over thirty years. Contact" (Luster, Wright).

“Kareem” Millage tilts his head, in the background of the portrait. But one fears if one lingers too long that an aestheticization overtakes the experience; or, is the experience predicated on aestheticization in the first place? Yet, at this moment, the spell is broken, and one realizes these individuals are in prison, many for a long time, or even the rest of their lives.

The only other portrait in Wright’s *One Big Self* is on the back cover and shows simply a woman’s tattooed right arm stretched out, palms open; this portrait connects the text(s) to the art world, a more aesthetic moment, while simultaneously reiterating the confines of prison. The woman’s name is Tina McGee, and the caption reads: “tattoo. portrait of inmate’s sister, Elena McGee, murdered in 1994 in a drive-by shooting at the St. Bernard Projects, New Orleans” (Luster, Wright). What immediately strikes about this portrait is how it echoes and seemingly recreates the outstretched arm in Robert Mapplethorpe’s famous *Young Man with Arm Extended* (1975).¹²⁶ What the portrait of Tina McGee’s arm does, however, is completely reconfigure the body as an in-between space and site of subjectivity and momentary going beyond. The tattoo—maybe done in prison?—works as McGee taking ownership, albeit momentarily, of her body, and also what is displayed. This is a tricky moment that maneuvers through politically rocky terrain, and a journey both Wright and Luster, through their aesthetic constructions, are constantly reminding the reader and viewer of: these individuals are in prison.

What also works in this in-between space of construction are the portraits of prisoners in Halloween and Mardi Gras costumes. One of the most striking is the portrait

¹²⁶ On this picture, Barthes notes, “This boy with his arm outstretched, his radiant smile, though his beauty is in no way classical or academic, and though he is half out of the photograph, shifted to the extreme left of the frame, incarnates a kind of blissful eroticism” (59).

of Zelphea Adams, who wears the prisoners' stripes, yet has constructed a giant, elaborate hat, an exaggerated stove-pipe that she painted with black and white stripes to match the uniform. The hat has beads dangling down and around, and a giant feather stuck to it; also, her face is painted with black and white striped make-up to further mimic her uniform. She has a slight smile, a playful look. The portraits that showcase individuals dressed in Halloween or Mardi Gras costumes momentarily enact some of the ideas of Carnival. As Mikhail Bakhtin notes, carnivals were occasions in which the social hierarchies of everyday life, with their solemnities, pieties, and etiquette, as well as their ready-made truths, could be overturned, creating a 'world-upside down'" (81). Similarly, Wright's helter-skelter poetic construction mimics the Carnival as well, creating word portraits that disturb and disambiguate. Early in Wright's text, lines, prisoners' speech, float freely: "I know every word to every song on *Purple Rain*.—Willie" (5); "The last time you was here I had a headful of bees" (5); "My auntie works here, and two of my cousins. If I get in trouble, / get a write-up, my mama knows before supper.—George" (6); "My mug shot totally turned me against being photographed" (7); "Pop names every single one of his roses, his company keepers" (16); "I haven't found anyone good enough for my cats, said Lyles" (16). What these floating lines portray is the floating nature of these individuals; the spatial breaking within an extremely horrible structure—the prison. These lines are mini-portraits that illustrate ephemeral snatches of speech, individual thoughts that float and connect with Luster's portraits.

Jennie Berner focuses on Deborah Luster's use of tintype in the portraits to illustrate a specific artistic encounter. Tintype, known to resist some of the formalizing associations with traditional portraiture, draws further attention to both artist and

prisoner. Berner contends: “Tintypes relative indifference to the anesthetizing of their work enabled subjects to take more active roles in the composition of the portraits. Subjects often choose how to pose, where to look, what expressions to have, and what to wear” (Berner). These aspects are portrayed in the many different poses and look of the individuals in Luster and Wright’s text. This play between photographer and prisoner, then, does “not overdetermine [Luster’s] subject’s identities as prisoners. On the contrary, they enable her subjects to express a wide range of identities and aspirations,” Berner continues, “some of which seem deeply sincere, others deeply ironic, and others so fantastical that they are difficult to reconcile with the reality of prison life” (Berner). Luster’s tintypes also draw attention to race, as expressed in one of Wright’s poems, titled, “Black is the Color,” that echoes Nina Simone: “of that big old ugly hole / of 77% of the inmates in Angola / of your true love’s hair / of 66% of the inmates at St. Gabriel / of the executioner’s corduroy hood” (34).¹²⁷ Berner, ultimately, reads both texts as much more diffuse, troublesome encounters. Commenting on Luster’s project to locate the prisoners’ “very own selves,” Berner argues, “Are these really the subjects’ ‘very own selves’? Does the fact that the inmates choose how to dress and pose themselves necessarily ensure that their ‘very own selves’ are being presented? More to the point, what does the phrase even mean?” (Berner). These thoughts are what make it difficult, almost impossible to consider either the portraits or the poems on their own. Berner, notes that the “poem in particular displays a kind of abstraction that violently wrenches readers from lived experience and locates them in a formal space” (Berner). The poem is,

¹²⁷ Berner argues that “Luster’s tin-type style photographs, which have an antique look to them, further underlie the historical significance of these statistics. They show that despite the time that has elapsed since the Civil War, when tintypes reaches the height of their popularity, the status of African Americans still looks bleak” (Berner).

despite its intents and purposes, a highly diffuse, artistic creation, one that is devoid of structural narrative, in favor of floating lines, difficult and jangled thoughts. In many ways, this practice, in fact, does hint at “the real feel of hard time,” particularly how it repels and draws readers, always inviting while keeping its distance, mimicking the impossibility to ever truly feel as others have felt, unless one has journeyed the same road.

Epilogue

Toward a Criminal Aesthetic

Wright's poetic practice offers moments of slippage, apertures that briefly look into "the real feel of hard time." In many ways both Luster and Wright's texts balance difficult notions of hospitality, ideas of guest and host, terms that relate to the rest of the work in this study as well. Ideas of hospitality in *One Big Self* can be illustrated through Derrida's thinking on the topic. Hospitality makes it necessary that one must have some type of power to host, and that the host must have power over the people being hosted. The reason is that if guests take over the host is no longer in control. This means, then, any attempt for hospitality is also coextensive with the host keeping control. Wright and Luster, at all points in their construction, are in control; in one sense they are "hosting"; what makes this characterization of "hospitality" much trickier is that, at the same time, the prisoners are hosting them. Whereas, ultimately, Wright and Luster hold sway, in particular with what gets created and disseminated on the artistic front, they are also somewhat at the mercy of the prisoners, who must agree to take part, who must work with and trust them to a certain extent. There is an artistic symbiosis, a mutual benefit and exchange. The subtle interplay and creative back-and-forth are what makes both Luster and Wright's texts so complicated to deal with. Even though Luster and Wright want to draw attention to the prisoners' plight and mass incarceration, the texts are first and foremost high works of art, not polemics. The focus on form is one of the main factors that differentiates the texts in this study from traditional studies that focus on criminality and prison literature.

Complicated notions of hospitality are also at play through David's encounters with others and his navigation of difficult spaces in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. David's movement through a series of spaces, such as the bar and Giovanni's room, forms who he is at the close of the text. Many of these spaces are predicated on their inhabitants housing and welcoming David. Though David continues to run, hide, and self-loathe, he makes a move toward narrative invention with his creative thinking of Giovanni in the prison cell, David's first and primary move toward hospitality and creation in the text. Baldwin's attention to the criminal is at work through his attention to crime; however, the break in form of the novel does not focus on the criminal act but rather on David's narrative play with the act. David constantly pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable, particularly with his relationships. At the same time he is caught, trapped in the very spaces he helped create. If there is any way out for David, and I do not know if there is, it could be through his attempt at narrative construction. This way out differentiates from previous criminal texts, where a "way out" is specifically illustrated and attained after the criminal has traversed through a continuous series of spaces and served his time. The way out in *Giovanni's Room*, in turn, is not clear. Whereas previously David constructs his life, and the lives of others on the fly, and through various silences, his minute, sustained attention on the imagining of Giovanni's final moments offers a break that could point toward the life of an artist.

Rosmarie Waldrop's engagement with the criminal echoes Wright's in its focus on the political. Waldrop's speaker looks at the crimes of war through slant, oblique angles. The practice of the glimpse offers brief moments where the speaker can engage before swerving to another topic. Rather than the prolonged gaze at war, illustrated by

most war literature, Waldrop's speaker is distracted, turning over personal thoughts with shifting concerns on war, attempting to see both the personal and political through a philosophical lens. However, this attempt does not completely work, and the speakers are left with fractured syntax and the continued grasp toward language. Waldrop illustrates this trouble through the broken form of her prose poems that feature disconnected lines floating in white space. The speaker in the poetic sequence continuously draws attention to the victims of war, especially in the consideration of the Other and the U.S.'s occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. The criminal aspects of war are raised, yet there is no overemotive reaching; instead, there is grim acceptance and a promise to write, talk, and move forward. The feminine space is also touched upon through multiple philosophical asides and a self-reflective awareness. Waldrop's project is a practice in difficulty: she combines the lyric and personal alongside the experimental. Despite the muted emotional engagement, there are many instances where the speaker starts, notes a personal aside, and attempts to locate a philosophical frame, before quickly returning to the overtly political. This method is the practice of the glimpse, and illustrates these moments as fluid, overlapping, and inevitable. Previously, most war writing's sustained focus centered around the singular soldier's experience, one who is primarily male, and traced his journey through boyhood to manhood, tracking the horrible lessons learned. Waldrop's engagement initially appears static; the movement of and in the poems is less physical and more philosophical. What gradually appears is an oblique engagement with the apparatus of war.

Joanna Scott's *Arrogance* offers diffuse ways to look at and interact with the *enfant terrible*, Egon Schiele, and also opens a different way to engage with the lives of

artists. Michel Serres's notion of the parasite further explores the idea of hospitality while complicating the roles of host and guest. In a *künstlerroman*, traditionally, the artist is at the center and dictates the action, the maturation of the artist is explored in detail, and the world is viewed through his or her lens. In *Arrogance* a drastic change occurs; Scott's female narrator constructs and draws a kaleidoscopic portrait of Schiele and his mistress, Vallie. In doing so, the young girl recreates the narrative and, in a sense, becomes an artist. Schiele does paint her nude portrait; however, she is never simply a passive, compliant model. Each move she makes is specifically calculated to get closer to both Schiele and Vallie, to interact with them in the hope that their style will rub off, and to one day become an artist herself. She never paints but her recreation of Schiele's life, focused on the women surrounding him and their subsequent influence, is a distinct, singular artistic statement. In many ways this narrative recreation echoes David's toward the close of *Giovanni's Room*, Wright's symbiotic recreation alongside Luster and the prisoners in *One Big Self*, and also Waldrop's creation of a different space to talk about war in *Driven to Abstraction*. Scott's dizzying narrative play, the insouciant mixing of the absurd with the tragic, mirrors the juxtaposing of time and space in Schiele's gnarled portraits, while simultaneously pushing the project further. Scott equally exalts and obliterates Schiele; art and the artist seethes and blurs within the delicate spatial interplay of form and content.

The seemingly incongruent texts in this study are loosely tethered through their collective attention to and push against form, and their complication of the criminal. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* locates David's criminal behavior and intensely investigates his self-loathing and wish to run from who he is. In one sense he is his own punisher and

captor throughout the text. No one judges David harsher than he judges himself. With this point, the text breaks from the traditional focus on the criminal and the criminal's punishment from outside forces. David, at all times, inhabits a paradoxical space: he escapes in that he is never apprehended or punished, yet David never escapes his own view of himself. David's attempts at narrative construction toward the end work as a move to break free. Similarly, the speaker in Rosmarie Waldrop's poetic sequence, "By the Waters of Babylon," from *Driven to Abstraction*, locates the crime of war, but the speaker appears trapped in her or his own circular focus. Only through the formal invention of the glimpse, a different way of working through the prose poem, can the speaker attempt to come to terms with the criminal. The spatial play within these texts further connects their project. David appears homeless; he runs from the U.S. to Paris with the hope of a safety he never finds. The speaker in the poetic sequence occupies different spaces as well: there is a constant oscillation between what is happening in the United States with the occupation in Iraq. James Baldwin also left the U.S. and lived his later years in France, where he died. Rosmarie Waldrop left war-torn Germany shortly after WWII to settle in the U.S. and make a life writing and translating poetry alongside her equally famous poet and husband, Keith Waldrop. As in both texts, the writers occupy diverse, in-between spaces. The female narrator in Joanna Scott's *Arrogance* travels from Austria to New York, where she visits an exhibition on Schiele that results in the flooding of memory. C.D. Wright occupies the difficult space of entering the prison, talking with and speaking for the prisoner throughout *One Big Self*, a difficulty she acknowledges and reckons with in the Introduction. In one sense, Waldrop, Scott, and Wright work together as a Brown University school of thinking and writing. Rosmarie

Waldrop was a professor at the university for a long time; C.D. Wright was a professor there until her untimely death in 2016; Joanna Scott completed a master's degree at Brown, studying under John Hawkes in the late 1980s.

The relation of the criminal switches to focus on the prescient construction of art in Scott's *Arrogance* and C.D. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation*. Scott's Egon Schiele works as an absent center in which women, ultimately, move around and influence. However, Schiele's genius is never questioned, only complicated. The criminal depiction of Schiele within the courtroom and prison is narratively hijacked and rendered through a different style of portraiture, one that draws Schiele rather than being painted by the artist. This turning over helps illuminate many of the portraits, especially those of young women. The framing of Schiele's story coupled with both narrators' rendering enables new ways that structure one's engagement with the paintings, in particular Schiele's masterful *Sick Girl* (1910). C.D. Wright's complicated interaction with prisoners' speech and attempts to lay out the real feel of hard time overturns traditional ways of engaging with the prisoner. Wright's attention to form, the meticulous messiness of the style, illustrated through broken lines, spatial reconfigurations, and a multitude of disparate voices, obliquely captures many of the troubling moments of incarceration. However, Wright's project is never to speak definitively on prison. The most striking component of *One Big Self* is its complication of space: there is nothing more fixed than the idea of prison and the idea of prisoners living and being within the structure. Wright's spatial interplay momentarily obliterates the structure, and equally disembodies and locates each voice within spatially diffuse settings. Images, speech, thoughts, and wishes are overheard and repeated; voices stand alone and mix, enacting a formally formless

practice that investigates while never wholly situating the individuals in a fixed place. Deborah Luster's portraits of prisoners, many in carnival and Mardi Gras costume, connects with Schiele's portraits in enacting a transgressive push toward the boundaries of what art and storytelling can do. There is a distinct power in the prisoners' portraits that enables moments of *ostranenie*, of defamiliarization; moments that connect with Schiele's twisted portraits, moments that echo David's narrative portrait of Giovanni, and the speaker's portraits of war in Waldrop's poetic sequence. It is precisely within these moments and practice of defamiliarization that locates each text as extending the boundaries of criminal writing and opening up new spaces to talk about form and art.

Constructing transgression, in all the texts talked about in this study, is practiced through a disparate, complicated, slippery relationship with the criminal, a constant navigation of various, diffuse, liminal spaces, and an artistically transformative practice in creating art. All of these texts, which at first glance, appear completely different, completely untenable as coexisting in a study, overlap, echo, complement and play with one another on multiple levels. David, in *Giovanni's Room*, struggles with and questions his criminal sexuality, and navigates a series of troublesome spaces, many of which offer moments of freedom, experience, and safety. Similarly, the young girl in Scott's *Arrogance* traverses a number of criminal spaces—Egon Schiele's studio, facing Schiele in the courtroom—which swerve and break out in a kaleidoscopic fury to include other women from the text, for a completely different portrait of the artist as a young man. Waldrop looks at the U.S.'s criminal engagement and occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, noting collateral damage on both sides and situating the troublesome, mostly prosaic and tired practice of creating art about war, in a spatially diffuse,

philosophically questioning sequence of poems; a sequence that momentarily breaks free from the history of war writing, until finally noting that there is no complete breaking free, like there is no end to war. All of these texts encounter highly political topics, yet politics is not their sole, underlying project. Wright, in her dizzying poetic display, and Luster, in her mesmerizing portraits, showcase a practice of looking and witness that does not necessarily uncover and show more, but further veils the prisoners within a heightened cloak of artificiality and art. This practice, though, draws more attention to the poetic spaces, the artistic spaces at work, and then the difficult spaces prisoners must endure every day.

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