To Dee-dee
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This dissertation examines the way in which poets from both the Beat Generation and the Black Arts movement used poetry as a form of activism during the long 1960s (1955-1975) in San Francisco, and considers to what extent similarities in their performative and stylistic strategies warrant a reconceptualization of “the counterculture.” Specifically, by juxtaposing the early work of Beat poets Gary Snyder and Michael McClure with that of Black Arts poets Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, I show that each used poetry to project what I call an alternative social imaginary: a vision of an ideal society that serves as the driving force behind social change regardless of whether it will eventually be realized. As such, poetry performances functioned in a way similar to Jill Dolan’s “utopian performatives” for they offered spectators hope of a better world. Building on Dolan, I show that they did not merely offer a glimpse into this alternative world, however, but also used poetry as a space for modeling the kinds of behaviors and practices necessary to potentially realize these visions.

To explain how they did this, I first take a close look at San Francisco and argue that the city’s tendency to “reimagine” itself throughout history might be a reason why the social imaginaries offered by long-1960s poets found fruitful ground here. Second, I analyze the work of Nikki Giovanni and Michael McClure published between 1968-1974 and argue that for both
poets authentic feelings of love and solidarity formed the foundation for an alternative social imaginary because these could undermine the repressive realities of capitalism and white supremacy. Finally, in my last chapter, I juxtapose Gary Snyder’s work with that of Sonia Sanchez and use both Michael Warner’s theory of publics and counterpublics and Jill Dolan’s idea of “utopian performatives” to illustrate how both poets modeled “wholeness” for their publics, and what role these publics played in effectuating social change. I conclude by considering how the excavation of such significant similarities between seemingly disparate movements might offer hope for finding common ground in the polarized atmosphere of the contemporary United States.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Directing Our Glance: Poetry and Social Change

Let’s / change / to a wave / of liberated joys / and set the models of reality /
afloat like toys.

– Michael McClure
Jaguar Skies

Over the course of 2016, the 1960s have seemed closer than ever. The police shootings of several African American men, the retaliatory killing of policemen in Dallas, Texas and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a strong protest movement in the form of Black Lives Matter, and the rise of Republic Presidential nominee Donald Trump, whom some have compared to President Richard Nixon, all indicate that alienation, discontent, and racial discord have returned with nearly the same force as in the 1960s. Then, too, police brutality sparked severe distrust among black communities and state violence was frequently sanctioned to break up protests, most notoriously at the National Democratic Convention of 1968 and at Kent State University in 1970. While cultural differences such as the comparative lack of student activism and less overt nature of racist incidents means we cannot collapse the two decades, news outlets are nonetheless teeming with articles drawing parallels between 2016 and 1968. Academically, however, relatively few have returned to the 1960s. The research that has broached the topic tends to fall into two categories: it either takes a long look at the 1960s or approaches the decade from a different, specialized angle. These approaches are clearly not without merit: I am indebted, for example, to the in-depth overview of black literary nationalism by James Edward Smethurst (2005) and Madhu Dubey’s argument that some novels written by black women during the height of the Black Arts movement reconfigure black nationalist ideology (1994). More recently, however, publications concerning the 1960s have been less interdisciplinary and more decidedly historical
in scope. There have been several broad overviews of 1960s America on the one hand, such as Tom Hayden’s 2009 book *The Long Sixties: From 1960 to Barack Obama* and Christopher Strain’s *The Long Sixties: America, 1955-1973* (2016), as well as a handful of specialized historical research on the other hand, such as Clarence Lang’s *Black America in the Shadow of the Sixties* (2015) and *Port Huron Statement* (2015) by Richard Flacks and Nelson Lichtenstein. The interchange of arts and politics, as well as the blurred lines between the two, which was such a defining feature of the 1960s, has largely been relegated to the sidelines. In recent years, very few scholars have offered new insight into the dynamic and often dialectical relationship between literature and society in 1960s America. The paucity of recent academic work on this topic is surprising given the current social and political climate: in an age where the presidential elections have come to be defined by spectacle rather than policy, and in which one of the most popular contemporary musicals is based on the lives of one of America’s founding fathers (*Hamilton*), I believe that arts and politics, and especially performance and politics, have once again become inextricably intertwined. At this particular historical juncture, then, the poetry and performance of poets in the 1960s could help shed light on the ways in which revolutionary art offers possibilities for social change.

For while it is impossible to offer a singular explanation for the surge of poetry in the 1960s, the turn to the arts as a revolutionary medium resulted in large part from just such a strong desire for social change and a frustration with the apathy – or downright hostility – of politicians and citizens alike. Arguably two of the strongest poetic presences during the long 1960s – the beginning of which I consider to be the Sixth Gallery Reading in 1955, and end around the same time the Black Power movement experienced its demise in 1975 – were the Beats and the Black Arts movement. Although these two movements were not the only poetry
movements at the time, they were two of the most prominent ones. Despite their differences, the
two movements share some striking similarities in terms of how they engaged with and
attempted to mobilize their audiences to realize social change. Because of these similarities, I
suggest reconceptualization, or at least a reconsideration of what constitutes “the counterculture”
might be in order.

When I use the word “counterculture,” I am referring to a social undercurrent of ideas
with a utopian slant that found expression in arts and culture, and that different greatly from the
mainstream. Some scholars have attempted to differentiate between different elements of what
we usually call “the counterculture” by separating the culturally oriented hippies from the more
pragmatic New Left, or by separating both of these from more aggressive subsets such as the
Weathermen. Indeed, David Gross suggests it is necessary to make these distinctions, because in
his view, the “hippie” preoccupation with personal enlightenment and abstract solutions were so
unsustainable that they sounded the death knell of the counterculture (108; 110). He arrives at
this conclusion after arguing that an emphasis on personal liberation from materialism, which
could be achieved through short-lived emotional experiences, detracted from effective political
organizing. Although it can be useful to tease out the different elements that constitute our
present conceptualization of “the counterculture,” I do not believe it is possible or even
productive to compartmentalize its different elements in this way. Oftentimes, the lines between
hippies, leftists, Weathermen and drug addicts were blurred. Joseph Ferrandino points out, for
example, that the New Left and hippies were nearly indistinguishable because the culture of the
Haight “served a tremendous educational purpose for the New Left” by showing the politically
and socially subversive potential of culture, which they then harnessed (191). In that context, any
differentiation between the hippies and the New Left would merely be artificial. What is more,
such separations are also unhelpful because they emphasize division and fragmentation rather than widespread ideological consensus. Although what we consider to be “the counterculture” undeniably consisted of many different subgroups, their social and political ideals – full social equality, true freedom for all – were fundamentally the same. Since the boundaries between different factions of the counterculture were blurry, I push the idea of cohesion even further: what if we counted members of the Black Arts movement, despite their racial and political differences, among members of “the counterculture” as well? To what extent would this inclusion be warranted? On what would such a reconceptualization be based, and what could it offer us now, in the 21st century?

Drawing primarily on Raymond Williams’ concept of “structures of feeling,” Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, Jill Dolan’s “utopian performatives” and Michael Warner’s theory of publics and counterpublics, I juxtapose the early work of Beat poets Michael McClure and Gary Snyder with that of Black Arts poets Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez to argue that all four of these poets used poetry to project an alternative social imaginary rooted in love, and used their poetry performances to model behaviors that could help realize this alternative. Thus, by performing their poetry in front of live audiences, poets from both the Beats and Black Arts movement concretized the possibility for social change. Without sidestepping the divergent core ideologies structuring each cultural movement, I believe that juxtaposing these poets yields a productive discussion and perhaps even a revision of our notion of “the counterculture,” which in turn could help shed light on both the possibilities for revolutionary art in the present moment and the potential commonalities held by each opposing faction in this polarized socio-political climate.
Perhaps scholars have largely ignored the commonalities between these movements because both movements do, at first, seem diametrically opposed. Popular imaginings of the counterculture as a movement of “peace” and “love” run counter to the Black Power Movement’s overt militancy. As a separatist movement, the Black Panthers, as members of the Black Power Party were also called, believed a “new America must be born” to restore blacks’ self-confidence and pride (“What We Want” 54). The discussion of unification of all people was dismissed as “purely academic,” which is not to say that they were categorically opposed to that ideal, but rather, that they dismissed the white conception of that ideal because they believed it would create a “white power bloc” within a supposedly unified group of people (ibid. 57). Instead, they were aiming for a separate black society until black self-determination was sufficiently restored. The Black Arts movement, the cultural chapter of the Black Power Movement, subscribed to this view as well. In his essay “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic,” for example, Addison Gayle jr. draws attention to the way in which black artists, especially writers, are “culturally strangled” by trying to adhere to white standards of what publishable writing should look like (46). For this reason, he argues, the form of black art should be radically different, and should be written with black audiences in mind (“Introduction” xxi). By allowing black artists to develop away from white audiences and white criticism, they would be able to write authentically, unencumbered by white writing conventions.

While several female black artists responded to the call of creating new standards for writing, some of them eschewed the broad focus on black pride in favor of a more personal approach. Work by poets like Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, and Sarah Webster Fabio and writers such as Rosa Guy adhered to subscribed to several tenets of the black arts ideology, such as abandoning traditional literary forms or spelling, but at the same time
challenged the dogma that all of their writing should explicitly support black power. Nikki Giovanni, especially, has been criticized by leaders of the Black Arts movement for creating work that is too personal and too concerned with personal (love) relationships to be considered sufficiently revolutionary (Fowler, *Nikki Giovanni* 14). However, some scholars have since recognized the potential political power of love, or what Keith Leonard also calls “affective identification,” as a powerful feature of Black Arts writing that helped solidify black consciousness and coherence (619-620). For these artists, Leonard writes, “artistry becomes a fought-over terrain in which victory looks like love and though that love does not conquer all, it becomes the means to make you free” (621). In my view, this kind of affective approach was not limited to the Black Arts movement but existed among some of the Beats as well.

For although existing studies of the Beats differ in scope and focus, most explain their rise as a response to the alienation felt by many young people after World War II, thus also suggesting that “feeling” was central to their work. While the number of Beats was limited and cannot really be called a “movement” as such, they did have a major social impact. They are sometimes described as precursors to the hippies or even to the 1960s “counterculture” as a whole, although – as I shall show – I consider them to be part of that counterculture. While their rise might have been motivated by feelings of alienation, their cultural protest amounted to more than mere rebellion. According to Stephen Prothero, “[T]he beat movement represented a spiritual protest against what the beats perceived as the moribund orthodoxies of 1950s America” (208). A “spiritual protest”: this word choice reveals how some of the Beats perceived themselves or how they were perceived by others. For some they were the voice of young drifters; figureheads of a new generation and its discontents. For others, they functioned as modern-day shamans attempting to heal societal ills caused by excessive violence and
capitalism. Either way, the spirituality that Prothero and others have pinpointed as central to Beat poetry was not necessarily religious in nature. While some Beats (notably Gary Snyder) were drawn to Buddhism, the spirituality they sought often resided in what they considered to be the sacredness of daily life and relationships. Fostering personal, authentic relationships between oneself and one’s community thus became a central Beat focus. While the Beats did not focus explicitly on love, then, they similarly emphasized the importance of personal relationships and building a community to challenge the societal status quo. In that sense, both the Beats and the Black Arts movement could be said to have emphasized love or “affection” as a revolutionary strategy.

The driving forces behind their revolutionary poetry were alternative social imaginaries that could replace, or at least challenge, the capitalist and white supremacist status quo. In this work, I use the term “social imaginary” to refer specifically to the vision of an ideal society; one that serves as the driving force behind social change regardless of whether or not it will eventually be realized in all its facets. For the Beats, this vision was primarily a holistic one that emphasized inter-being with the rest of the cosmos and was imprinted with deep environmental concern. For the women of the Black Arts movement, the projected alternative social imaginary was more rooted in concern for the immediate community and for the self: self-love and self-care were pivotal. This meant that in spite of these different emphases, both the ideology of the Black Arts movement and the Beats hinged on love. While 1950s and 1960s bohemians were often derided for their abstract emphasis on “love and peace” (indeed, this vacuous stereotype is the one we are most often confronted with in popular culture), my work shows that this emphasis on “love” was not merely an empty phrase but a genuine force for change that was not just limited to a fringe minority of white hippies, but extended to the Black Arts movement as well.
While my comparison of these movements is limited to the four poets mentioned here, I suggest their work is largely representative of the groups or movements they were a part. For example, although Gary Snyder and Michael McClure are generally considered more “ecocritical” than the average Beat poet (if there is such a thing), their emphasis on connecting to the natural world is merely a variation on the theme of authenticity and connection to a true, authentic self that characterizes virtually all Beat poetry. Likewise, while it could be argued that Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni are only representative of the Black Arts poetry written by black women, I believe their poetry actually displays some of the central tenets of the Black Power movement in general, such as the emphasis on community-building and sharing. The creation of social programs such as the Free Breakfast Program, People’s Free Medical Centers, and the Intercommunal Youth Institute (later Oakland Community School) are tangible evidence of how important these ideals were to the Black Power movement as a whole.

My reasons for selecting these four poets and not others are threefold: first, by the late 1960s, all four of these poets were active at the same time, and all were still in the early stages of their careers. Second, with the exception of Nikki Giovanni, all were active in San Francisco. Yet, while Giovanni did not live in the Bay Area, she was such a key figure in the Black Arts poetry scene and so closely allied with many members of the San Francisco Black Arts scene nation-wide that I believe she cannot be left out of a close examination of 1960s poetry, and a comparison with the others is warranted. Finally, each of these poets has enjoyed critical and public success long after the conclusion of the 1960s and 1970s, which suggests the work of each enjoys lasting appeal.

Although poetry is not nearly as popular an art form now and it was then, I nonetheless believe studying poetry of the 1960s can provide insight into art’s revolutionary possibilities in
2016. For while an interest in poetry itself has largely declined, other forms of performance have, to some extent, taken over poetry’s role. Their implicit social commentary proves that art can still be insurgent, as Stephen Colbert’s comedic interruption of the National Republican Convention of 2016 showed. Specifically, a study of 1960s poetry might offer ideas on how to bridge the chasms caused by a two-party system and racial polarization. While I will not pretend to offer clear-cut solutions to such pervasive and lasting social and political problems, I do believe examining Beat and Black Arts poetry side by side shows how seemingly divergent ideologies can draw on the same basic ideals, and that art – in this case, poetry – can galvanize audiences to fight for those ideals.

Performance theory and theories of public spaces have proven particularly fruitful in determining the extent to which poetry was, and can still be, an impetus for social change. In the chapters that follow, I try to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this work: considering the similarities between the Beats and the Black Arts movement, to what extent would a reconceptualization of our notion of “the counterculture” be warranted? What would it look like, and what could it offer us today? In order to answer that question, my analysis starts with an examination of San Francisco, as I argue that a tendency to “reimagine” society runs throughout the city’s history, which made it fruitful ground for the kind of social imaginaries offered by poets in the 1960s. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere and Raymond Williams’ concept of “structures of feeling,” I suggest that significant public interest in science fiction in the nineteenth century coupled with the bohemian-leftist climate of the 1930s fueled the idea that art could be a source of potential political power as it became a vehicle for dialogue and social criticism in the “public sphere.” In my next chapter, I analyze poetry by Nikki Giovanni and Michael McClure published between 1968-1974 and argue that both poets
believe that authentic feelings of love and solidarity are fundamental to the creation of a revolutionary community, and that these feelings constitute the key principle that could undermine the repressive realities of capitalism and white supremacy and become the foundation of an alternative social imaginary. Finally, in my last chapter, I juxtapose Gary Snyder with Sonia Sanchez and use Michael Warner’s theory of publics and counterpublics – and, to a lesser extent, Jill Dolan’s theory of utopian performance at the theater – to demonstrate how work by both poets called a counterpublic into existence, and that their poetry performances projected an alternative social imaginary that offered their publics hope, which served as the driving force for potential revolutionary action. This revolutionary action did not take the form of protests, however, but rather of “doing” language: by modeling behaviors such as mindfulness and witnessing in front of their audiences, they believed they might be able to challenge the socio-political status quo from the inside out. As Dolan points out, “performance[s] direct our glances in…constitutive ways, they offer a public space for renewing our critical attention to the machinations of dominant ideology” (141).

Since the arts and humanities have come under increasing scrutiny from both the government and the public over the last three decades, with several governors\(^5\) and senators questioning their “usefulness,” examining poetry in the 1960s becomes a particularly generative endeavor. For aside from the question of whether art should be useful,\(^6\) examining poetry and poetic performance in the 1960s suggests art plays a pivotal role in shaping our interactions, and could thus help shed light on what it means to be human – not just then, but now, at the beginning of the 21\(^{st}\) century.

Notes


3 An important exception would be James Smethurst jr., author of (most recently) *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* who renders the commonalities between the Beats and Black Arts very explicit and traces them, in large part, to the Popular Front of the 1930s. See also my chapter on San Francisco.

4 See for example Wendell Berry and Charles Altieri in Altieri’s *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry*, 128.

5 See for example Florida Governor Rick Scott’s comments on the need for practical degrees that will “get [students] jobs, in an article by Adam Weinstein entitled “Rick Scott to Liberal Arts Majors: Drop Dead.” *The New York Times* recently offered a more comprehensive overview of this attitude nation-wide in an article by Patricia Cohen called “A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding.”

CHAPTER 2
A CITY IN FLUX: RE-IMAGINING SAN FRANCISCO IN TIMES OF CRISIS, 1848-1955

San Francisco is 49 square miles surrounded by reality.

– Paul Kantner, co-founder Jefferson Airplane
Source Unknown

Although the exact source of Kantner’s quote is unclear, it has become an oft-quoted statement in texts about San Francisco. Perhaps its popularity can be explained by the way in which it seems to capture the city’s reputation as a progressive and slightly strange metropolis so accurately. Judging from San Francisco’s social, political, and literary histories, this image is not purely mythological. As scholars such as Geoff Ward, Timothy Gray, Michael Davidson, and Richard White have argued, San Francisco has always had a weird streak. Geoff Ward, especially, argues that San Francisco as a place had to be constantly imagined and re-imagined, which meant it was as much an imaginary place as an existing one. Commenting on this peculiar fact, he writes: “[A] real place, of solid (if sometimes alarmingly shifting) rocks and sand and vegetation, had in an important sense to be devised rather than discovered, and by a conspicuously literary imagination” (61). In other words, the city was under permanent construction, or in permanent flux, both in the concrete and abstract senses of the word. From its inception, the city underwent more radical changes than most other American metropolises at the time, and at a remarkably fast rate, too. For example, the Gold Rush (1848-1855) drew thousands of immigrants, especially Chinese, to the city, which meant the number of citizens grew from 812 to 36,151 in four years’ time (Sinclair 22). Almost overnight, California became one of the most diverse states in the country (ibid.). Shortly after this period, the country experienced the Civil War followed by rapid industrialization, both of which led San Franciscans to spiritualism and science fiction as possible bases for forging a new sense of community after the war. At the
same time, they also fueled speculation about the possibilities of future technology. The downside of this rapid industrialization, however, was that it caused feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation among laborers. This, in turn, contributed to San Francisco’s becoming a hub of leftism and communism at the beginning of the 20th century. The city’s leftist politics combined with its image as a “frontier” city that was constantly in flux ushered in a bohemian era that started around 1930, which further changed the city’s social and cultural climates. Considering these swift changes, it is perhaps no surprise that throughout San Francisco’s history, citizens repeatedly used their imagination to construct alternative, more clearly defined versions of the city.

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how and why this happened, these alternative visions could be regarded as “structures of feeling” in Raymond Williams’ sense of the word, and as such, they could be said to have set the stage for social change. Although Williams elides a clear-cut definition of these “structures of feeling,” he comes closest when he describes them as “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt…specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships” (132). As “lived” cultural elements, they are continuously in progress and can never be reduced to a fixed state, which prevents them from being appropriated by the dominant order even though they are also – paradoxically – a structure (i.e. a set of related characteristics). This is what makes them potentially powerful terrains for social change: in Williams’ words, the “modes of domination” can never reasonably encompass all of human practice and experience, so they leave behind those social experiences that cannot be reduced to a fixed, tabulated entity (125, 130). He writes:

Social forms are then often admitted for generalities but debarred, contemptuously, from any possible relevance to this immediate and actual significance of being. And from the abstractions formed in their turn by this act of debarring – ‘the human imagination,’ the ‘human psyche,’ the ‘unconscious,’ with their ‘functions’ in art
and in myth and in dream – new forms of analysis and categorization, overriding all specific social conditions, and more or less rapidly developed. (130)

In other words, while aspects of human experience such as dreams and the imagination define, to some extent, the spirit of an age, these structures of feeling cannot be reduced to anything so clearly circumscribed that they can be harnessed by any specific ideology. To illustrate this idea, Williams uses language as a concrete example of a structure of feeling. By looking at the way language changes over time, he writes, it becomes clear that every generation speaks a slightly different version of the same language. These stylistic variations are indicative, and perhaps even representative, of a certain age and a certain generation, and yet they cannot be codified. Because they cannot, they are powerful areas for potential social change. After all, if areas such as the imagination are not taken seriously by the dominant order as a crucial and potentially powerful part of human experience, it is a space in which a new vision of society could be developed, and new social visions could flourish.

Although these structures of feeling were not limited to San Francisco, the city might serve as one of the best case studies to demonstrate their power: while other metropolitan cities, notably New York, went through similar rapid demographic changes, and also boasted a significant countercultural scene, it did not become the locus of such centralized countercultural activity as San Francisco did between the 1950s through the 1970s. Aside from Williams’ structures of feeling, the work of Geoff Ward and several other cultural historians helps to shed light on why this might be. Specifically, I believe an answer might be found in what Geoff Ward has called the “whackiness” running through the city’s history, or what Michael Davidson has called, in milder terms, the feeling that in California one is “living at the margins” (11). Both Ward and Davidson implicitly suggest that there is a sense, among both Californians themselves and Americans alike, that the state is somehow “different” from the rest of America. This belief
is part of a structure of feeling, so to speak, that threads together much of Californian history. Each significant stage of the city’s development – its rapid expansion and subsequent speculative search for community after 1860, its embroilment in leftist and communist politics in the 1930s, and its turn to artistic and especially poetic protest in the 1960s – was an expression of the “structures of feeling” that characterize San Francisco and shape its image as a liminal city. While this sense of “outsiderness” resurfaced more during some generations than others, it is nonetheless continuously “lived and felt,” and as such it typifies Californian social experience. Building on Ward’s argument that San Francisco has always been a city that is imagined as much as it is real, I argue that San Francisco’s seeming mutability and elusiveness, aided by its offbeat reputation, served as a catalyst for the constant (re)imagining of the city.

In this chapter, I will focus on what I believe to be two of the most significant impetuses to reimagining society, which laid the groundwork for a similar kind of reimagining done by the 1960s countercultural poetry scene. First, the huge public interest in science fiction in the nineteenth century exemplified the city’s willingness to push the boundaries of their thinking about society, and second, the surge of bohemian-leftist thought in the 1930s showed art’s potential political power as it became a vehicle for dialogue and social criticism in the “public sphere,” in Jürgen Habermas’ definition of the word; a kind of space between politics and social labor (Ethington 15). Since both this openness to new ideas and a desire to engage the audience were foundational to the 1960s poetry scene, I argue that the science fiction-era and the bohemian period were key stages in the city’s development because they contributed to an environment in which innovative or even revolutionary ideas did not seem too far-fetched or utopian, and in which a publicly-engaged revolutionary poetry could easily take root. Although these were three very different periods in San Francisco’s history, then, that feeling of
“outsiderness” structured and defined the city over the course of a century, and determined its response to a range of pressing social issues. During each period, that response took the form of a re-imagination of society, and in the 1960s, that reimagination effort took the shape of poetry.

**Ghost City: Nineteenth-Century Science Fiction and Spiritualism**

The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of great changes, not just for San Francisco, but also for the country as a whole. The Gold Rush had greatly expanded San Francisco’s population and turned it from a homogenous society into a mosaic of different cultures, languages, and ethnicities. Upon first arriving to San Francisco in 1849, travel writer Bayard Taylor wrote:

> The streets were full of people, hurrying to and fro, and of as diverse and bizarre a character as the houses: Yankees of every possible variety, native Californians in sarapes and sombreros, Chileans, Sonorians, Kanakas from Hawaii, Chinese with long tails, Malay with their everlasting creeses, and others in whose embrowned and embearded visages it was impossible to recognize any especial nationality. (55)

Almost overnight, then, San Francisco changed from a small American settlement to an expanding, multicultural city. Aside from anxieties about race, this rapid expansion also led to a boom in prices that suddenly created starker divisions between rich and poor. On top of that, the U.S. had just recovered from the U.S.-Mexican War when, less than two decades later, the Civil War challenged the idea of a unified nation. This series of events gave San Francisco an “unsettled feel,” as Ben Tarnoff puts it (55). The dazzling speed with which American society seemed to be changing in mid-nineteenth century San Francisco sparked excitement in some, and anxiety in others. These two conflicting sentiments contributed to the rise of some of the most popular sources of entertainment at the time: spiritualist séances and science fiction novels. Both of these forms of entertainment pushed Americans to expand their views of society, and especially of community.
According to historian Robert S. Cox, the sudden interest in spiritualism was a direct consequence of Americans’ anxiety about the state of society after the Civil War. In his work *Body and Soul*, he argues that although American society was deeply divided and stratified around this time, citizens longed for a sense of community. Spiritualism was able to provide that kind of connection because it hinged on sympathy – that is, on common, shared feelings, often of loss – which, in turn, provided Americans with a new (affective) framework for understanding the world and relating to others. Cox presents the case of Abby Sewall, for example, a young woman living in Maine in 1850, who felt uprooted by slavery, the oppression of women, and the general “fraying state of the nation” (70). Like many other spiritualists, Cox explains, Sewall believed churches and revivalist sects merely exacerbated the differences between people; they did nothing to bring them closer together. When she came across spiritualism and attended her first séance, Sewall grew to believe that “the affective relations established in life survived death to create a framework of love and emotion through which spirits operated and through which society became a community” (85). In other words, a strong belief in ghosts, and a willingness to imagine that communicating with them was possible became the glue that held many post-Civil War communities together.

While spiritualism was very popular throughout the United States at this time, Daniel Herman argues it reached “a sort of apogee in San Francisco,” which he calls “a spiritualist hothouse” (421). While some sources indicate spiritualism existed prior to the Civil War, a lack of consistent records means there are no hard numbers demonstrating its popularity in San Francisco during that time period. In 1867, however, San Franciscan Benjamin Todd first started recording spiritualist activities in the Bay Area, at which point he estimated there were between 8 and 11 million spiritualists in the United States, hundreds of which lived in San Francisco alone.
In addition, the growing interest in speculative fiction, and – conversely – science fiction writers’ interest in San Francisco also contributed to the impression that the city was a kind of speculative “apogee,” as Herman calls it.

Those who considered the industrialization of America to be exciting rather than scary – or, perhaps, a mixture of both – science fiction became extraordinarily attractive. Unlike spiritualism, science fiction’s appeal did not lie in its ability to make one feel part of a community, but in the power to project astonishing visions of the future. Using early science fiction writer Robert Duncan Milne as his leitmotif, Sam Moskowitz shows that during the second half of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the century, San Francisco was home to a burgeoning speculative and science fiction movement. Geoff Ward also points to the common interest in science fiction and so-called “hoax literature” (false narratives presented as real), a popular mode of writing in which even Mark Twain, who was living in San Francisco, dabbled at one point (Ward 64; Tarnoff 61). While it is difficult to pinpoint who read these stories, their audiences must have been quite large: many science fiction short stories were published in newspapers and magazines such as The Overland Monthly and The Argonaut, both of which were California-based and enjoyed great popularity (Moskowitz 37-38). What is more, in the 1880s and 1890s so-called dime novels became popular among boys, as did pulp fiction magazines for adults (albeit a decade later). Among both, Everett F. Bleiler claims, science fiction was one of its most important genres (xxi).

What is more, for many science fiction writers San Francisco and the American West were highly evocative. Indeed, while Milne was the most popular San Francisco-based science fiction author of his day, he was hardly alone in choosing the Bay Area as the backdrop for his narratives: one glance at the bibliography of Bleiler’s Science Fiction, The Early Years suggests
that dozens of science fiction stories were set in San Francisco prior to 1930. Bleiler even goes so far as to include the following commentary in his bibliographic entry for “California”: “See also San Francisco. Many of the following entries are probably also located in the Bay Area” (868). Most of these are from around 1910, but others, such as A.D. 2000 by Alvarado M. Fuller and “A Hero of the Twentieth Century,” by John Henry Barnabas were published as early as 1890 (Bleiler 267, 37). Even authors who did not explicitly set their narratives in California were nonetheless inspired by it: Arthur B. Evans shows, for example, how the well-known French science fiction writer Jules Verne was very taken with the idea of establishing a utopian city in the American West (38). In fact, utopia became an increasingly popular theme around the turn of the century. Like spiritualism, utopian science fiction novels helped people reconstitute versions of society that – although imaginary – did not seem too far-fetched to someday become reality, and pushed people to consider the revolutionary possibilities afforded by technological progress.

White Americans were not the only ones pushing the boundaries of accepted thinking, however, even though the glaring lack of African American science fiction and surrealist writers in mid-nineteenth-century California might suggest otherwise. Rather, the apparent dearth of black science fiction writers can be explained by the relatively small number of African Americans in California at that time: in 1852, African Americans only made up about 1% of the population (“African Americans: Gold Rush Era to 1900”). In other parts of the country, however, black writers did write science fiction, and successfully so. Since this was still a niche genre, however, perhaps black artists’ draw towards the imaginary is more clearly reflected by their interest in surrealism. Although surrealism is often associated with 1920s France, Robin D.G. Kelley convincingly argues that some of its precepts were part of “Afrodiasporic cultures” before Surrealism became an official movement; thus predating the 1920s by decades if not
centuries. In Kelley’s view, surrealism could be seen as the ultimate liberatory movement because it “recognizes the imagination as our most powerful weapon,” which attracted enslaved Africans and later African Americans living under Jim Crow (159). In his interpretation of Surrealism as a “liberatory movement,” it gave people the freedom to truly re-envision and transform their lives, or to “resolve the contradiction between everyday life and our wildest dreams” (Chicago Surrealist Group qtd. in Kelley 158). Although these surrealist tendencies were by no means confined to San Francisco, they did find particularly fruitful ground there (albeit not until the 1940s, when there existed a sizable population of African Americans and poets Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans made it part of their own style and identity as Beat poets).

In the late nineteenth century, then, the experience of social upheaval coupled with San Francisco’s reputation as an outsider city created a climate in which the imagination could thrive. Specifically, surrealism, spiritualism, and science fiction all provided new frameworks that allowed San Franciscans to interpret the changes to which they were subject. Although these genres are in no way analogous, they all ask the reader to imagine the seemingly impossible. This became especially valuable when the demographics of the city changed to such an extent that to some the social fabric seemed to unravel. And while I will not claim any direct link between the reading preferences of San Franciscans in the 1850s, and their receptiveness to outlandish ideas a century later, I do argue that this consistent attraction to the speculative illustrates the existence of imaginative “structures of feeling,” to use Williams’ term. The interest in the extraordinary shows that San Francisco has long been a city in which imagining the unimaginable was not only common, but an essential part of its social fabric that was “actively lived and felt,” as Williams put it (132). These living “structures of feeling” never fully fade into the past but continuously hover below the surface of society, only to resurface again at times of
social crisis. Williams explain: “At different moments in history, and in significantly different ways, the reality [of] such diverse and yet specific actualities, have been powerfully asserted and reclaimed, as in practice of course they are all the time lived” (129). While each stage in San Francisco’s cultural history is singular, then, they all “reclaim” this attempt to harness the imagination for social change, as had happened in the 19th century: first, in the late 1920s and 1930s in American history, when California labor unions proliferated and caused tension within San Francisco, and second, during the period between 1955 and 1975, when feelings of alienation caused by World War II helped create a cultural climate in which poetry and poetry readings projected alternative social visions.

**Red City: Leftism and Communism in 1930s San Francisco**

Once San Francisco started booming, it never really stopped. The first half of the twentieth century saw demographic and cultural changes that seemed to rival those of the preceding century. The period between 1920-1950 proved especially significant for expanding the open and imaginative climate ushered in by spiritualism and science fiction during the second half of the 19th century. By the 1920s, the industries that employed many San Franciscans were slowly taken over by “big business.” Since the shift from artisan shops to industrialization had happened so quickly, those in leadership positions generally continued to treat their workers as mindless subordinates, much like they would have done before the industrialization. However, this lack of attention to their employees as human beings also meant that they either could not or would not recognize the feelings of “alienation and uncertainty” that plagued many laborers who were put off by the lack of control over either product or process (Wiebe 20). Only decades after the Gold Rush and the Civil War, then, Californians were starting to feel unmoored once again. While technological progress had led to amenities that made life easier, and work in one of San Francisco’s several industries – notably the maritime and longshoremen industries – was steady,
a sense of community was lost. This was particularly painful considering that, for a while, no actual social classes existed in San Francisco. There were social hierarchies, especially in the workplace, yet no clearly circumscribed differences existed. Since San Francisco was such a new city, initially the vast majority of citizens were newly arrived members of the working class. By the end of the nineteenth century, a middle class had started to form, but an upper class was still missing (Ethington 52). The result was a society that, at the start of the twentieth century, was virtually entirely united against capitalism. Philip J. Ethington takes the Great Upheaval, a series of leftist, politically motivated upheavals between 1887-1894, as evidence of this unification. He writes: “Whether measured by numbers of people either participating in strikes or voting for labor or farmer radical parties, the Great Upheaval presents an impressive example of widespread protest politics on the part of hundreds of thousands...of ordinary American people, white and black, men and women, immigrant and native born” (242-243). Unusually, then, this feeling of having lost a community was not limited to a small subgroup of San Franciscans. Instead, it concerned all working citizens, whose allegiance and sense of camaraderie was rooted in an opposition to industrial capitalism.

By the 1920s, this community had grown stronger, as evidenced by the many workers who were either direct members of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) itself, or of affiliated labor unions. Both were highly visible presences in California, especially from the 1930s onwards. At the same time 1930s San Francisco’s leftist affiliations and rebellious spirit made it an attractive place for bohemian literati, which in turn was key to the rise of 1960s poetry movements, including the Beats and the Black Arts movement. They further stimulated a tendency already present in San Francisco: a willingness to project a radically new
social imaginary. Before I turn to those movements, however, I will show that even the CPUSA, as a primarily pragmatic organization, encouraged workers to think beyond their own realities.

The General Strike of 1934 could be considered a direct result of workers’ desire to defeat the status quo. As one of the biggest labor strikes in American history, it was an outpouring of feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation that had long been simmering underneath the surface of San Francisco society and led to tensions within the city. Between 1920 and 1940, trade unions such as the International Longshore and Waterhouse Union (ILWU) and the Stewards Union were active presences in the social and political landscape of the Bay Area. Due to their democratic political processes and emphasis on camaraderie, unions such as these created a sense of agency and community among workers that they were hard-pressed to find elsewhere. Aside from such large labor unions, communism was also decidedly more visible in California than elsewhere in the United States, primarily because the Californian CPUSA branch resisted the national call to go underground in response to McCarthyism (Smethurst 251). The twin leftist presences of the CPUSA and several labor unions were not coincidental: indeed, the CPUSA played a central role in organizing the International Longshoreman Association (ILA) strike, and the subsequent General Strike of 1934.

The timeline leading up to this general strike illustrates how conflicts between unions and industries were not isolated incidents between workers and businessmen, but affected life in the city on a larger scale. In March of 1934, longshore workers voted to strike for a pay raise and shorter hours, among other things, which was diverted by last-minute negotiations between the ILA and a mediation board appointed by President Roosevelt. Although the ILA leadership and the mediation board reached a deal, the workers themselves were not satisfied, and with the help of the CPUSA organized a strike on May 8th instead (Chretien). On July 5th, the situation
escalated when police shot and killed two workers, and wounded many others during a confrontation that was wildly chaotic and unequal in force. Historian David Selvin writes in a commemorative 1980s piece for the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “[T]he violent conflict had been raging since morning, ranging up and down the hills and streets fronting the Embarcadero. It was an uneven battle, angry and bloody – riot guns, tear gas and revolvers in the hands of the organized and disciplined forces of the law against the bricks and rocks and fists of disorganized and weaponless protesters.” In its wake, several other organizations joined the strike as well, eventually resulting in the participation of 200,000 people (130,000 of whom lived in the Bay Area) at the strike’s height (Chretien). When the strike finally ended, on July 17, it had been one of the biggest strikes in American history. Although it had been a veritable success – it resulted in the unionization of longshoremen across the West Coast of the United States – it had come at the cost of a peaceful social climate in San Francisco.

As workers were beaten down by mechanization and oppressed by demands imposed from above, unions projected the belief that an alternative life was possible, and that resistance would not be futile. By emphasizing community and collectivity, they fueled the belief that resistance was possible, and that change could occur if they invested in collective organization. Printed media, especially union and communist magazines, played a crucial role in fueling this belief, because it did the ideological work of organizing workers and disseminating these ideals to a larger group of people. In addition, such outlets also provided workers with a platform for personal expression, and as such served a function very similar to the poetry broadsheets of the 1960s. Printed media such as *The Western Worker, The Waterfront Worker,* and *The Daily Worker* cemented feelings of affiliation and belonging among workers, for they made visible the collective of which they were a part. Moreover, since these magazines published materials
written by laborers themselves, they offered a “high degree of participatory democracy,” as Ray Markey notes with regard to similar labor publications in Australia (12). Cary Nelson shows that such publications, notably The Daily Worker, also included poetry, which was then very much considered a tool in the fight for worker’s rights (32). Indeed, Nelson writes:

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\text{[R]ead leading poetry...became a way of positioning one’s self in relation to the possibility of basic social change...Poetry at once gave people a radical critique and visionary aspiration, and it did so in language fit for the speaking voice. It strengthened the beliefs of those already radicalized and helped to persuade some not yet decided. It was a thus a notable force in articulating and cementing what was a significant cultural and political shift toward the Left. (ibid.)}
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In other words, the space for poetry, a “visionary” activity, as Nelson calls it, in a magazine dedicated to pragmatic change, encouraged workers to imagine radical alternatives to their status quo. In poetry, Nelson believes, one does not have to limit one’s thinking to what is practical for any given purpose, but is free to imagine what could happen if one dares to push the boundaries of one’s thinking, regardless of whether it seems realistic or not. Agreeing with Nelson, I maintain that this confluence of participatory and creative aspects in labor unions and especially in workers’ magazines figured as a precursor to the engaged poetry climate of the 1960s, since it was part of the fabric of the city’s social and cultural fabric. As in the 1870s, social upheaval and feelings of displacement pushed people to imagine alternative societies. Thus, the atmosphere that gave birth to spiritualism and science fiction as expressions of the structure of feeling that characterizes San Francisco – its “outsiderness” and subsequent willingness to imagine alternative societies – found expression in labor unions and worker’s magazines, which also tried to project alternative social imaginaries in response to feelings of alienation.

The effect of magazines (both labor and mainstream) publishing “common” people’s pieces fueled both labor activism and community activism, as evidenced by the movement against urban renewal. Between the 1940s and 1960s, urban renewal was a particularly pressing
concern that disproportionately affected ethnic neighborhoods, and which fueled influential community action.\(^5\) In fact, sociologist G. William Domhoff goes as far as to argue that San Francisco is the only major United States city in which “progressive activists and neighborhoods had a real and sustained impact for nearly five decades.” Although it would be an exaggeration to imply a direct link between communist thought and San Francisco’s current status as a liberal city, Leftist decision-making and progressive social movements are correlated with many instances of progressive political change (Anyon 59).

Finally, in addition to such “visionary” spaces in worker’s magazines, Michael Denning also points out that so called “proletarian literature,” although never truly successful, briefly sustained revolutionary ideas as well, as their “cumulative effort” led to “[the enfranchisement of] a generation of writers of ethnic, working-class origins,” thus making their stories “part of the mythology of the United States [and] the national-popular imagination” (229). Regardless of their limited popular success, then, these novels and nonfiction books left an imprint on American culture. Judging from the fact that workers, for the first time since the beginning of the industrialization, and especially since Fordism (the period of assembly-line factory work after 1914) were afforded the opportunity to express their own ideas and opinions, one could even argue that the new writing spaces afforded to the working classes not only affected but \textit{transformed} American culture.

\textbf{City of Dreams: Bohemians in San Francisco 1930-1955}

By the mid-1940s, the Bay Area’s leftist climate was drawing intellectuals and literary figures from all over the country, many of who espoused a belief in the political or even revolutionary power of art. These bohemians were not just drawn by the romantic notion of a city “out west,” on the so-called border of civilization, but also by a desire to forge lives independently, free from the restraints and conventions of mainstream society. Many who moved
there did not do so for a mere change of scenery; they wished to align their lives with their (romantic) ideals. Mildred Edie Brady, in a 1947 issue of Harper’s Bazaar, describes how this influx of writers and artists, a group referred to as “the new bohemia” changed the California landscape as they set up camp in in rural areas and hitchhiked everywhere. Although they hung around the city, they primarily lived in tents and shacks on the side of highways where they passed their time writing or painting (313). Although the bohemians that arrived in the 1930s and 1940s were predominantly white, the leftist circles in which the bohemians moved (and with which they were often considered synonymous) did include a number of African Americans, especially literary figures. Although most of them would eventually shift allegiances to the Black Arts movement, they were initially involved in communism in different ways, as I shall show later. As for the white leftists and bohemians, communist involvement served as an undeniable bridge to the activism of the 1960s.

Certainly one of the most influential artists among the bohemians of San Francisco at this time was poet Kenneth Rexroth, who would become a mentor figure to both Gary Snyder and Michael McClure. Rexroth, who had arrived in San Francisco in 1927, quickly established himself as a poet and a well-known literary figure in the West. Although supposedly notoriously difficult to deal with on a personal level, he was a celebrated poet who would regularly hold poetry readings and literary circles at his house during the 1940s (Smith 36). While he was raised a Catholic, Rexroth developed an interest in Eastern philosophies and religions, especially Buddhism, during his time in San Francisco. These interests helped him to conceptualize a “community of love,” as he calls it in a 1979 issue of Zero magazine. “In vision,” he writes, referring to the act of writing poetry, “the observer is united with the observed, the poet communes directly with other beings, and all interact in community…” (Gibson 33). In his
definition, poetry served as a special language that would unite the poet and members of the public in a “loving” community. For Rexroth, then, poetry served as a method for trying to establish an alternative way of living with others.

Many of the poets who gathered around him were considered part of a new poetic movement called the San Francisco Renaissance, and some, including McClure and Snyder, shared his Buddhist-inspired views. Although some scholars differentiate between Beats and San Francisco Renaissance poets, by the mid-1950s the two had become virtually indistinguishable (Goffman and Joy 238). Although the poets in Rexroth’s circle were leftist by varying degrees, they all shared his commitment to an alternative social imaginary, or even to the eventual realization of an alternative society. Fueled by Rexroth’s own convictions about art’s revolutionary potential, the poets in Rexroth’s literary circle saw their work as political, and believed “non-poet” audiences were crucial to creating a community of like-minded people (Smith 65-66). Although it would be an exaggeration to singlehandedly credit Rexroth with the conceptualization of poetry as a revolutionary tool, he was nonetheless pivotal in crystallizing this idea for the white members of this new generation of poets.

An interest in the revolutionary potential of art was not limited to Rexroth's circle alone, however. Despite communism’s reputation as a “white” ideology, African Americans were involved in leftist-bohemian circles from the start. Although Rexroth’s own support for poetry written by black poets was limited, his reticence was exception rather than rule: most American communists between the 1930s and 1950s were invested in racial justice and supported African American artistic ventures. In fact, William Maxwell writes, “the history of African-American letters cannot be unraveled from the history of American Communism without damage to both” (2). In 1969, for example, CPUSA’s International Publishers published a key black poetry
anthology called The New Black Poetry, and the CPUSA also supported cultural institutions aimed at the African American community in the Bay Area (Smethurst 94, 253). Moreover, several well-known black writers, including Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes were affiliated with the CPUSA in one way or another; either through their work with communist presses or through direct involvement with organizations such as the Communist League of Struggle for Negro Rights (Maxwell 2). In short, African American writers were engaged with communism in several different ways.

While white leadership in both publishing houses and the CPUSA was undeniably problematic, especially considering the communist emphasis on equality, recent scholarship in the field of African American history acknowledges that the relationships between black poets and writers and white patrons were more complex than they originally appeared: George Hutchinson’s The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (1996), William Maxwell’s Old Negro, New Left (1999), and Alan Wald’s Exiles of a Future Time (2002) all show that black artists in the 1930s and 1940s generally had more power to shape their own (literary) paths than has long been assumed. Ignoring this would thus mean expunging African American literary agency before World War II, as Maxwell rightly concludes (5).

Already in the 1940s, however, there was a push for more black presses so that black authors and poets were not dependent on whites to get their work published and distributed (Smethurst 94). Two decades later, this desire for independent black institutions and organizations led to black writers’ denunciation of communism, both because its ideology subordinated racism and sexism to class struggle, and because its leaders were virtually all white despite black involvement on all other levels. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the Black Power movement was particularly popular, communism had receded into the background for
most black artists. Black Arts poets like Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez did not identify as communists, and sometimes openly rejected it. In a 1970 interview from the *Black Collegian*, for example, Giovanni expresses her distrust of the communist party, calling it a “white organ of social control.” She goes on: “[E]very time black people wanted to do something either the communists came in and took it over or the regular crackers came in and said it was communist” (Fowler 8). Sanchez, who was accused of being a communist while teaching classes at San Francisco State University (now San Francisco State College), similarly rejects any suggestion of involvement with the CPUSA, claiming she hardly even knew what it was (Feinstein 169).

Although black women seemed to make up a much smaller portion of black support for communism, one of the most prominent black female communists, Audley Moore, forms an important link between communist-leftist thought in the 1930s, and the black nationalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Eric McDuffie, who has made an extensive study of Moore’s politics, writes that her involvement with the CPUSA taught her “the importance of ideological discipline, party building, and the art of grassroots political organizing,” all of which became key to building a strong black nationalist movement (182). Moore, who had been drawn to the CPUSA because it led an amnesty movement on behalf of the Scottsboro Nine (the nine African American men and boys arrested in 1931 for allegedly raping a white woman) and because of their support of black self-determination, would be actively involved in the CPUSA until 1950, when she started to believe black Americans needed to “decolonize” their own minds before anything else could change (ibid. 185). Shortly afterwards she founded a retreat where she mentored and trained young black nationalists, as well as the leaders of the Revolutionary Action Movement (one of the early Black Power organizations, founded in 1961), and even Malcolm X (186). Her house in Philadelphia became a hub of early Black Nationalist activity, as she taught
young nationalists about Marxism, Leninism, and black nationalism (ibid.). In that sense, her home was very much like Kenneth Rexroth’s, except whereas his mentees were joined by a belief in visionary poetry, Moore’s were connected by their belief in visionary black leadership. Although Audley Moore is just one example among many, and black nationalist ideology was, of course, inspired by discourses on decolonization as much as by communism, her political trajectory is one of the clearest examples of the impact of leftist-communist ideology on black nationalist thought. In spite of the differences between Rexroth’s circle and Moore’s retreat, both were founded on a belief in the power of ideas. It would not be a stretch to suggest that both were formed by structures of feeling that had shaped the cultural climate of San Francisco since its inception. Clearly, as Moore’s example shows, these structures of feeling that allowed one to turn to the imagination as an activist tool in times of social unrest were not limited to white Americans. By the 1960s, this became even more apparent: as I shall show later, interracial interactions in San Francisco’s cultural sphere were more complex than census records might suggest.

The way in which leftist-communist artists fused art and politics would thus set the stage for 1960s poets to the same. Although neither the Beats and Black Arts artists were unreservedly committed to Marxism, and sometimes explicitly rejected communism, as I have shown, it could be said that the structures of feeling that first became apparent during the second half of the nineteenth century, when San Francisco distinguished itself as a “different” city due to its ethnic diversity and widespread interest in science fiction and spiritualism, recurred in the leftism of the 1930s, and was once more revived in the 1960s. During each era, the feelings accompanying this outsider status were never quite codified and “passed” into the past, but remained very much a lived experience that structured San Franciscans’ lives throughout several decades. From the
city’s inception, new generations experienced these structures of feeling as exciting and productive and continued to harness them in times of social upheaval. In the 1870s, the disappearing sense of community coupled with San Francisco’s unusual social environment played bolstered the growing public interest in spiritualism and science fiction. Some sixty years later that same outsider feeling coupled with the mechanization of labor and the advance of capitalism resulted in a burgeoning leftist and communist movement in which labor magazines played a central role. Finally, between 1955-1975, when the city’s nonconformity mixed with middle class disillusionsment and outrage over racial inequality, environmental destruction, and the war in Vietnam, the result was a barrage of social protest fueled by – again – a commitment to alternative social imaginaries. In each of these eras, its surrealism bolstered the creation of revolutionary movements with a utopian slant that used (imaginative) writing as an important revolutionary tool. Thus, the way in which members of the Beats and Black Arts movement conceptualized art as revolutionary political tool, and their firm belief in the establishment of an alternative social imaginary, can in large part be traced to the leftist-bohemian climate of San Francisco in the 1930s and the speculative environment of the late nineteenth century, when Americans from all walks of life dared to imagine a radically new world. These “structures of feeling” that characterized San Francisco as a “strange” city then, remained active and were repeatedly harnessed by new generations and new social movements. In this way, they threaded together the seemingly disparate movements of the Beats and the Black Arts movement.

City Spaces and the Public Sphere

Since the desire for community would remain a constant theme throughout San Francisco history, it was only a matter of time before a sense of unity would be celebrated openly, in public spaces. This would indeed happen, but not right away. The arts, especially poetry, were a private affair for quite some time: the poetry readings that took place in Kenneth Rexroth’s living room
during the 1940s were not unusual. Up until the Second World War, poetry readings were a distinctly private happening, and on the rare occasions when poetry readings did take place in public, they were “formal affairs” (Candida-Smith 49). During the war, however, poetry readings were more often held in public because poets hoped they would help strengthen the American morale. The resulting public interest in poetry led to the creation of several avant-garde poetry journals and the organization of the first Festival of Modern Poetry in 1946, at which Kenneth Rexroth was one of the speakers (ibid. 50-51). For the first time, then, poets had both a public forum and a direct connection to the audiences for which they wrote. In this way, the public nature of poetry readings as well as the Beats and Black Arts poets’ geographical proximity to one another meant that although they were technically part of two distinct poetry scenes (a white one and a Third World one, respectively) they resembled each other in style and purpose. Both emphasized love, especially self-love, and both modeled alternative social imaginaries for their audiences in an attempt to draw the audience into a dialogue about social issues.

As public poetry readings proliferated, the “purpose” of this poetry shifted from linguistic experimentation – which was still important, but no longer its main concern – to addressing social themes and questions. As a result, poets in big cities on both the East and West coasts, but especially in metropolitan areas in the West such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, were creating work that was much more socially engaged than before. As Gary Snyder states in a 1978 interview: “[I wanted to] bring poetry back from our special practice, so to speak, to the open realm of human dialogue where we can address it to anyone” (qtd. in Robbins 203). Returning poetry to the people was a central theme for most of the poets active during the mid-20th century. Poets’ performances in all kinds of places, from cafes to universities and from parks to festivals, allowed for dialogue with the audience. It opened up spaces for conversation, which
was necessary in order to truly get people involved in the creation of an alternative society. These spaces did not just open up after poetry readings, but also during the readings themselves: regardless of where they were performed, the audience would comment on and respond to the poetry, yelling or otherwise making their opinion known (Kane 31). This social engagement formed the basis for the alternative society poets like Rexroth, McClure, and Snyder, but also Giovanni and Sanchez, envisioned.

Scholars like Geoff Ward, Michael Davidson, and Timothy Gray have all theorized the role of San Francisco as the center of bohemian and countercultural activity. For Ward and Davidson, San Francisco’s poetry circles, salons, and other literary events shaped the city to a place suitable to such a purpose. As Davidson writes, “the poem enacts in its own realm forces...that structure the natural world” (20). For Timothy Gray, however, it is exactly the other way around: the natural and physical location of San Francisco shaped its literary scene, as only a city so on the outskirts of American literary life, amidst wild nature, and literally on the edge of the “western” world could give birth to such an innovative poetry scene (32). In my view, the natural scene set the stage for the subsequent social scene that developed, consisting primarily of left-leaning Americans, as I have shown. Moreover, I neither fully subscribe to Davidson’s or Gray’s view of the relationship between poetry and place in San Francisco, but believe in a combination of both: the poetry scene and its social environment stand in dialectical relation to one another. As the bohemian westward pull of the city in both the 1920s and 1960s demonstrates, there was a certain attraction to the city’s frontier image, despite the fact that it was no longer a true frontier at that time. This wild, “outsider” characteristic of San Francisco helped create a poetry scene in which socially minded, publicly engaged, and experimental poetry became possible. At the same time, this experimental poetry scene also shaped the locales
of these readings: if its western location and wild mythology made the creation of an alternative poetry scene possible, then that poetry scene also made a new kind of cultural atmosphere possible, changing San Francisco from a city whose natural surroundings as well as its cultural atmosphere had a profound impact on it both physically and socially. As I will show, poetry readings used the public sphere as a space for conversation, thus encouraging listeners to engage in cross-racial and cross-cultural dialogue despite racial segregation.

The kinds of places in which poets performed allowed for an interchange of ideas and fostered dialogue about society. In that sense, poetry readings as they occurred more frequently from the 1940s onwards revived the role of coffee houses and salons as they functioned during the first establishment of a public sphere. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Jürgen Habermas argues, among other things, that the first incarnation of a “public sphere” came about when the aristocracy encountered the bourgeoisie in coffee houses to discuss literary works in the mid-seventeenth century. This was the first time men from different social classes intermingled and talked as equals. Their discussions, Habermas writes, could be seen as a form of social criticism, because their talk was essentially reflexive: by discussing works of literature, fiction and nonfiction, they discussed themselves (32, 43). The second half of the seventeenth century, then, saw a rise in establishments in which people from all walks of life could discuss and criticize society with one another. In that sense, it served both a social and a political function. These discussions were not merely a form of amusement, but also generated political awareness of “the needs of society” (33). Of course, the seventeenth century public sphere’s open and inclusive character was largely a fiction: while men from all social strata were welcome to participate in coffee house discussions, only a very small percentage of people in Western Europe was literate at the time, and women were de facto banned from participating
(37, 56). Nonetheless, the creation of a public sphere, which coincided with the privatization of homes, led people to question ideas that were formerly left to be interpreted by church and state, and to do so with potentially anyone in society, regardless of social standing (36). As such, the arts (for Habermas also emphasizes the roles of concerts and the visual arts) played a key role in establishing a more democratic climate in which social criticism became more acceptable.

Both the democratic and dialogic qualities of these salon and coffee house discussions persisted (aided by print media) throughout the next centuries both in Europe and the States, although poetry readings did not become public affairs until the 1940s. When they did become public, however, they, too, often took place in coffee houses and stimulated dialogue between poet and audience, and among members of the audience themselves. For the poets, this had one added perk: readings allowed them to keep their poems “open.” When writing a poem for publication, they had to “close” it because it would be reproduced statically. But in a reading, no such stasis existed: they could keep adding and subtracting from the poem for as long as they pleased (Damon 337). This particular stylistic quality also points to the influence of jazz music, to which both black and white bohemians were attracted because of its spontaneous, improvisational nature, as I shall show later. In the context of poetry, responses from the audiences and resulting conversations could become part of the performance, resulting in a near-collaborative art piece. In addition to this creative benefit, the 1940s readings and discussions were also more dialogic because they were more inclusive than those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In large part, this was the result of a 97% American literacy rate in 1940, which gave more people the chance to participate, but cheap broadside editions of poems and free readings and “happenings” also aided the expansion of the public sphere (National Center
for Education Statistics). In that sense, the post-1940 poetry readings truly fulfilled the promise of an inclusive public sphere of which literally anyone could be a member.

Although Habermas primarily focuses on the development and function of a “public sphere” rather than on the reasons why citizens were drawn to participating in this public sphere, he does point out that people were drawn to participate in the public sphere, in part, out of a desire to learn more about human nature (47, 50, 55). As novels became more popular, empathy became an important part of this desire to understand what makes us human (50). Even in the early incarnation of a public sphere, then, we see the precursors for the kind of public sphere that would allow poetry to take on a revolutionary role. In the 1950s and 1960s, drawing in the audience through dialogue became a central tenet of public poetry readings, both for black and white, male and female poets, as I will show in later chapters.

Rexroth, as mentor to the Beats poets, also saw love and empathy as important elements of a functioning democratic society, and believed art could be instrumental in inspiring these feelings. Poetry was especially promising in that respect, because it allowed poets to closely connect to their audience. The poets who succeeded him, and whom he mentored, reflected this philosophy as well. Like most poets at the time, Snyder and McClure both viewed poetry readings as a dialogue with the audience, and indeed encouraged the audience to respond to and participate in their works. A 1966 review of the NCTE poetry festival (at which Gary Snyder was one of the speakers) exemplifies this, as the writer speaks of audience members yelling things from the front rows and enjoying the “liveliest and readiest audience interchanges...ever” (Stafford 952). The festival was such a success that Snyder remarked that contrary to popular belief, “poetry is very much in the front of the spiritual and social revolution taking place in the United States” (ibid.). Sonia Sanchez even used interactions with her audience to rally them
before the poetry performance. Knowing that music and the radio interested people much more than poetry readings at the time, Sanchez would draw people into a conversation before starting her reading, and then once she got their attention, “draw them into a poem” (Melhem 78). As poetry shifted and started to include more “black” themes, Sanchez realized her desire to make poems more rhythmic. She wished them to have more of a beat. Indeed, one of her poems, “a/coltrane/poem” even includes the instruction: “to be sung.” When she first performed this poem, audience members started clapping and stomping their feet in response (ibid. 84). A conversation with Stephen Vincent, a San Francisco poet and artist who went to many poetry readings during the 1960s, suggests that such responses were rule rather than exception: “[o]ften folks felt free to respond during a reading” he says, “laughing or saying something in response to a poem when it was finished.” One main reason these poets encouraged a response from the audience was their desire for dialogue. The whole point of the poem was not just to be a static, aesthetic object, but to elicit reactions and spark conversations about society, especially its difficult socio-political issues, even when there is resistance. For example, Sanchez admits that when she brought up the Vietnam War during a performance, she was booed. Unperturbed, she told the audience: “That is a discussion we need to have” (Johnson-Bailey 85).

One could argue that such a creation of a dialogue, which was so important to both the Beats and the Black Arts poets, was limited by racial segregation, which was then still rampant in San Francisco. Its African American population hovered between 5.6% in 1950, and 13% in 1970 (data from 1960 is unavailable) (Bay Area Census). If these numbers themselves do not say much about the interaction of blacks and whites, a 2001 study by Douglas S. Massey indicates that San Francisco was still severely segregated in 1970. Using a demographic measurement called the “dissimilarity index,” which measures how evenly two demographic groups are
distributed across a specific area, Massey shows that 1970 San Francisco had a dissimilarity index of 80.1. Since the index measures from 0 to 100, 100 being the full segregation of two different groups, it is clear that blacks and whites in San Francisco likely had little contact with one another at the time. And indeed, as I have mentioned before, the 1960s San Francisco poetry scene was still largely divided into two distinct scenes in the 1960s and early 1970s: a so-called “Third World” poetry scene, and white one. This was further fueled by the fact that many young blacks were drawn to Oakland and Berkeley, where a nascent black power movement was developing on the campuses of Berkeley, Laney, and Merritt College. As a result, the population of young black people nearly doubled between 1960 and 1970 (Crowe 199). Hunter’s Point, an area on the far east of San Francisco where many of the docks that had drawn African Americans from the South in the 1930s and 1940s were located, remained San Francisco’s only predominantly black neighborhood well into the 21st century (Roscoe).

Although this segregation cannot be overlooked, and does place limitations on the extent to which Black Arts poets and Beats were able to carry out an open dialogue, the reality of black and white interactions was more complex than these numbers might suggest. First of all, official racial segregation did not mean blacks and whites never interacted. In fact, in terms of poetry readings, the makeup of the audience largely depended on the neighborhood in which the reading took place, rather than on the race of the poet herself. Nikki Giovanni, for example, points out that although her audiences were “basically” black when she first started reading poetry in the late 1960s, its demographics depended on the location: a venue in a predominantly African American neighborhood would draw a predominantly black audience, for example, and more diverse neighborhoods would draw more diverse audiences. For example, two prominent poetry hubs for “poets of color” were Glide Church in the Tenderloin district, and Malvinas in
North Beach. The former was a mixed-race neighborhood before it became predominantly Vietnamese in the 1970s, and the latter boasted sizable populations of Chinese-Americans and Italian-Americans. In addition to reading in diverse neighborhoods, the Beats also included at least three prominent African American poets among its ranks: Amiri Baraka (then still LeRoi Jones), Ted Joans, and Bob Kauffman. Although Joans and Baraka eventually allied themselves with black nationalism instead, during the late 1950s and early 1960s they were still very much a part of the Beat crowd and participated in their poetry readings (Mekas). These two factors alone already paint a more complex picture of interracial interactions in San Francisco’s cultural scene between 1955 and 1975. Since poets’ audiences did not solely depend on their poetic affiliation to any specific movement, audiences would have likely been more mixed than government annals might initially suggest.

The mutual borrowing between Beats and Black Arts poets, especially in terms of style, also complicates the picture of interracial interactions in San Francisco at this time. For example, some Beats, like Allen Ginsberg, occasionally wrote “jazzy” poems, and McClure sometimes performed his poetry accompanied by jazz music (in fact, nowadays, his performances rarely go without). Mike Janssen writes: “the rhythm, meter and length of verse [of Beat poetry] was also distinctly more similar to jazz music than it was to traditionally European styles... Jazz music is distinct in its stressing of the second and fourth beats, as in traditional African music, as opposed to the stressing of the first and third beats, as in Western music. Beat poetry frequently has a much looser, more syncopated rhythm, similar to jazz.” Both black and white listeners to jazz recognized the music as “self-consciously subversive,” Lorenzo Thomas claims, which explains part of its appeal for the Beats (292). In addition, they liked its element of improvisation, which allowed for the spontaneously—and therefore less “academic” and artificial—creation of a poem.
Indeed, this interest in spontaneity helps to show why this interest in jazz cannot simply be dismissed as an instance of cultural appropriation, but is instead part of a stylistic exchange that included both the Beats and Black Arts artists. For example, at the beginning of Baraka’s career, Charles Olson’s theory of “projective verse” had a great impact on his poetry. Olson, who greatly influenced Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and several other later “Beats” as well, suggested that poetic lines needed to follow the poet’s natural breath.\textsuperscript{15} In the early stages of his career, Baraka was very receptive to his ideas. As Nathaniel Mackey writes, “[Baraka’s] description of the music of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, with its emphasis on "total area" as the determinant of form, is highly suggestive of the Projectivist notion of ‘composition by field,’” in that both reject meter, line, chords and bars in favor of the natural progression of a song or poem; their “more musical considerations of rhythm, pitch, timbre, and melody” (Mackey 365-366) Over time, however, Baraka became disillusioned with what he perceived as a failure – on the parts of the Beats and other adherents of Olson’s Projectivist aesthetics – to really engage with the social problems of the decade; to really affect reality, so to speak, which is why he eventually allied himself with the Black Arts movement instead (ibid. 358-359).

Nonetheless, both his involvement with the Beats, as well as the Beats’ interest in jazz and other forms of black music such as bebop, suggests a more convoluted system of cultural borrowing, and more thorough interracial interaction than socio-historical statistics might indicate.

Finally, while it is true that there was little direct cross-racial dialogue, the proximity of these two scenes, combined with the fact that both harbored some of the same ideals and shared the idea of poetry as a revolutionary strategy, did create the conditions for such discussions. After all, the Beats and Black Arts coexisted in the same city, often performing in adjacent or even the same neighborhoods. In theory, this meant that poetry aficionados could see both
Sanchez and Snyder perform the same night. This would mean that they shared at least some members of the public, who would thus be exposed to both the Beats and Black Arts poets’ re-imagined versions of American society. This, coupled with their emphasis on revolutionary love and civic engagement, would theoretically form the ideal conditions for the kind of dialogue they envisioned, as they essentially invited people to join them in imagining an alternative society through their readings. This alternative society necessarily also transcended race. In that sense, while the poets did not directly facilitate cross-racial dialogue, they did help to set the stage to make it possible. After all, the existence of two separate poetry scenes did not negate the fact that both firmly believed in the transformative potential of art, and in the importance of public engagement with that art.

San Francisco’s status as a nonconformist city and eventual countercultural hub rested largely on this dialectic between social environment and poetry scene: specific venues and locales shaped its poetry scenes, but the poetry scenes also affected these neighborhoods as they encouraged people to intermingle, converse, and connect. The city’s state of constant transition partly enabled these interactions, as continuously shifting demographics brought people of different ethnicities literally closer together.

Harnessing the Current of Strangeness

The structures of feeling that Raymond Williams speaks of, that ambiguous cultural expression of social feeling, was of course not limited to the “49 square miles” of San Francisco. Indeed, some might argue that the history and circumstances that made San Francisco so amenable to the type of revolutionary poetry performed by the Beats and the Black Arts poets were not unique to that city. While it is true that in some other American metropolises a similar culture arose, I nonetheless maintain that San Francisco was a unique case. To illustrate why, I will briefly draw a comparison to the New York poetry scenes in which Nikki Giovanni
participated and show that there are still aspects that set San Francisco apart from other big cities.

New York and San Francisco were two major hubs of Black Arts cultural activity at the time, and there was a continuous interchange of both ideas and artists between the two (indeed, Sonia Sanchez moved from New York to San Francisco in the early 1960s, while Amiri Baraka left San Francisco for New York). In fact, Smethurst writes, due to conflicts about the role culture should play in the Black Power movement, many black artists left for other cities, including New York, with the result that West Coast black nationalist ideologies became widespread and gained traction across the United States (284). Unlike Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni never lived in San Francisco. Instead, she chose New York City as her home base and became part of the Black Arts scene there. Like the Bay Area, 1960s New York enjoyed a blossoming poetry scene that also included black, Nuyorican, Puerto Rican and “Third World” poets, and here, too, a leftist history fueled the new generation’s poetics and politics. This new generation of poetic activity primarily took place in New York’s Lower East Side, which many poets hailing from elsewhere saw as a kind of new frontier for American poetry (Kane 17). As in San Francisco, audiences would comment and yell during performances, and poets entered into dialogues with their audiences (Giovanni). On rare occasions difficult topics such as race were openly addressed and discussed, as the Umbra poets did in the early sixties. This unusual fact even leads literary historian Daniel Kane to conclude they were “the only truly revolutionary poetic voices at the time” (91). While it is true that they were, in that sense, revolutionary, Umbra poets formed only one poetry collective among many, which meant they made up only a fraction of the 1960s New York poetry scene. Because of this, their performances tell us little about the general poetic climate in New York at the time.
Like San Francisco, the 1960s New York poetry scene was heavily influenced by Old Left bohemianism as well. In New York, however, members of this older generation were generally part of the New York and Black Mountain schools of poetry, rather than the Beats (which was primarily a West Coast phenomenon). Although the Beats and Black Mountain poets held similar views on the purpose and practice of poetic performance, and indeed influenced each other—Michael McClure was influenced by Charles Olson, for example, the “father” of the Black Mountain poets—they starkly differed in their attitudes towards their own alienation. Smethurst explains:

> [O]ne of the main distinctions between the early works of the different ‘schools’ can be found in the manner in which they represented their alienation. The Beats were often by turns pessimistic, prophetic, and humorously satiric and self-satiric: the poets of the Black Mountain-school, especially Charles Olson, as Frank O’Hara noted, were highly (and perhaps overly) conscious of the Pound-heritage of finding the great statement; and the New York school poets, especially Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler, often made this alienation seem fun – at least on the surface. (62)

In other words, unlike the Beats, the Black Mountain poets were more concerned with style, and the New York poets approached alienation in a more amusing way. As a result, much of their poetry lacks the emotional appeal and sense of urgency conveyed by Beat poetry, and with it, the impetus for drastic social change that was central to the poetry of San Francisco in the 1960s.

Even though Black Arts poets such as Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, and Lorenzo Thomas wrote more socially engaged and, in Kane’s words, revolutionary poetry, they shared the scene with the Black Mountain poets who had a vastly different outlook on life. The poetry scene was thus not only fragmented into different ethnic scenes, as in San Francisco, but also in terms of “attitudes” towards society: one playful, the other urgent. In San Francisco, on the other hand, this urgent “outsider” perspective predominated, and was shared by Beats and Black Arts poets alike. Indeed, it was precisely this marginal status that drew so many bohemian writers from the
1920s to the 1950s. Kenneth Rexroth described this perfectly, when he said in San Francisco “it [the underground] is dominant, almost all there is” (Rexroth qtd. in Davidson 12). In other words, the mainstream consisted of outsiders. The city’s marginality played a big role in its investment in social issues. One huge difference compared with San Francisco, then, was that while the 1960s New York poetry scene contained pockets of poets dedicated to addressing social justice issues, overall it was less marked by a desire for social change.

Moreover, aside from its leftist history, New York and San Francisco’s histories have little in common, primarily because San Francisco’s location on the edge of the continent as a former “frontier city” influenced the course of its development and helped shaped its image as a somewhat outlandish place. While both cities were shaped by waves of immigrants throughout the years, for San Francisco this happened almost overnight when the Gold Rush (1848-1855) drew thousands of immigrants to the city, causing a phenomenal increase in the number of citizens, and especially in those of East-Asian descent. Between 1848 and 1852, the number of citizens grew from 812 to 36,151, and it became one of the most diverse states of the nineteenth century (Sinclair 22; “California Gold Rush”). In addition, the special brand of “whackiness” that Geoff Ward ascribes to San Francisco was absent from New York. Of course, New York history has its fair share of unusual characters and events, but it lacks the strange amalgam of emerging multiculturalism coupled with spiritualism, science fiction, and bohemianism that had come to define San Francisco. Again, then, the primary difference between the two cities can be found in San Francisco’s reputation as a haven for foreigners and drifters.

While San Francisco and New York had some things in common, then, as both evolved into multicultural, left-leaning, metropolitan areas, each phase in San Francisco’s history added another layer to its unusual stature, and made the rise of the 1960s poetry scene more possible.
As I have shown, the interest in spiritualism and science fiction pushed citizens to think beyond their own physical realities to imagine more outlandish possibilities, and the rise of leftist politics and bohemians both popularized the use of art as a tool for change, and emphasized the importance of having a voice and engaging in dialogue. Each of these phases in history paved the way for the creation of the 1960s poetry scene, which was marked by both. They were able to think differently because the social spaces (as well as the physical) were and continued to be in flux; both the era of spiritualism and science fiction, and the era of leftism and progressivism were sparked by drastic changes in the city’s ethnic makeup. It was precisely this state of constant movement that set it apart from other American cities, for it forced those living there to continuously imagine and re-imagine the city in which they were living. For the Beats and Black Arts artists, this meant re-imagining society in radically new ways and encouraging the audience to share in these visions. Although their visions of a more loving society may seem utopian to us, then, projecting such a radically new social imaginary was less of a stretch for citizens used to re-imagining their city. Indeed, its “fluxness” may well have helped water the seeds for what Geoff Ward so aptly called San Francisco’s “visionary topos” (58).

The idea of San Francisco as a place set apart from everything else never faded: in the 1940s and 1950s itself, Americans on both sides of the political spectrum viewed it as an unusual, near-imaginary place. As Timothy Gray writes: “[T]he members of the Ford administration were occupied with a set of challenges rather different from those faced by bohemian writers in San Francisco. And yet, at some level, both groups were seeking the same utopian realm: a fantastical place where cold war posturing might be superseded by natural and nonideological partnership among geographically linked peoples” (16). This search for a near-utopian place was not merely abstract and idealist, however: writers and poets were very much
concerned with the pragmatic realization of such a utopia. As Ernst Bloch shows, the potentially transformative aspect of performance might not be as far-fetched as it may initially seem because art is not just imaginative, but reflective: it mirrors that what is immanent in society. In this theory, art does not just fantasize about an alternative society, but detects tendencies in society that already suggest the inching towards this new society (146). In the end, then, it could be said that the Beats and Black Arts poets engaged in a critique of “master narratives,” as Michael Davidson has suggested with regard to the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance (31). Instead of doing so by “celebrating an essentially plural society,” however, they did so by tapping into the current of strangeness – indeed, the structures of feeling – that runs from San Francisco’s founding to the present. And although this current of strangeness engulfed large parts of America in the 1960s, the Bay Area would remain its source.

Notes

1 While the country as a whole industrialized during this time, industrialization happened at an especially frantic page in California. Karl Marx himself even wrote about California to an American correspondent, stating that: “[n]owhere else has the upheaval most shamelessly caused by capitalist concentration taken place with such speed.” See Letters to Americans, 1848-1895: A Selection, 126


3 Martin R. Delaney, called by some the first black nationalist thinker, wrote a successful newspaper serial called Blake, or the Huts of America between 1861-1862. Somewhat later, Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy (1892) saw considerable success as well, as did Sutton Griggs Imperium in Imperio (1899).

4 Although labor magazines were the main avenues for organizing workers, leftist sentiments were by no means limited to these outlets alone. Some prominent mainstream media outlets also expressed leftist sympathies, expanding - at least on paper - the leftist community in the western United States. In the early 1930s, for example, the California-based magazine Overland Monthly and Out West ran articles praising progressive social initiatives in California such as Unemployment Relief Associations (R. Moore) and had no qualms referring to big businessmen as “the billionaire king[s] of our bad dreams” (A.E. Moore). Likewise, in Living Age magazine, which was popular across the United States, one writer calls for a socialist-inspired liberal movement led by people such as Eugene Debs or Edward Bellamy, two noted socialists (the latter of whom was more well known as a writer)(“The American Scene”). In 1932, even the avowedly conservative magazine Forum and Century published a piece entitled “We Need a Labor Party - Now!” in which the author rails against the established political parties for their lack of understanding the workers’ plight (Hutchinson).

5 See Lisa Brahinsky’s ‘Hush Puppies,’ Communalist Politics, and Demolition Governance: The Rise and Fall of the Black Fillmore” in Ten Years That Shook the City: San Francisco 1968-1978 for a detailed look into this development.
According to Michael Davidson, Kenneth Rexroth himself was decidedly left-leaning: he argues that part of what attracted him to the city was that so many of its writers were entrenched in the labor movement. Indeed, Davidson writes, Rexroth thought of San Francisco writers as “engaged proles,” or proletarians. Gary Snyder, however, declared himself a pacifist rather than a leftist in a 1962 letter to Allen Ginsberg. Although he was not yet a practicing Buddhist at the time of Rexroth’s poetry circle some five to seven years earlier, he was then already immersing himself in Eastern religions, so it would not be a stretch to assume these sentiments were already starting to take shape. McClure, too, refused to get too involved in politics, as he believed it aimed to repress “mammalian” nature, and dangerous to the environment. He did know Herbert Marcuse personally, however, and admired his work (see Rebel Lions 115).

The group of poets surrounding Rexroth consisted primarily of white male poets, but he did also promote the work of white women and black men such as LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Denise Levertov in his radio shows. See “American Literature Archival Collections in USC Special Collections: Kenneth Rexroth.”


“Question re: poetry readings.” Received by Berit Brink, 3 Dec. 2015. Personal correspondence.

See note 9.

See note 9.

Giovanni, Nikki. “No subject.” Received by Berit Brink, Jan 13. 2016. Personal correspondence.

See note 9.

Kaufman was not very engaged with the Black Arts movement at all, yet James Smethurst argues that his poetry was in many respect a forerunner of the kind of avant-garde poetry that dealt with antiracism and anticolonialism simultaneously that would come to characterize black nationalist poetry in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Smethurst, "Remembering When Indians Were Red": Bob Kaufman, the Popular Front, and the Black Arts Movement.”

See my discussion of Sanchez and Snyder for a more detailed explanation of this theory.

Research suggests that such cross-racial alliances were not merely hypothetical, but did indeed form among blacks and whites in San Francisco, and not just in literary circles. Amy Ongiri, for example, argues that contrary to popular belief, white involvement with the Black Power movement was serious, committed, and effective. See Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic, 69.
CHAPTER 3
NIKKI GIOVANNI AND MICHAEL MCCLURE: VISIONS OF LOVE AS REVOLUTIONARY ACTION

Freedom and love may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us…

– Robin D.G. Kelley

*Freedom Dreams*

[I]t is always the love that will carry action into positive new places that will carry your own nights and days beyond demoralization and away from suicide.

– June Jordan

*Some of Us Did Not Die*

In her 1970 poem “Ugly Honkies, or the Election Game and How to Win It,” Black Arts poet Nikki Giovanni offers a scathing critique of American elections, which she believes are useless because all the candidates are white. Amidst the violence that pervades society, and especially after multiple black politicians have been killed, she suggests – in what are probably some of the most famous lines from her poem – that:

the barrel of a gun
is the best voting machine
your best protest vote
is a dead honkie (72-75)

As a poet writing within the Black Arts Movement (approximately 1965-1975), which followed what it saw as the failures of King’s non-violent, anti-segregationist movement, Giovanni was expected to use combative, anti-white, and pro-Black language. In Addison Gayle jr.’s *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), a volume containing some of the most influential essays outlining what black art should look like, Gayle himself wrote that black artists are “at war with American society,” and suggests art should reflect this battle (xvii). Similarly, prominent Black Power fighter Ron (later “Maulana”) Karenga argued that black arts should initiate a revolution in people’s minds, yet he insists this can only be done if these works of art explicitly support the Black revolution.
He emphasizes that black cultural nationalist poetry should “kill and shoot guns,” and that it should be collective. In other words, it must represent the “common” experience of all black Americans, and it must incite rebellion and thus revolution (33-34). Clearly, in “Ugly Honkies,” Giovanni tries to do just that. Yet, a focus on these militant characteristics alone would result in a misreading of Giovanni’s actual beliefs about the revolution. For in the same poem, amidst name-calling and explicit disillusionment with formal politics, she also states:

let’s build a for real black thing
called revolution
known to revolutionists as
love (98-101)

Questioning the sustainability of counter-violence, she offers an alternative solution: love. This may come as a surprise, given that adherents of the Black Power movement were often (self-) portrayed as militant and violent. And while this was indeed part of their image, dismissing them as a domestic terrorist group ignores the complexities within the movement. As Keith Leonard puts it, some of the key figures of the Black Arts movement

[m]anaged to transform the narrow, closed, and divisive masculinist Black Nationalist subject into a more bohemian, open-ended and inclusive version predicated on intimacy rather than on masculinized self-assertion. Moreover, this affective communalism—again, dare I call it love—was also posited as one of the defining characteristics of the culture of this black nation, becoming as much the alternative radicalism of Black Nationalism as its more explicitly articulated social and political ideals. (620)

How to reconcile this positioning of “love” as an alternative revolutionary strategy, which seems to echo the nonviolence championed by Martin Luther King Jr., which the militant rhetoric of the Black Arts movement? Giovanni concedes that as she grew older, she came to look at nonviolence as a self-love strategy: “If we can forgive them,” she says, “we must then love ourselves” (The Prosaic Soul 269). It could be said, then, that much of her violent rhetoric is merely a veneer that would legitimize her poetry in the eyes of the Black Arts movement. What
she is really committed to is rebuilding black life, or a “for real black thing” as she calls it, based on love and empathy. This, to her, would be truly revolutionary because it would challenge the underlying feelings of inferiority that help enable white supremacy.¹

Michael McClure, a member of the Beat Generation, was similarly committed to transforming society by emphasizing affective bonds and reinforcing a sense of community. While it may seem like a stretch to juxtapose Nikki Giovanni’s black proto-womanist poems with those of Michael McClure – a white, male member of the Beat Generation who first rose to prominence after the famous Six Gallery Reading (1955), a decade before Giovanni did – their shared emphasis on community and affection is undeniable. Clearly, I will not suggest that his poetry is feminist or womanist in any way, but as a so-called ecocritical poet, he does also project a radically alternative social imaginary that is similarly rooted in an affective community. In his view, however, the entire universe is part of the “community.” Since both poets believe that authentic feelings of love and solidarity are fundamental to the creation of a revolutionary community, these feelings constitute the key principle that could undermine the repressive realities of capitalism and white supremacy and become the foundation of an alternative social imaginary. When I use the term “social imaginary” I am referring specifically to the vision of an ideal society; one that serves as the driving force behind social change regardless of whether or not it will eventually be realized in all its facets. I argue that McClure and Giovanni are not merely writing poetry at the same time, but are part of a broader countercultural tradition that uses poetry as a vehicle for presenting an alternative social imaginary rooted in authentic, loving personal connections. A brief look at each poet’s influences could help contextualize the similarities between the two.
For McClure, these are authentic connections to the universe in general, not just to other human beings. While this may sound quite abstract, especially alongside Giovanni’s material concerns, his upbringing and trajectory as a poet sheds some light on this idea. Born in Kansas in 1932, McClure was raised in Seattle from the age of five by his grandfather, who was an avid amateur naturalist (Phillips 8). In his grandfather’s care, his interest in nature grew and would eventually become central to his work as a poet. In the early 1950s, he followed his girlfriend to San Francisco with the intention of becoming a painter. Upon discovering that his favorite painters had just left the art institute he had planned to attend, he decided to enroll in a writing workshop instead. As a visually oriented person, however, he continued to think about the poem’s visual representation on the page (this might explain why, visually speaking, his poems are often shaped like insects). The leader of the workshop in which he enrolled was Robert Duncan; a key figure among the so-called San Francisco Renaissance poets who had a major impact on the Beats (ibid. 109). From that moment forward, he increasingly became part of the literary bohemia that was flourishing in San Francisco.

McClure did not only count poets and writers among his friends, however: one of his close friends was scientist Sterling Bunnell (ibid. 14). His friendship with Bunnell, as well as his interest in the works of biologist Ramon Margalef and ecologist Howard T. Odun, rekindled his dormant interest in the environment, and he started developing ideas about poetry’s relationship to nature. “Out of his readings of Margalef,” Phillips explains, “McClure began to view his poems as biological extensions born of an ‘organic process’ in which one life form – the poet’s – transfers energy [and] in the mysterious and interwoven fabric of the complex and beautiful systems Odum described, [he] found the scientific support for the intuitive feelings of species interconnectedness with which he had been struggling for more than twenty years” (39, 40). In
other words, his dabbling in biology and ecology provided him with “evidence” for ideas he had been entertaining for a while: namely, that humans are fundamentally “mammals” who would live in harmony with the rest of the universe if only they could be more in touch with their “natural” selves, and that poetry could be a way to concretize the relationship of human beings to the rest of the universe by “transferring energy” from poet to reader. His acquaintance with Black Mountain poet Charles Olson, and especially the latter’s theory of “projective verse” would provide him with more specific stylistic ideas on how to do that: “projective verse,” per Olson’s definition, meant allowing lines of poetry to follow the poet’s natural breath. These ideas, combined with French dramatist Antonin Artaud’s call for works of art that would dynamize the “stifled...dynamic relationship that should exist between the artist and his society,” (King) would form the groundwork for the rest of McClure’s œuvre.

While McClure’s environmental emphasis clearly differs from Giovanni’s concerns about both racism and sexism, he nonetheless shares her belief that resistance to oppression should be sought in personal connections and communal action. To him, however, this “community” encompasses the “extended community” of the universe. In his work September Blackberries (1968), he expounds this vision as he expresses the belief that all human beings are first and foremost mammals that would be gratified if they lived in harmony with nature. For him, the awareness that he is himself a “mammal” fosters a deep appreciation – one could even call it “affection” – for the world around him. He uses his poetry to suggest a revolution in consciousness should start with love for the world around us that is both “biologically and spiritually aware” (Phillips 49). In order to show the parallels between this view and Giovanni’s, however, it helps to first get a sense of her personal and artistic influences as well.
Nikki Giovanni was born Yolande Cornelia Giovanni jr. in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1943 but moved to Cincinnati, Ohio shortly after she was born. Her grandparents remained in Knoxville, however, where she spent many summers growing up. In high school, when her parents were having relationship difficulties, she even moved in with them. Giovanni’s friend and biographer Virginia Fowler describes Giovanni’s grandmother as one of the most important people in her life. In fact, when she was expelled from Fisk University in 1960, it was because she went home to her grandparents for Thanksgiving while the Dean had not given her permission to do so (Fowler, *A Literary Biography*, 1; Giovanni, *The Prosaic Soul*, 14). In addition to Emma Louvenia, Giovanni also looked up to her outgoing sister Gary Ann (who was the one who nicknamed her “Nikki-Rosa” for no apparent reason – the name stuck, although the “Rosa” was later dropped), her mother Yolande, with whom she was close, and some of her teachers, notably Sister Althea Augustine, who remains a close friend until this day (Fowler, *A Literary Biography* 11-13; *Nikki Giovanni* 7). According to family stories, Giovanni was a dreamy child, forever forgetting what she was supposed to be doing because she was always daydreaming about other things (Fowler, *A Literary Biography*, 12). She did well in school, and attended Fisk University after high school. Although she was initially expelled, she was later reinstated and became a campus leader. She enrolled in a writer’s workshop with John O. Killens, through which she met rising literary stars who would go on to become major figures in the Black Arts movement, such as Amiri Baraka and Dudley Randall (ibid. 19). She also reestablished the Fisk chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). After she graduated from Fisk in 1966, she edited an arts journal called *Conversations* and organized Cincinnati’s first Black Arts festival, among other things. In June, she attended Detroit’s Second
Annual Black Arts Convention, which – as Virginia Fowler also points out – inspired the first poem of her first collection, called “Detroit Conference of Unity and Art” (ibid. 23).

Giovanni realized her embrace of black nationalism would not be sustainable without a degree of emotional connectedness, which would reduce some of its masculinist ethos and make space for black female subjectivity. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where and how she came to this realization, some of her early actions indicate that she was already entertaining this idea during her time at Fisk. For example, she refused to help bring Stokely Carmichael (then the unofficial leader of the SNCC) to campus for fear that it would lead to violence between students and the Nashville police, recognizing the limits of his militant rhetoric (ibid. 19). During her senior year, in 1966, she also published an essay in Negro Digest in which she explicitly questioned the seemingly subservient position of women in the Black Arts movement. She writes: “Is it necessary that I cease being a Black woman so that he can be a man?” (“I’m Worried about a Manchild” 86). These instances suggest she was actively thinking about the effectiveness of Black Power rhetoric, and especially its masculinist slant. Indeed, looking at her poems between 1968 and 1975, it is clear she came to believe that emotional connections between people, both men and women, were fundamental for rebuilding black life. bell hooks makes a similar argument when she claims, with regard to Frantz Fanon’s work, that in order to heal the “psychic” wounds of racism, we have to recognize black female subjectivity. Doing so, she believes, would create a site for “ontological resistance,” as Fanon calls the kind of resistance that confronts white narratives about black histories and black modes of being. Specifically, when black women are recognized as subjects by black men, ontological resistance becomes feasible because it would signify both an acknowledgement of their connection as black people, and an acknowledgement that those connections and the histories that forged them matter.
(85). Without believing in this site of potential ontological resistance, hooks concludes, it is impossible to start imagining alternative ways of being (84-85). Echoing hooks, Giovanni suggests that black communities can only begin to rebuild themselves by recognizing the worthiness of one’s own feelings and those of others. Needless to say, this required recognizing the value of black women and distancing oneself from the masculinist rhetoric that pervaded the Black Arts movement\(^2\) and saw women as essentially secondary.

To some extent, Giovanni’s view recalls Alice Walker’s womanism. Per Walker's 1982 definition, womanism can be defined in four interrelated ways. Calling it “black feminism” would be too simplistic: rather, it is an inclusive feminism, concerned with the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of women, and ”committed to survival and wholeness of entire peoples, male and female” (Walker xi). She continues by defining a womanist as someone who is:

Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.”

Traditionally capable, as in: ”Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” (ibid.)

As women who are both individually capable and “universalist,” womanists are both confident in their own abilities as well as dedicated to improving the lives of those who are part of their communities. Her poetry suggests Giovanni is committed to this two-pronged goal as well. What is more, she shows that recognizing and discussing her personal feelings does not detract from the struggle for black power, but enhances it: only by being a “whole” person, and engaging the world as such, can she really partake in the revolution. In this way, she also encourages others to share their feelings in order to be “whole” and connect with others. Genuine connections strengthen communal bonds that help protect communities against oppression, she seems to suggest.
Yet, while Giovanni’s vision closely resembles Alice Walker’s “womanism,” I hesitate to use this label because Walker did not coin the term "womanist" until 1979, and did not fully define it until 1982; a decade after Giovanni’s first poetry collections appeared. For that reason, I choose to understand her vision of a loving society more in terms of poet’s June Jordan’s words instead. As one of Giovanni’s contemporaries, she writes: “The love devolving from my quest for self-love and self-respect and self-determination must be, as I see it, something you can verify in the ways that I present myself to others, and in the ways that I approach people different from myself” to which she adds that this would give her a “socio-psychic” strength to “embrace more and more of the whole world” over time (271). While much of Jordan’s work about love was written around the same time Alice Walker published In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens (1982), the idea that her journey into self-love depends, in part, on her connections to others and her willingness to approach them lovingly runs through several of her essays written as early as 1974 (Jordan 285). For Giovanni, too, emotional connections are central to her vision of an alternative society, as her poems in My House (1972) suggest. In large part, they are what fosters the wellbeing of black Americans in general, and black women in particular, as Patricia Hill Collins writes (103-104). This sense of comfort is, in turn, crucial to resisting racist oppression. To return to June Jordan’s 1978 epigram at the beginning of this chapter: “[I]t is always the love that will carry action into positive new places, that will carry our own nights and days beyond demoralization and away from suicide” (269). Offering this same view, Giovanni shows that the revolutionary nature of her poetry resides in its ability to cast love as viable alternative to violence.

Her ability to make room for black female subjectivity and especially interiority, could be called particularly revolutionary in that respect, since this interiority is often rendered invisible
by both American society at large and in organizations that emphasize black pride, such as the Black Power party (the stereotype of the “strong black woman” is a good example of this, because while it is often meant as a compliment, it precludes the possibility of being a complex, “whole” human being, as Giovanni herself also suggests in her 1966 Negro Digest essay). 3

Showing how black women have always had to grapple with stereotypes in their attempts at self-definition, social theorist Patricia Hill Collins explains how black female sexuality has been tied to “animalistic” or “wild” images for centuries, complicating the quest for self-definition (Black Sexual Politics 28). Often, she writes, U.S. black women had to figure out how to define themselves in ways that grappled with the implications of stereotypes, yet were authentic at the same time. In other words, as Karla Holloway writes, black women are continuously forced to “configure [their] private realities to an awareness of what [their] public image might mean to others” (36). Self-definition was thus not a mere question of re-establishing agency, but of doing so while also navigating the latent effects of stereotypes on themselves and on others’ perceptions.

During these struggles for self-definition, black female “consciousness,” as Hill Collins calls it, became a place that could transform the social demands and restrictions placed on black women (ibid. 99-100). Women’s interior lives became safe spaces for experimentation and self-definition, as did sharing those interior lives with others – especially other women. In the 1960s and 1970s, this sharing extended beyond one’s immediate circle of friends and family to the American black community at large: as Hill Collins explains, music and poetry became particularly important because whereas a black women’s literary tradition existed, it was not accessible to everyone. Performance, on the other hand, could be understood by anyone, regardless of education level (108-109). She writes: “One can write for a nameless, faceless
audience, but the act of using one’s voice requires a listener and thus establishes a connection” (104). Poetry thus provided a platform on which black women could not only re-define themselves, but also share these self-definitions with others, thus creating new safe spaces free from white “surveillance.” Only in such safe spaces did it become possible to engage in acts of public dreaming again; that is, it became possible to dream and live rather than merely to resist.

As work by Addison Gayle jr. and Ron (Maulana) Karenga shows, however, prominent members of the Black Arts movement discouraged creating art that was not explicitly revolutionary. Since some black revolutionary nationalists accused black artists of merely making “symbolic gestures,” it is perhaps not surprising they tried to validate their work by making it unequivocally militant (Smethurst 283). Barred from writing poetry and literature that was personal, however, black woman writers were discouraged from exploring the interplay of race and gender (and, to a lesser extent, sexuality and class). The primary focus had to be on race. As such, they were asked to forego examining the “wholeness” of their experiences as black women in exchange for an exclusive focus on "black" cultural nationalist forms of resistance. Giovanni’s display of personal, affective feelings thus signals a departure from the bulk of Black Arts poetry, and opens up the possibility of personal connections between her poetic persona and the reader, as well as between different readers. As she later stated, in The Prosaic Soul of Nikki Giovanni: “Art is a connection. I like being a link” (254). As the link between different human beings, her poetry became a political tool that not only makes people aware of the repressive reality they are a part of, but also posits an alternative mode of existing rooted in a “for real black thing,” constituted by love rather than violence.

Perhaps the displays of affection in Nikki Giovanni’s early poetry have so rarely been identified as the source of revolutionary power because her initial popularity rested in large part
on her militant rhetoric, and critics have also focused primarily on the explicitly revolutionary qualities of her poems (Fowler, *Nikki Giovanni*, 14, 27). Indeed, when one removes the personal elements from her work, the poems are unreservedly violent. However, reading her poems only in terms of their political content results in a misreading that ignores the revolutionary potential of affection, which linked a “definition of individual sexual love...with possibilities of social freedom in the economic and political realm” (Davis 10). While it is difficult to reconcile the daydreams and declarations of love that are scattered throughout her œuvre with the explicit calls to violence, a thorough reading of Giovanni’s work requires that we navigate the two. Both themes – desire and seduction on the one hand, and revolutionary militancy on the other – made up Giovanni’s experience as a black woman in the Black Arts movement, and so both need to be acknowledged in order to really see the “whole” persona she has crafted for herself.

Some of the poems such as “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro,” in which she repeatedly asks “Can a nigger kill?” or “Ugly Honkies or the Election Game and How to Win It,” in which she suggests “the barrel of a gun / is the best voting machine,” are explicit calls to violent action. Yet, even there, the call to fight back is mitigated by the personal dedications at the beginning of some poems: “Black vs. Negro” is dedicated to her nephew Peppe, for example, and the seemingly political “Detroit Conference for Unity and Art (for HRB),” which opens *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968), is not just dedicated to H. Rap Brown (then chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) but also implies that she values her attachment to him more than the actual politics of the conference. The last two stanzas proclaim that despite the important decisions made at the conference, the crucial event was that “Rap chose me” (20). Amidst the politically important black nationalist work she is doing, her feelings of admiration for Brown, and her girlish delight when he takes note of her, matter more
than the conference proceedings. Likewise, in “The Only Song I’m Singing” (1972) from My House, she also suggests that while political action is important, it is not nearly as important as her relationships. Metaphorically ignoring calls from “the president” (21), Giovanni confides that: “[i]f you think you want me home i think / i’ll stick around (23-24). While these kinds of remarks (“Rap chose me” and “if you want me home i think / i’ll stick around”) may seem frivolous, they could also be viewed differently: as she shows throughout the rest of Black Feeling, Black Talk (1968), Black Judgment (1970), and especially My House (1972), those personal, human connections are indeed the foundation on which a freer, love-centered black community could be built.4

Through her poetry, then, Giovanni shows that Black Art does not have to be belligerent in order to uplift the Black community and effect change, and that the very act of writing poetry itself could be the truly revolutionary strategy because it presents readers or listeners with the vision of an alternative way of living. By asserting herself as a “whole” black woman who is both powerful and vulnerable; loving and revolutionary, and who cares about her own well-being as well as that of the community, she offers up a testimony of black feminine selfhood that was normally discouraged by the Black Arts aesthetic. In doing so, she not only presents an alternative but also provides the basis for realizing that alternative, for her own testimony invites other women to identify with her emotions and experiences. As such, her poetry becomes a vehicle for representing and solidifying a kind of proto-womanist vision of society.

Legal Violence and Black Arts Resistance

In order to understand the radical nature of this vision, it is important to get an idea of the violent context in which she projected it. The surge of social activism and resistance throughout the 1960s, especially the unprecedented number of riots, were perceived as a threat by several local branches of the American government. As a result, the instances of what Walter Benjamin
called “legal violence,” (that is, the condoned use of force by the military and the police) increased. This also explains why police violence against African Americans was particularly brutal and widespread during the 1960s and early 1970s, for civil rights protests challenged the very foundation on which mid-century American society was built: the separation of black and white, and thus the subjugation of black citizens. Likewise, New Left protesters challenged imperialist thought, including America’s presumed prerogative to intervene in the conflict in Vietnam. In both cases, as became clear on Bloody Tuesday 1964, when peaceful civil rights protesters were gassed and beaten in Tuscaloosa, Tennessee; at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968, when anti-war protesters were beaten and arrested in large numbers; and the Kent State shooting in Ohio 1970, when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on students protesting the Vietnam War, killing four.

Realizing that a threatened government would violently suppress any further protest or other forms of activism that could be perceived as threats, members of the Black Power movement rejected Martin Luther King’s integrationist approach and turned to counter-violence instead. As Stokely Carmichael, the “honorary prime minister” of the Black Panther Party, writes in his manifesto “Towards Black Liberation:”

It is white power that makes the laws, and it is violent white power in the form of armed white cops that enforces those laws with guns and nightsticks. The vast majority of Negroes in this country live in these captive communities and must endure these conditions of oppression because, and only because, they are black and powerless. (644, emphasis in quote)

Since they had few legal rights, and no law-making power whatsoever, any kind of “legal violence” was per definition oppressive. Moreover, since the state continued to feel threatened by African Americans, especially by those associated with the Black Power movement, they used both overt and covert violence (in the form of invasive Counterintelligence Program practices, for example) to suppress Black Power. The only effective response, then, according to
the Black Panthers, was to respond with counter-violence. In their eyes, the true freedom, independence and dignity of black people rested on the ability to shoot back.

Interestingly, Carmichael’s manifesto “What We Want” underscores that the alternative society Black Panthers seek to build is founded on love, yet according to him, this state can only be realized through violence: “We can build a community of love only where we have the ability and power to do so: among blacks,” he states, and adds that force is the only way to gain access to this power (57). The Panthers believed they had to form a power bloc, which meant that unity, not diversity, was of utmost importance. Several scholars have pointed out that this put female Black Panthers in a difficult position: despite being members of a revolutionary party, they were discouraged from addressing women’s issues because the movement believed they would be divisive. Considering that two-thirds of Black Panthers were women, this was a particularly unusual perspective (Cleaver 234). However, as Kathleen Cleaver and others have pointed out, sexism was not unique to the Black Panther Party, but a reflection in the 1960s attitude towards women in general. Perhaps it was just more noticeable in the Party, Cleaver suggests, because women in the Party actively tried to challenge and subvert the roles allotted to them (235).

Regardless of the precise extent of misogyny in the Party, it is clear that the Black Power movement – and, by extension, the Black Arts Movement – discouraged women’s self-expression. Essays such as Karenga’s “Black Cultural Nationalism” and Neal’s overview “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic” were particularly influential in spreading this idea, because they were prescriptive: they dictated the form, shape, and content of black art so that it would maximize support for the revolution. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, Karenga emphasized that art must be both collective and in clear support of the revolution (34). While he suggests that there can be “diversity in unity,” as he calls it, in reality the demand for explicitly
revolutionary content left little room for the exploration of other subject matters. In other words, while the black aesthetic was not meant to be a “standardization” of art but a mere “framework” of recommendations, the call for black art for and by the people automatically precluded the examination of topics that were not explicitly black and revolutionary. As a result, the emphasis on collectivity left little room for women to express themselves as women. Individuality was considered a threat to the collective cause of black power, and so women’s concerns or other individual experience had to take a backseat to the elevation of the race in general. For Carmichael and most others, then, any kind of “love” not centered on the love male revolutionary comrades have for each other could not be discussed before blacks had true political power. This is a missed opportunity for true ontological resistance, as bell hooks writes in her essay on love and Fanon, because it means the men in the Black Arts movement refuse to exchange a gaze with black women and thus fail to recognize them as subjects. True revolutionaries would “demand the creation of a world where women and men in general, and black women and men in particular, would dialogue together,” she suggests (84-85). In other words, such revolutionaries would acknowledge one another as “whole” people.

Love in Times of Violence: Giovanni’s Dreams

In spite of Carmichael’s misgivings, both Giovanni and McClure use poetry to show that a loving society cannot be brought about through violence. Rather, feelings of solidarity and community provide the basis for social and cultural resistance, because they provide the safe space in which it is possible to dream. As Robin D.G. Kelley writes in Freedom Dreams, “the black radical imagination…is a collective imagination engaged in an actual movement for liberation,” to which he adds that, among other things, it is the product of “endless conversations circulating in a shared environment” (150). This is not to say that every word uttered by U.S. black women was an expression of collective ideas, but rather that the sharing of any individual
ideas with their communities led to new social possibilities. By sharing their ideas in a safe environment made up of like-minded people, they not only sustained a sense of security but also initiated a potentially transformative dialogue in black communities.

Before I turn to McClure in order to expand on the similarities between his work and Giovanni’s, let me first reiterate the key difference between these two poets: for Giovanni projecting a loving social imaginary automatically also means calling for the recognition of black female subjectivity, because a true community cannot exist without acknowledging black women’s places in it. As such, her call for a more loving society is also a call for her recognition as a black woman. McClure’s recognition as a subject is less crucially tied up with his alternative social imaginary: as a white, straight male, his existence as a subject has never been questioned, and he has never had to worry about being overlooked as a human being. He does, however, advocate for our mammalian selves to be “seen” in a way that resembles how Giovanni demands that black women be “seen.” Without this acknowledgement, McClure suggests, it is difficult to conceive of the universe as part of one’s community, and without that conception, human beings struggle to treat their environments respectfully. What is more, by refusing to recognize the environment as part of the community, people narrow their field of vision. As a result, it becomes more difficult to come up with truly alternative imaginaries, in the same way that not returning the black woman’s gaze – as bell hooks puts it – leads to a “lack of the imagination of the heart” (85). To become “whole beasts” again, as McClure puts it, (“With Tendrils of Poems” 18) we need to rekindle the awareness of ourselves as “mammals,” which will allow us to be free enough to dream limitlessly. He writes:

I have heard that Mozart signed letters to his sister with endearing obscenities such as, “a kiss on the bottom to my darling sister.” Watch young animals at play, the endearments, the mutual explorations and cleanings, the investigations. In the
human realm these cub activities are forbidden or left in the secrecy of dark closets, basements, and silent bedrooms. *(Scratching the Beat Surface 115)*

But they should not be forbidden, McClure suggests, because such unrestricted playing and talking allow us to dream and fantasize without restrictions posed by our sense of propriety or pragmatism. In a sense, then, his ability to dream requires getting back in touch with our extended “natural” community, including our own “mammalian” consciousness, as he calls it. Just like Giovanni needs personal connections to be recognized and thus be a “whole” person and carry out her revolutionary work, so McClure believes people’s mammalian consciousness needs to be recognized to sustain a connection to the universe as a whole. Thus, while McClure’s subjectivity does not hinge on the potential realization of his alternative social imaginary in the way Giovanni’s does on hers, both of their visions require the establishment of a loving community.

Perhaps because of the social activist climate of the 1960s, both McClure’s and Giovanni’s late 1960s and early 1970s poetry displays a tension between insistence on pragmatic action, and the belief that indirect action – loving, writing poetry – is just as valuable, if not more so. In Giovanni’s “Adulthood (for Claudia)” (1970) for example, the narrator moves by way of brief, personal, almost diary-like lines towards a climax that seems to suggest violence is necessary to be a “real” black person, but which actually implies that (self-) love is the true source of being for “real.” Likewise, McClure, in *WE a Poem of the Bio-Alchemical War*”(1968), McClure also seems to suggest that direct action, whether it is political or physical, would be more effective than symbolic resistance. Yet, a closer reading reveals that for him, poetry is, in fact, a form of direct action: it allows him to juxtapose his own fears with the televised portrayals of the Vietnam War, throwing the latter into sharp relief, as I shall show later.
In Giovanni’s poem “Adulthood (for Claudia)” from her collection *Black Judgment* (1970), Giovanni shows that violence hinders the creation of lasting change because it disrupts the family atmosphere that is crucial to her sense of self and feelings of empowerment, because it provides her with a safe environment in which she is free to dream. The opening lines situate her in a welcoming environment: she is sitting on people’s porches among friends and family, occasionally chatting to a teenage crush. She writes: “I usta wonder who I’d be/when I was a little girl in Indianapolis /sitting on doctors porches with post-dawn pre-debs…” and later she adds “when I was a teenager I usta sit/on front steps conversing/the gym teachers son with embryonic eyes/about the essential essence of the universe…” (1-3, 10-13). She spends her days dreaming about the future and the meaning of life, waiting to attend a debutante ball or talking to a high school crush. Her lounging on steps as a child and later as a teenager conjures an image of a languid, carefree childhood. In the context of the poem as a whole, however, they also evoke a sense of unease. Since the poem traces Giovanni’s intellectual awakening to revolutionary black life and black power, and are a commentary on blackness and social class, the lines at the beginning reflect who she used to be, and that “self” was content but impotent, as she admits a few lines later. In the context of those later stanzas, which directly name the acts of violence inflicted on politicians and activists in protest communities, this previous “self” appears naïve, unaware of the world beyond her porch. Her inability to see further than the steps of her home is signaled by her attraction to the gym teacher’s son, whom she describes as having “embryonic eyes.” However, the poem’s organization renders the reference to “embryonic eyes” sufficiently ambiguous that the description could also refer to Giovanni herself. Primarily concerned with herself and all things unrelated to her own identity, she has not fully come into her own yet, and so the physical underdevelopment of her “embryonic eyes” mirrors her intellectual development.
– hence, she is still wondering “[i]f life / would give me a chance to mean” (6-7). Her eyes are still evolving, still unfinished, and as yet, unseeing of the violence lurking behind the surface of her tranquil existence.

Similarly, the inability to see leads her to retreat into a world of intellectualism and pretense, turning to academia as a new source of hope as she lectures on “Black history and began to believe all good people could get/together and win without bloodshed” (29-31). However, these hopes are quickly dashed as a vast number of prominent civil rights activists are arrested and murdered within the span of a mere seven years. The abrupt shift from reflection to cataloging those who were killed and arrested turn the latter into hammer blows that nearly erase the ruminative lines that preceded it. Nearly – because while the juxtaposition of childhood innocence and political violence seem to imply that the mere discussion of change does not amount to anything, the final lines unexpectedly return to those childhood memories. In these lines, Giovanni suddenly wonders why she did not become a debutante after all,

or a withdrawn discoursing on the stars and moon.
instead of a for real Black person who must now feel
and inflict
pain. (52-55)

Abruptly shifting back to the memories that occupied her thoughts at the beginning of the poem, these lines imply she regrets that the calm, daydreaming days of her childhood were interrupted. The only reason she did not hold on to those dreams was that she wished to be a “for real Black person,” and the only way to do this was to “feel/and inflict/pain,” according to the precepts of the Black Power movement. There is some tension here, then, between the kind of action that is desired of her, and the kind of poem she is “supposed to” write according to the guidelines set out by Black Arts moguls like Larry Neal, and the personal experiences and feelings she wants to pour out on paper.
The ambiguity of this poem is particularly interesting in the light of Giovanni’s evolving thoughts on violence over the course of her life. Juxtaposed with the preceding, violent section of the poem, the message of these final lines seems clear: if one wants to be a “for real Black person,” someone who is proud of him or herself, then he or she should be willing to physically fight back, and be unafraid to get hurt in the process. And indeed, this was what Giovanni believed during the early stages of her career. In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate (thirteen years after the first publication of *Black Judgment*), she explains the rationale for violence resistance to which she was then committed. “We're saying, “Wait a minute. Who do you think you're playing with?” Nobody's going back to 1954. No matter what the rollback is. It's not even going back to '64” (Giovanni 60). In other words, she argues, violent resistance is necessary in order to liberate the self and move forward, and to progress as a society. Without resisting the violence levied on the black community, she reasons, they will remain oppressed, and therefore, it is imperative to at least be willing to fight back.

However, in the context of *Black Judgment* (1970) as a whole, the willingness to “feel /and inflict / pain” does not seem to refer so much to violent resistance as it does to the human condition. Looking closely at some of the poems in this collection, it becomes clear Giovanni regularly hints at the importance of love despite these poems’ overt hostility and militancy. One particularly salient example is “Ugly Honkies, or the Election Game and How to Win It.” As the title suggests, this is a caustic poem rejecting American politics as uniformly bad because each party is motivated by white interests, regardless of party affiliation: “all you honkies are alien / to me,” she states in the middle of the poem, adding “‘whose side are you on?’ / the black side, fool” (83-84, 88-89). Yet, despite her entreaty that “the barrel of a gun / is the best voting machine,” with which I opened this chapter, she concedes that “a for real black thing / called
revolution” is “known to revolutionists / as love (98-101)” In other words, while it is important to fight back, the real revolution happens when we connect and love each other. The poem’s final lines exemplify this tension and final concession to love:

check again
that’s gas you’re smelling
survival is still the name of the game
black people still our only allies
life or death still our only option
let’s me and you do that thing
please? (153-159)

Immediately following the lines suggesting death (“that’s gas you’re smelling”) and polarization (“black people still our only allies”), there is something else: the possibility of acknowledging each other, loving each other, and – supposedly – making love. It is almost as if she realizes that if “life or death still our only option,” she better live life to the fullest and spend her time loving others, rather than merely hating everyone and everything, because the former will truly provoke change.

A couple of poems later, in “For a Poet I Know,” she returns to the idea that a truly “for real black person” is a whole person, feeling both the bad and the good things, and being emotionally connected to oneself and to others. What is more, in this particular poem she also presents poetry as a tool for taking note of all the things in life that matter. After requesting poems about all kinds of things, she ends by underscoring that the things she wants most is:

not just a quiet half white hating poem
about a black poem
called a black poet
that i know and would like to love
again. (46-50)

Poetry, when used in the way Giovanni suggests here, can become both a celebration of life’s events, good or bad, and a catalog of one’s most personal experiences. As such, it offers the poet a space to be real. She entreats the person she is writing to (ostensibly a fellow poet) to write
personal, emotionally honest poems: by writing about his “hospital experiences” he can be vulnerable, and therefore real. By sharing his dreams, and admitting that he no longer wants to “fuck women,” he no longer has to hide behind a mask of violent masculinity but can simply be himself. As Keith D. Leonard writes, Giovanni thus underscores poetry’s ability to “challenge [the] masculinist subject” of Black Nationalism “from within” (619). Indeed, Giovanni deplores later in the poem, those “half white hating poem[s]” do not really “tell me who you are.” Noticing and relaying all the small moments that make up one’s life, however, paint a whole, personal portrait. That wholeness is what makes a “for real black person.”

In a way, “Adulthood (for Claudia)” and especially “For a Poet I Know” could be seen as the initial stage of evolution in Giovanni’s thinking. For even though she expressed her commitment to violent resistance in the 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, and many of her poems express this same sentiment well throughout the 1980s, just as many poems suggest her thinking is going down a new road. This even applies to some of her earliest poems, as the ones above (from her second collection Black Judgment, published in 1970) show. And indeed, in her collection of nonfiction published in 2003, Giovanni reflects on the past and presents a different view on the use of violence in an essay from 1988: “We did, however, learn something interesting about violence during the sixties,” she writes. “It doesn’t work. Violence is like money in the bank; it’s only helpful if you don’t have to use it” (The Prosaic Soul 266). In hindsight, then, she openly professes what she had been implying in her poetry for years: counter-violence yields no long-term solutions. In this light, the final lines of “Adulthood (for Claudia)” that suggest a “for real black person” must “feel / and inflict / pain” are challenged by some of the poems following it, as she subverts the meaning of being a “for real black person” from a violent one to a person who is emotionally connected to the self and others. As Giovanni
writes in the same 1988 essay in which she renounced violence: “We had each other; and we had our dreams. And we knew our dreams should not and could not be separated from the ‘each other’” (270).

In the first chapter of her biography, Fowler suggests that Giovanni’s poems were always foremost personal, and only secondarily revolutionary. To her, “Adulthood (for Claudia)” functions as a transitional point in the collection name, because after it the poems turn more to personal feelings and the arts than to militancy (ibid. 43). Giovanni herself has likewise admitted that her poetry had largely changed because the Black Arts rules that imposed limits on her self-expression had now fallen away. She considered herself to be a “photographer” of the 1960s, taking verbal snapshots of the things she saw happening around her so that the rest of America would understand. As she explains the same interview: “I was trying to capture the moment because we as a people did not have a voice. And during that period we didn’t have that many people to explain what we were feeling and the rightness of that desire. In the ‘80s we really are a capable people. Now I don’t have the obligation to speak for anyone” (Reynolds qtd. in Fowler 21). In other words, the political atmosphere of the 1960s put pressure on her to voice a collective desire, which explains the tension between an insistence on pragmatism and a desire to emphasize love as the real revolutionary source of power.

This commitment to love and solidarity within the black community becomes clear in “Adulthood (for Claudia),” but is even more explicitly mentioned in her famous poem “Nikki-Rosa.” In this poem, as well as in most of her work in Black Feeling, Black Talk (1968) and Black Judgment (1970) and even more so in her subsequent collections Re:Creation (1970) and My House (1972), she refuses to expunge the personal in favor of the political, or the individual in favor of the communal because she does not consider the two to be mutually exclusive. In
fact, she locates the source of black power in personal relationships, and in loving one another. In “Nikki-Rosa,” using the name her sister gave her, she warns whites that they cannot understand her life, let alone write about it, because they will only see the negative sides and overlook the fact that “Black love is black wealth” (30). Amidst the external factors that might indicate hardship (a father who drinks, not having an indoor toilet), it might be easy to overlook the joy that stemmed from her sense of connection. Her confidence, which enables her “black power,” stems from togetherness, she suggests, not from material possessions or counter-violence. Giovanni herself explains she wrote the poem in 1969, when African Americans started to become disillusioned with the freedom they had achieved. Instead of remembering the sit-ins, the protests, and the smaller acts of resistance of their parents and grandparents, they became embittered by the remaining lack of opportunities. “We wanted Magic,” Giovanni writes, “and we soured because freedom is reality” (The Prosaic Soul 269). In this climate, she wrote and published “Nikki-Rosa,” attempting to frame the togetherness of families and communities as the ultimate representation of freedom. In spite of slavery, the black community continued to exist and thrive, and that could be considered truly magical (ibid.).

Once again, however, hooks’ claim that (black) people need to recognize one another, and especially black women as people, becomes crucial; in fact, in order to ensure that community ties provide the foundation for revolution it is imperative that we do so. In “Woman Poem,” for example, also from her early collection Black Judgment (1970), she suggests that recognizing each other, as hooks asks us to do, provides the chance to transform our bleak perspective on life into a more hopeful one; one that recognizes the “wealth” of “black love”: “it’s intellectual devastation / of everybody / to avoid emotional commitment” (52-54), she writes. The poem as a whole seems to suggest that the cause of her persona’s bleak outlook lies
in her inability to see “black love” as an alternative to unhappiness as the “only / for real thing” she knows. As she speaks this poem, she is unable to look at her circumstances differently: “you see, my whole life / is tied up / to unhappiness,” the poem starts, because “it’s father cooking breakfast / and me getting fat as a hog” or “having no food / at all...” Yet, Giovanni mentions similar hardship in “Nikki-Rosa” (1970) insisting that it was not nearly as hard as it looked. In lines that echo the ones above, she writes: “it isn’t your father’s drinking that makes any difference / but only that everybody’s together and you /and your sister have happy birthdays…” (23-25).

Regardless of circumstances that could be interpreted as difficult by others (the dreaded “white person” Giovanni mentions later in the poem), those circumstances are merely superficial elements of her life. The value of that life lies in her connection to others, and the joy she experienced when “everbody’s together.” This is what the speaker of “Woman Poem” struggles to perceive. Near the end of the poem she does seem to grapple with it, however, as she writes: “it’s intellectual devastation / of everybody / to avoid emotional commitment” (52-54). In other words, while “black wealth” is available, it is difficult to access if no one is willing to recognize the other as valuable enough to make an “emotional commitment” to. A few lines earlier she hints at this lack of mutual recognition as well, stating: “Smiles are only something we give / to properly dressed social workers / not each other” (30-32). Yet, without this recognition of “shared subjectivity,” bell hooks writes, there is no ground for revolution. She writes: “It is precisely the mutual patriarchal gazing – the competition of status of ‘real’ man – that creates the blind spot in the liberatory analysis of those white and black who cannot see the ‘female’ and thus cannot theorize an inclusive vision of freedom” (83-84). If the poem’s speaker is recognized
and acknowledged as a subject, if she is allowed to return the gaze, so to speak, she can connect with others in the community. And that connection serves as the groundwork for revolution.

Even “Adulthood (for Claudia),” which is less explicit in its suggestion that love could be an alternative source of power for black Americans, is an example of how feelings of affection can become revolutionary. Claudia, to whom the poem is dedicated, is mentioned only once in her collection of semi-autobiographical writings *The Prosaic Soul of Nikki Giovanni*. It is not clear who Claudia is, exactly, or how she met her: all we know is that it is someone she knew while working at Walgreens in the period after she was expelled from Fisk University in 1961. Both she and Claudia needed each other’s love and support in order to achieve their dreams.

While Claudia finished high school, Giovanni cared for her young nephew and worked at a drugstore, after which she was able to return to Fisk in 1964. In *Gemini*, Giovanni writes how she struggled to “keep [herself] intact” while working the cash registry. It is not that she found it difficult work, but rather, that it was so far removed from the dreams she had that she struggled not to lose herself in the process (136). During this time, she felt supported by Claudia’s friendship:

I did have a friend and people would say, what you are doing for Claudia is wonderful, and I wanted to say, but she’s doing me a favor, because I didn’t have many friends and have always been truly grateful for those few I have. And she went on to finish high school and my mother would say, you have really helped Claudia, and I would say, without her I would have gone insane. Which is more or less true because people or at least I cannot live without someone. (ibid.)

Claudia, she seems to imply, was a stable presence; the continuity of their relationship grounded her when her future seemed to be shifting. Love, then, is what pulled her through. This sharply contradicts her statement, in the same poem, that blacks need to “inflict pain” in order to be a “real” person,” which in the context of this poem might simply indicate as part of the human experience, we also have to feel and perhaps even inflict pain at some point in our lives. This is
not meant to be a militant poem, but a poem for a friend who helped her to maintain a sense of self – not through violence, but by being there and connecting with her.

In “Seduction” (1968), from *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, love becomes a more explicit source of revolutionary power. In this amusing poem, the speaker tries to seduce a man by slowly undressing him and herself while he is trying to have a conversation regarding the revolution. Being aware of the pragmatic Black Power movement conceptualization of power and resistance, she knows her seduction will be seen as a mere distraction: “and knowing you you'll just say / "Nikki / isn't this counterrevolutionary…?"” (24-26). From the point of view of most Black Power adherents, the answer would probably be yes: anything that was not explicitly revolutionary was supposed to be abandoned. And yet, its seeming counterrevolutionariness is precisely the point: the speaker’s actions in this poem break through that masculinist gaze hooks believes stunts revolutionary progress and forces the man “rapping” to acknowledge her. ‘Nikki / isn’t this counterrevolutionary…?’” her interlocutor asks her, but clearly, in the context of hooks’ theory about interchanging gazes, it is supremely revolutionary.

In “When I Die” (1972) she returns to that same question, and even offers an explicit answer in the poem’s final lines:

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and if ever i touched a life i hope that life knows
that i know that touching was and still is and will always
be the true revolution. (45-48)
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Again, in this poem, she emphasizes her own self-determination, which extends until after her death: *she* holds the prerogative of deciding what happens after her death (“please don’t let them read “nikki-rosa,” she entreats again in line 17, echoing a similar line in “Nikki-Rosa” itself). A more important element of this self-determination, however, is that she can use it to teach her son about true revolutionary action. By showcasing her own appreciation for little things in life (“old
ladies with their blue dresses and hats and gloves,” “watching dawn,”) and wishing her son will be comfortable to do the same ("smiling at an old / man / and petting a dog don’t detract from manhood") she once more indicts the masculinist single-mindedness that shapes Black Nationalism, and emphasizes the “validity” of love and affection for the ordinary world around one as an alternative way of living. In that sense, her outlook resembles McClure’s in its emphasis on freely following one’s desires: there is no true self-determination (and therefore no authenticity, McClure would say) if self-expression is still limited. When people are free to express their feelings, however, they can connect to others, and this connection necessitates the recognition of one another’s subjectivity. This creates the dialogic sphere between (black) men and women bell hooks speaks of, and which she claims is crucial to imagining “inclusive vision of freedom” (84). In other words, personal connections enable conversation, and these conversations open up the possibility of devising an alternative social imaginary rooted in love.

**McClure’s Mammalian Vision**

Like Giovanni, McClure harbors a firm belief in the revolutionary potential of love. However, since McClure’s social experience as a white man is so different from Giovanni’s reality as a black woman, it might be difficult to see the parallels between their work. Nikki Giovanni herself, for example, has dismissed the Beats as elitist and withdrawn from society due to their much-publicized drug use (Fowler, *Conversations* 48). Admittedly, at first glance, McClure’s recreational use of hallucinogenic drugs seems rather indulgent and apolitical: after all, it seems a pastime more likely to produce an individual state of enlightenment than a sustainable vision for an alternative society. The broad vision conveyed by his early work, however, is predicated on communal change through personal change.

While McClure’s poetry has nothing to do with black self-determination, it does also grapple with the difficulty of establishing a new, loving basis for society and being a “whole”
person in the face of oppression. For him, the forces against which he has to fight or not racist or sexist, but capitalist: indeed, capitalist greed and its emphasis on individualism are at the root of violence in society, and awareness of our mammalian nature, including our connection to the universe and our own drives and desires, can serve as a buffer against that violence. By more consciously living our experiences, that is by becoming more sensory aware, McClure suggests we will realize that freedom is always already here; available in nature.

Since this “mammalian awareness” is so foreign to most people, McClure sees it as his task to enlighten others, and since he perceives of poems natural extensions of himself that can transfer energy from him to his readers, he believes it is the perfect vehicle for raising that awareness (Scratching the Beat Surface 57). As he writes in “The Shape of Energy,”: “The great self-organizing act of verse-energy as it flows on and on, becoming more diverse, stronger in its self-supporting complexity...begins to create a fundament that never existed before” (ibid. 75). Clearly, then, he sees his writing poetry as a laying the foundation for an alternative social imaginary, simply by speaking them out loud.

This idea did not originate with McClure, but with the man who became one of his biggest stylistic influences: poet Charles Olson. Olson became a central figure for the Black Mountain Poets, and shortly after the Six Gallery Reading McClure was introduced to his work by publisher Jonathan Williams. A year later, in 1956 McClure, working with editor and fellow poet James Harmon revived an anarchist magazine called Ark II/Moby I, in which he compiled Black Mountain poetry and Beat poetry (King). After this publication, Olson came to influence more poets of McClure’s generation, including Gary Snyder and Denise Levertov, to name just two. Particularly appealing to many Beats was Olson’s philosophy of “projective verse,” laid out in an essay by the same title. Put simply, projective verse is the idea that poetry should follow the
natural rhythms of a person’s breath and speaking. It does not concern itself with lengthy
descriptions or form, because descriptions stifle the poem’s energy and form “is never more than
an extension of its content” (240). Instead, impressions follow each other rapidly to keep the
poem’s energy moving (ibid.). Needless to say, Olson firmly believed poetry should be spoken
out loud: “[S]peech is the solid of verse,” he writes, “it’s the secret of a poem’s energy” (244).
This theory of projective verse allowed McClure to bring together two ideas he cared about: that
poems could be conceptualized as an “organic” transference of energy from poet to reader, as his
readings of biologist Margalef suggested, and that in order to fix the relationship between art and
society, a radically new kind of art had to be established. Finally, Olson’s emphasis on natural
speech patterns and natural breathing was also in accordance with his view of humans as
fundamentally “mammalian,” for it further solidified the idea that poetry is a natural process.

Ironically, McClure occasionally used mind-altering substances to become his “natural”
self. As McClure’s monographer Rod Phillips points out, McClure considered drug-use to be an
entryway into what he called the “mammalian” state of mind (49). While this is somewhat of a
paradox, McClure believes drugs help remove the barriers that prevent us from loving fully and
freely all that surrounds us. In other words, it helps one to enter into a “mammalian
consciousness” completely. This “mammalian” consciousness forms the groundwork for
McClure’s way of thinking, and is characterized by a deep awareness of the body and its drives.
Upon first realizing there are limits to the free expression of desire, McClure suggests, a person
enters into a state of “revolt,” which is defined by an ongoing awareness, or mindfulness, of the
body and its desires. This awareness constitutes a source of freedom, according to McClure,
because if we are aware of our urges we may find a healthy way to express them, and do not
have to resort to violence in a desperate attempt at catharsis (Meat Science Essays 48). Human
tendency to categorize and moralize behavior leads us to label, police, and control sexual practices, McClure suggests, with violence as the end result. Without this policing, we are all just bodies with a “mammalian” spirit, and if we can recognize this, we can “join units together into larger and larger structures...to create love structures” (ibid. 60). In the context of McClure’s idea of “mammalian consciousness,” using drugs is not merely recreational, nor is it an escape; rather, it is a means by which it is possible to shed preconceived notions about community, the body, and sexuality that prevent one from seeing oneself as part of the natural world and thus of the universe as a whole. For him, as for Giovanni, then, loving authentically is crucial. By loving freely and openly, regardless of social or political restrictions, love becomes a truly revolutionary force, they believe, because it does not let itself be limited by an identity politics that wants to ignore it, or an economics that wishes to repress it. Instead, it creates a space in which dreaming of a new society – and perhaps realizing it, eventually – becomes possible.

In the same way that Giovanni seems momentarily jolted out of her carefree existence by the racist violence permeating society, McClure’s ideal of universal love between all beings (and even non-beings) is challenged by violence at home and abroad. Specifically, the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam as well as numerous incidents of police violence at home briefly seems to challenge McClure’s belief in the revolutionary potential of “love” as a peaceful, holistic force. By 1968, “Operation Rolling Thunder” had been under way for nearly three years in Vietnam. This military operation essentially consisted of the continuous bombing of North Vietnam in an attempt to shatter the communist regime. The bombings resulted in an estimated loss of over 800,000 Vietnamese lives (Hirschman, Preston and Loi 806). In February of that same year, U.S. soldiers killed hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in what came to be known as the My Lai Massacre. Although public awareness of this massacre did not become widespread until
about a year later, it is exemplary of the kind of extreme brutality that characterized the Vietnam War, and with which McClure and his contemporaries were confronted through the media. This violence does not only cost lives, but also destroys the environment, McClure points out, which, in turn, poses a threat to human beings everywhere.

Considering the catastrophic damage done by herbicidal warfare, McClure questions the usefulness of an abstract emphasis on universality and mammalian consciousness in his poem “WE a Poem of the Bio-Alchemical War” (1968). Rejecting an escape into the imagination, he states: “WE TELL OURSELVES THAT WE CAN / CHANGE THE SCENE! / AND SURE IT CHANGES (to be our nerve’s shape)” (11-13). In other words, we can change the scene in our minds, we can imagine a different war, and a different Vietnam, but that does not actually change the reality of the situation. And yet, as I shall show, even in this poem, he moves past his skepticism to return to the idea that poetry could perhaps contribute to a solution. In large part, he seems to suggest, poetry opens up a space for communal dreaming. Such an emphasis on community is not at odds with his belief in following one’s own personal desires. On the contrary, becoming aware of one’s own drives is a prerequisite for building community, in McClure’s eyes. Only by listening to one’s own instincts can human beings connect to each other authentically and build a meaningful community. After all, it is difficult for a communal effort to have any leverage if the social connections on which it rests are artificial and fragile, without any real sense of camaraderie. Despite the fact that the sheer violence they witness every day rocks their rather idealistic imaginaries, they never abandon them because of the deep-seated belief that (communal) dreaming is crucial to social change.

In “WE,” McClure juxtaposes descriptions of the natural world with implicit and explicit critiques of the Vietnam War, with the startling effect that the reader is simultaneously
implicated in the war and hailed as a potential conscious objector. The shock of war disturbs the poem’s rhythm and ruins the ecstatic mood that characterizes the beginning of the poem, yet this mood is revived at the end, when he emphasizes the revolutionary potential of living in harmony with the rest of the universe. This poem, more than any other in this volume, shows how a “mammalian” consciousness and holism underpin his work, and form the basis of his vision of an alternative social imaginary.

The poem, which is divided into nine sections, starts off with an explicit anti-war section before segueing into what appears to be a paean to nature. A closer reading reveals McClure’s feelings of guilt, however, that result from his living a joyful, beautiful life while the country is at war and both the environment and human beings are systematically attacked and destroyed. Confronted with this cruelty, he questions the effectiveness and even the ethicality of pacifism as a mode of resistance before reaffirming poetry’s usefulness as a revolutionary tool. Section five is particularly unambiguous in this respect, as McClure writes:

THE HORMONES, AMINOS, POLYMERS DRIPPING
IN OUR BODIES MAKE GREAT MOVIES. WE’RE HYPNOTIZED
by esthetics.
‘BUT THEY are not really US!
NOT REALLY,’ we say!
We’re sure that we’re somewhere else watching.
We know the falcon stooping happened long ago.
THE FLIGHT OF SOULS ARE DIVING THROUGH THE BASEMENT DOOR UPWARD TO FLITTER OUT LIKE MOTES OF SILVER DUST IN BLACK SUNBEAMS. THE UNIVERSE HAS FLIPPED
WHILE WE LIE UPON
OUR SHEETS AND GOBBLE BONBONS
WITH THE MORNING NEWS! (143-63)

By writing “we” rather than “I” or “They,” McClure implicates the reader in this narrative of apathy in the face of destruction. “We’re/hypnotized/by/esthetics,” McClure writes, suggesting that we are too concerned with consuming the facts and details of the war to consider our own involvement with it. While it was precisely the televising of the Vietnam War that helped raise consciousness about the brutality of soldiers fighting there, McClure seems to imply that it also – inadvertently – turned the war into a consumable object; an event like a movie that could be expended and perhaps even enjoyed at a distance.

In that context, his reference to the falcon also calls to mind the second line from W.B. Yeats’ famous 1919 poem “The Second Coming,” written just after World War I. In its oft-quoted opening lines, Yeats conveys how the war has thoroughly altered society, not in the least because social hierarchies have been eradicated. He writes: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / the falcon cannot hear the falconer” (1-2). These initial lines, coupled with the mounting sense of doom as the poem progresses, suggest that amidst the chaos of war, those in charge no longer have control over the situation. In war, Yeats seems to suggest, there is no hierarchy, no control, no logic to the way in which social life is organized. In the context of McClure’s “We,” then, the phrase “the falcon stooping happened long ago” could be taken as an abrupt realization that the worst damage has already been done in the Vietnam War. If this sentiment is representative of what the average American in 1968 believed, perhaps the sense of apathy that McClure detects and condemns stems less from feelings of indifference than from a sense of powerlessness; a kind of resignation to the status quo that is exacerbated by the lull of daily television reports. Realizing this, and being confronted with such mass inertia, it is perhaps
understandable that McClure’s belief in a holistic mindset is momentarily shaken. Even so, after this initial disappointment he becomes more firmly convinced that people must be made aware of their “place within the web of life,” because this sense of connection and community might serve as the prime motivation for change (King). In fact, cultivating an awareness of our personal connection to the universe might prohibit future (chemical) warfare, McClure seems to suggest.

By reacquainting ourselves with our mammalian consciousness, that is, by experiencing the world on a more sensory level, it is easier to conceive of ourselves as biologically and spiritually connected to the rest of the world, McClure reasons, and while that newfound awareness will not stop the war it might at least destroy the apathy that enables it. In fact, McClure suggests, this awareness liberates us, because it shows us that even when human beings are at war, the natural world remains at peace. It is a constant factor in our lives; an ever-present community of which we are never not a part. He even prefaces the longest poem in September Blackberries, which carries this same message, by saying: “I am one with the universe of matter and energy as well as the fields that I do not know consciously or verbally.” To which he adds: “I wish to make a poem that is an act of nature – more free than the conditioning that I call politics” (71). In this poem, entitled “Xes, a Spontaneous Poem” (1968) he tries to realize this ideal by celebrating nature in all its forms and emphasizing his own place within it. More importantly, he shows how this understanding of himself and his place in the universe allows him to feel content even when the world is at war:

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LOOPING TO
long-haired Men
writing documents

with quills of birds

to scratch abysms
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DESTROYING ACTING
stratifying, inventing searching senses,
becoming as always
STARS, BAGS, MAMMALS, EUGLENAS
– ONCE AGAIN

TELLING US (ME-THEE),
“JOY”
of it.
( ( Dead word! ) )

IT
IS
ALL
RIGHT
PERFECT! GROWING PERFECT ALL WAYS! ! ! ! (139 -157)

While “long-haired men” writing with quills – the Founding Fathers and their descendants, presumably – draft documents, wage war, and try to shape public opinion (the “JOY of it,”) the universe refuses to be reined in by specific definitions and man-made classifications. As such, he posits the universe as a happy chaos in which we are all “free / to be / a cousin or a sister or a brother!” (55-57), that stands in stark opposition to the destructive, asphyxiating corset that is politics to McClure. Once we are finally free to revel in the universe’s chaos, he believes, we will be less likely to continue to destroy other beings.

In spite of this environmental idealism, McClure is grounded enough to recognize that the change in consciousness needs to be accompanied by actions that support this change. Returning to “WE,” for example, he also emphasizes that while we can and should imagine social change, merely doing so is not enough. To change something, we need to re-conceptualize ourselves as active participants in our fates, rather than the impassive victims of politics – much like Giovanni’s “real black people” who, empowered by self-love and black pride, as the first step towards changing society. He writes:
TO BE MORE.
WE HOPE FOR IT.
BUT
FINALLY
THIS IS US
and we ARE our Souls
or Spirits – or what
you will (110-117)

To which he adds, a few lines down, “WE’RE REAL” (127), emphasizing that we have a physical existence that accompanies our “Souls/or Spirits,” which propel us into action. This is the main shift in consciousness that McClure proposes: to see ourselves not as victims, nor as cogs in a machine, but as powerful beings. While being aware of one’s newfound capability still does not solve all social problems, he shows that full resolution is beside the point: “WE ARE TRYING! / AND THAT IS LOVE!” he writes (171-173). In the attempt to envision ourselves as capable, as actively engaged in making the world a better place, we are engaged in an act of love, and this love is what provides the fertile basis for a new reality. As the poem ends, McClure emphasizes this once more:

KNOWING THAT WE SHALL WHIRL AND CRASH
AND FALL PROSTRATE
but open, even then, like a daisy on a pillow (271-274)

Despite the chaos of war, and the destructive nature of violence in general, then, he offers that all humans harbor revolutionary potential.

This belief is reflected in his shorter poems as well. In the second half of “Thrice Blessed,” for example, a poem from his 1968 collection September Blackberries, he emphasizes that no truly new idea can develop without being in touch with the universe. While this sounds rather esoteric, it is actually part of McClure’s practical approach to socio-political issues: all of these, he believes, can be traced back to biological “problems,” so if one finds the biological
issue at its source, we might also understand how to resolve it. In “Thrice Blessed” he shows that this “biological” approach is central to developing a new social imaginary. The poem ends: “((Huge exemplary visions hang above / our heads, and lie within the earth. ))” (24-25). We need a new way of thinking to discover “the steppingstones” to Hermes Trismegistus, McClure suggests; a mystical god-like figure he invokes in the first lines and who – legend has it – developed the science of alchemy. McClure and some fellow Beats, such as Philip Lamantia, were likely attracted to Trismegistus because some of his doctrines correspond with McClure’s own ideas about the universe: for example, that “man is a ‘great wonder’ with the capacity for becoming a god; everything is permitted to him, and he can know all things,” and that all things in the universe are interrelated (“Hermes Trismegistus” 471). In order to follow “the path” and the “steppingstones” to Trismegistus, as McClure wishes to do in this poem – that is, to comprehend the universe as Trismegistus supposedly did – it is not enough to study the ideas and views of a single person. The ideas of any individual are necessarily limited by their human consciousness, which means they can only ever reflect a “fragment/latticework” of the universe. When we foster our mammalian consciousness, however, McClure believes we might become aware of the “possibilities” offered by our mammalian nature. When an interviewer suggests it might be in humankind’s nature to be destructive, McClure shoots back: “Ah but our nature has other possibilities” (Lighting the Corners 25, emphasis in quote). While it might be part of our nature to waste our resources and destroy the environment, McClure concedes, we may see those “other possibilities” that “hang above / our heads, and lie within the earth,” once we can conceive of ourselves as mammals, as he writes in “Thrice Blessed.”

In “A Stepping Stone,” from Jaguar Skies (1973) he returns to this idea of gaining an alternative vision of society by tuning into nature and emphasizing the importance of seeing
things differently before any real revolutionary change can take place. As a “muscle-energy being,” as he calls it, or as a being conscious of its relationship to the rest of the universe, he can access “new plateaus / of musky seeing” (3, 12-13). This “seeing” appears the most important part of McClure’s poetic oeuvre, especially during these early years. In several poems he emphasizes the doors that poetry can open; the alternative ways of looking at the world regardless of whether this alternative will ever be truly realized. “MY EYES ARE WIDE EXPLOSIONS” he writes in the poem “Ode (for Bob Dylan)” for example, underscoring his new perspective by ending the poem with: “All conceptions / of boundaries / are lies!” The most explicit reference to the importance of “vision” can be found in “Villanelle (for Gary Snyder),” however, also from his 1973 collection Jaguar Skies:

IN TURN WE GIVE FLESH TO THE REVOLUTION
like Che, Darwin, and Francis Crick
creating visions not solution (1-3)

The important thing, he seems to say, is to imagine an alternative: that, in itself, is revolutionary. His references in this poem are to people who dared to do exactly that: Che Guevara, Marxist revolutionary daring to dream of a liberated, non-capitalist Argentina; Charles Darwin, daring to posit the theory of evolution; and Francis Crick, discoverer of the structure of DNA. Each man’s revolutionary discovery started with a vision, McClure points out. Without these visions, there will be no breakthroughs, no changes to how we perceive the world. Asked about this apparent disavowal of solutions in this poem, McClure states: “I really don’t think there are solutions in the sense that people speak of solutions. When I speak of a long-term solution I mean a new path.” To which he adds, after being probed by the interviewer: “The function of poetry, as I see it, is to create a myriad-mindedness,” which he defines as “broaden[ing] [his] sensorium and hopefully the sensoriums of other people who read it” (Lighting the Corners 6). By broadening
people’s perspectives in this way, he hopes they will also develop these new ways of “musky seeing.” This might then eventually lead to action, as he suggests in “WE,” when readers realize they are not powerless beings.

While “imagining” is thus central for McClure, he occasionally becomes less abstract when he hints that loving human relationships are a prerequisite for being able to imagine at all. In that sense his view resembles that of hooks and Giovanni, who stress no “inclusive vision of freedom” can exist without recognizing others as potential allies (hooks 84). McClure’s poem “Affect” (1973) for example, laments the difficulty of fully experiencing reality when love is lacking. Without love, he seems to suggest, life becomes “painful / to our senses” (21). In a way, these lines recall Giovanni’s claim in “Woman Poem,” that “it’s intellectual devastation / of everybody / to avoid emotional commitment” (52-54). In the context of McClure’s poem this “withdrawal of feeling” is equally disastrous, because it forms an impediment to enjoying nature: when love is lacking, it hurts to be fully present and be in “revolt,” as McClure would have it. Since this “revolt” depends on being mindful, this pain forms an obstacle to the act of “seeing” differently that he praises in “Villanelle (for Gary Snyder)” and “A Stepping Stone.”

Finally, in the second-to-last poem in Jaguar Skies (1973) called “Up Beat,” McClure abandons his abstract exhortations and instead gets straight to the point: if we want to be liberated, we need to accept and embrace that we are animals on the inside. This poems shows, perhaps more than any other, why McClure is so certain they will not fail to discover the “new plateaus” as he claimed in “A Stepping Stone”: the very act of conceiving of oneself as a mammal automatically liberates us from the confines of a human perspective. In other words, by “absorb[ing] the beautiful systems” and focusing on “love” and “dreams” (which are repeated throughout the poem, once again affirming McClure’s commitment to alternative visions rather
than concrete solutions) there is no longer a separation between humans and the universe, so we cannot help but be free. When spoken out loud, the poem’s rhythm and sound support the poem’s explicit content: the repeated –s sounds call to mind the susurrus of rustling leaves or a “warm stream.” These sounds, together with the repeated mantra-like phrases “Love the children of dreams” and “absorb the beautiful systems,” drive home the point *Jaguar Skies* appears to be making: a mammalian, imaginative perspective is not just necessary, but desirable, because it spells freedom for both our minds and bodies.

By performing his poetry, he hopes to transfer this confident, cheery energy that sustains most of his work to the listener: “Energy poems are like fairy tales,” he writes, “they are compressions of many aspects of experience simultaneously” (*Scratching the Beat Surface* 65). By focusing on the poem’s impressions and sound, as he does in most of the poems I have examined here, he believes he can communicate “that what we truly share with others...the deepest, most personal, even physiological core” (ibid. 26). His adherence to “projective verse” is not just a gimmick, then, but a conscious effort to connect with others, so that everyone may follow their desires and be able to join in the “love structures” he envisions (*Meat Science Essays* 60).

**Walking the Line between Action and Abstraction**

While both the Beats and Black Arts artists have been criticized for being insufficiently revolutionary, their poetry shows that despite their lack of pragmatic action – i.e. the kind of activities that are clearly legible as “action,” such as protesting or fighting – their poetry is unambiguously revolutionary. In fact, it could be said to pave the way for lasting change. In the face of violent oppression, a sustained collaborative pragmatic effort to resist it is crucial, but cannot take place without first eroding the beliefs that help enable this violence and oppression. This is not to say that the oppressed are to blame for their own oppression; on the contrary. It
simply means that the rhetoric by which racist and capitalist violence is legitimized also saturates the consciousness of the oppressed, which obstructs their ability to resist it. In Giovanni’s case, removing this obstacle means, first and foremost, erasing the idea of black inferiority and – more specifically – establishing black female subjectivity. This erasure goes beyond the mere proclamation of “black pride”: it means being proud enough to love oneself and others, and proud enough to express personal feelings with others as well. In short, it means being proud enough to be a complex, authentic human being; a “whole” person. By doing so, she projects the possibility of substituting “love” for violence as a revolutionary tactic. For McClure, who primarily addresses capitalist ideology instead of white supremacy, removing the obstacles that slow down our liberation from oppression means reconceiving of ourselves as free “mammals” whose power resides in their own authentic inclinations, rather than powerless, helpless individuals. Like Giovanni, he stresses that neither a person nor a community can be “whole” if they refuse to recognize their own mammalian consciousness and rein in their own desires and dreams. Dreaming is one of McClure and Giovanni’s strategies, yet it is also a key objective of these strategies: the comfort and security of belonging to a community allows them to dream, enabling them to project this alternative vision, which in turn – they hope – might enable others to dream as well. Thus, McClure and Giovanni show that before any “active” action can take place, a change in consciousness is crucial, for only by being a whole person – proud, connected, complex, authentic – can one start to dream of a different future.

In hindsight, it seems clear that prolonged state violence, both domestically and abroad, was part of what fueled the cultural rebellion of the Beats, Black Arts artists, and others. They used poetry as a means to address this brutality and write a “counter-narrative” to society, as Keith R. Leonard has called it (620). Between 1968 and 1975, at the height of protests against
the Vietnam War and racial inequality, violence became particularly pervasive as the state increasingly resorted to violent repression to quell protests under the guise of keeping the peace. By responding with visions of love rather than violence, Beats and Black Arts artists walked the fine line between action and abstraction. Rather than merely using physical force against police repression on the one hand, or philosophizing and retreating all the way into esotericism on the other, poetry became a generative middle ground: a realm in which they could both reflect on the causes and effects of violence and project an alternative; thus changing ideas about the basis of society and stirring people into action. Rather than a mere symbolic or aesthetic pastime, poetry was a consciousness-raising tool.

A new question presents itself at this point: How, precisely, did poets manage to walk this line between action and reflection, and what strategies did they employ to turn their visions into reality? While my examination of McClure’s and Giovanni’s poetry shows that the projection of an alternative social imaginary rooted in love was crucial to real, lasting social change it leaves open the practical matter of how they tried to change people’s consciousness, and to what extent they succeeded in doing so. Looking at the nature of poetic performance and roles of audiences may help answer these questions, especially since many Black Arts and Beat poets wrote their poetry with performance in mind. And while both Giovanni and McClure performed their poetry throughout their lives (in some cases, they were even accompanied by music), the power of language, especially in performance, was particularly central to the poetry performances of Sonia Sanchez and Gary Snyder. As I shall show, they used their performances to provide strategies for more tangible change, thus attempting to harness dreaming while enabling (collective) action. This, I will show, could be considered a further element of continuity between the revolutionary poetry of the Beats and Black Arts artists, further
strengthening my suggestion that these four poets are, in fact, part of a large and varied counterculture, which regardless of the divergent political ideologies of its members was propelled by one fundamental ideal: love.

Notes


2 The effect of a masculinist outlook on black politics of the sixties and beyond has been well documented by Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superswoman*.


4 The final poem of *My House* (1972), after which the collection is named, is also interesting to consider in this respect: in it, she also speaks about love and home-making, all the while asking the reader whether they think she is writing a “silly poem” (11, 23, 36). Near the end, she becomes unapologetic, stating she’ll “smile at old men and call / it revolution cause what’s real / is really real” (41-43) and ending with: “and this is my house and you make me / happy / so this is your poem” (48-50). In other words, whether or not it is considered a “silly poem” by her readers is beside the point - what matters is that she chooses to celebrate a deeply personal connection that is meaningful to her.

5 How far-reaching white control over black bodies really was has been well demonstrated by the invasiveness of COINTELPRO espionage in the 1960s and early 1970s. FBI agents went undercover to report on and destroy domestic political organizations they perceived to be dangerous to the country as a whole, including the Black Panthers and the New Left. See for example James Kirkpatrick Davis’ *Assault on the Left* (1997) and Nelson Blackstock’s *The FBI’s Secret War on Political Freedom* (1988).

6 The Black Mountain poets was a group of poets centered on the short-lived but influential Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina. While the college itself existed for only twenty-four years, many of its graduates became influential characters in the artistic world of the 1960s, and some of its most prominent poets (including, for example, Robert Creeley) had an impact on Beat poets as well. *See Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* for a more detailed account of the poetic environment of Black Mountain College.

7 During the Vietnam War the American military also waged so-called “herbicidal warfare” by using strong defoliants. Several military operations, including Operation Ranch Hand and the Sherwood and Pink Rose operations, were specifically designed to do as much damage to the land as possible. For a detailed overview of some of the environmental effects, see “Smokey Bear in Vietnam” by James G. Lewis. Michael McClure also dedicated an entire (long) poem to this kind of warfare, entitled “Poisoned Wheat (1966)”

8 He seems even more committed to this idea in his 1973 collection *Jaguar Skies*. See for example “Liberation,” “Liberation 2,” “The Release,” and “The Bedroom Cliff.”

9 Crick himself admired McClure, and used part of his “Peyote Poem” as the epigram to his book *Of Molecules and Men*. 
CHAPTER 4
SONIA SANCHEZ AND GARY SNYDER: “DOING” POETRY AND THE CREATION OF A COUNTERPUBLIC

What do we say about the function of our poetry, the thing we do? That it explores. That it initiates thought or action. That it proposes its own displacement. That it allows vulnerability & conflict. That it remains, like the best science, constantly open to change: to a continue change in our idea of what a poem is or may be. What language is. What experience is. What reality is. That for many of us it has become a fundamental process for the play & interchange of possibilities.

– Jerome Rothenberg
Pre-faces & Other Writings

Poetry is a paper boat on the flood of spiritual desolation.

– Lawrence Ferlinghetti
Poetry as Insurgent Art

By the late 1960s, much of the buoyant San Francisco North Beach literary scene characterized by poetry readings became overshadowed by a grimmer atmosphere fueled by increasing police violence, arrests of Vietnam War protesters, and pervasive racism. This was the time at which the 1968 Summer of Love reached a turning point; a point at which the hopefulness of counterculture imaginaries came up against American imperialism’s futureless culture of violence, both domestically and abroad. Furthermore, Stephen Vincent suggests the rise of rock and pop musicians such as Jim Morrison of The Doors and Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin seemed to take over poets’ “evangelist” roles. As this grim political climate converged with the rise of pop and rock artists, poets and their spoken-word performances seemed to be relegated to the fringes of socio-political protests (Vincent, “Poetry Readings/Reading Poetry” 33). Yet, while the coffee-house poetry scene indisputably changed around this time, not in the least because some of its most successful poets moved, emigrated, or passed away, there were some who still attracted sizable audiences, and others who even flourished during this time. Gary Snyder was one of those. In 1968, as the San Francisco poetry scene underwent drastic changes,
he returned to the U.S. after a nearly ten-year stint studying Zen Buddhism in Japan, and would publish the American version of his third collection *The Back Country* a year later. In the years following this publication, he would publish three other successful volumes: *Earth House Hold* (1969) and *Regarding Wave* (1970), and *Turtle Island* (1975). The first two collections have enjoyed nine and seventeen printings to date, respectively, and *Turtle Island* has won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize. When Snyder returned to the U.S. and settled in San Francisco, Black Arts poet Sonia Sanchez had already been living in the city for a couple of years while working as an educator. In 1969, she published her wildly successful first collection *Homecoming*.

Enjoying success in the late 1960s and early 1970s is not the only thing Sanchez and Snyder had in common, however, for they also, like Michael McClure and Nikki Giovanni, shared a status as poet-activists. Despite many activists’ increasing impatience with poetry (ibid.), Snyder and Sanchez refused to separate their identities as poets and activists. Instead, most of their poetry is simply a continuation or extension of other kinds of social and environmental justice work they were doing at the time. For example, as Sanchez wrote about black women’s lives and complicated conceptualizations of black identity with her poetry, she also played a role in establishing the first Black Studies program at San Francisco State College (now University) in 1969. Similarly, Snyder has been a committed environmentalist all his life, even attending the United Nations Environmental Conference in Stockholm in 1971 while working on *Turtle Island*. For both poets, poetry and more “practical” forms of activism were simply intertwined.

In his book *Pre-faces & Other Writings*, poet Jerome Rothenberg suggests that what makes poetry “activist” is its dialogic quality: it is “constantly open to change” as “a fundamental process for the play & interchange of possibilities” (135). Rather than being fixed,
poetry is an open art form that relies on the audience’s reception to attain its full meaning. Indeed, part of the concern about poetry’s lack of practicality, as expressed by some members of both the Black Panther Party and its rival US Organization, stemmed from a fear that poetry was too inaccessible and too ambiguous to effect any concrete socio-political change. How could they make sure a poetry “mov[ing] with the masses and moved by the masses,” would also reach the masses (Karenga 35)? For many, the answer to this question was to take poetry to the streets by literally performing among these “masses” in jazz clubs or in parks. This was not just the aim of those involved with the Black Arts movement, however, but also of white Beat poets, who had confronted this same question some fifteen years earlier. In the mid- to late 1950s, Beat poets such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder took their poetry outside, to be chanted or recited amidst a throng of listeners and occasionally accompanied by jazz musicians. For them, Stephen Vincent writes, “the book [was] a momentary depository for the poem on the way to the people,” nothing more (“Poetry Readings/Reading Poetry” 22). Sonia Sanchez and Gary Snyder, as adherents of each movement, concretized the possibility of social change by fusing arts and activism. This fusion, coupled with their performance of poetry, marks their poetic practices as political acts. Indeed, Michael Warner and Jill Dolan, among others, have theorized the transformative social possibilities of the public and of performance, respectively. Warner’s theory of counterpublics is particularly insightful in this respect. Publics, he writes, are self-organized communities of attentive strangers called into existence by circulating discourses (71;74). Counterpublics, simply put, are publics called into existence by discourses that are in some way at odds with hegemonic discourses (121). As I examine Sanchez’s and Snyder’s poetry, I will be drawing on both Warner’s and Dolan’s work to show how the so-called “counterpublics” called into existence by Beat and Black Arts poetry enabled what Warner calls
“participation in collective world-making” and what Dolan calls “utopian performatives,” that is inspiring hope through small moments in the performance that “lifts everyone slightly above the present” (5). In the third section of this chapter, I will outline their theories into more detail.

I have already shown how the conceptualization of “love” as a revolutionary force was a key point of convergence for Nikki Giovanni and Michael McClure. In this chapter I will extend my comparative analysis of Black Arts poetry and Beat Poetry in the long 1960s to Sonia Sanchez, a member of the Black Arts movement, and Gary Snyder, a Beat and countercultural figure, who both rose to prominence around roughly the same time as McClure and Giovanni did. Instead of continuing to trace the emphasis on love as a revolutionary strategy in Sanchez’s and Snyder’s works, however, I turn my attention to the transformative potential of language itself as well as to the transformative possibilities stemming from the interchange between poet and public, and argue that both Snyder and Sanchez saw poetry as a practice; that is, they saw poetry as a practice that could concretize the utopian longing that formed the undercurrent of society, thus mobilizing a potential counterpublic called into being by their poetry. In this definition, poetry was something to be actively “done” or engaged in. This practice, they hoped, might spiritually regenerate the community by offering alternative social imaginaries. These social imaginaries and the strategies used to realize them took a slightly different form for each poet: Snyder mainly tried to regenerate the community by using his poetry to model mindfulness – a practice taken from Zen Buddhism concentrated on being fully aware of each moment. Doing so, he hoped, might help restore pre-modern notions of the self in relation to nature and counteract the sense of nihilism and disillusionment present among his generation. Sanchez, on the other hand, primarily used her poetry to model witnessing in order to help restore black people’s connection to their own cultural heritage and create room for more complex black
identities, especially black women’s identities. Witnessing, in this sense, meant to note and record aspects of black life in the United States in order to preserve them.

What is more, these poets’ different races also affected the character of their respective social imaginaries. Whereas Sanchez believed she had to actively destroy old notions of the (black) self in order to clear a space for more complex and “whole” modes of being, Snyder never considered the implications of race, because he did not have to. Specifically, Sanchez believed language, and especially poetic language, could unhinge seemingly fixed categories and concepts, including those she cares most about: the categories to which black women are often relegated and by which they are limited. She explains: “[H]and grenades are the words I use to explode myths about people, about ourselves, about how we live and what we think” (Cornwell 13). After clearing out a metaphorical space in this explosive way, she had room to complicate the notion of what it means to be black, which she did by connecting her poetic language to a larger black cultural history. By witnessing and recording black history as it was happening, she extracted the notion of blackness from its masculinist Black Power grip and expanded it to a much more layered concept centered on “wholeness.” Snyder, on the other hand, did not need to “explode” any outdated notions of identity; on the contrary, he wished to restore them. In his view, language – especially spoken language – could help rehabilitate human beings’ relationship to the environment and restore respect for that environment. This rather Romanticist outlook reveals one of the limitations of this comparison: as a white, heterosexual male poet, Snyder’s desire to mend the relationship between humans and their natural environments is unencumbered by race. Unlike Sanchez, he does not have to consider the extent to which his race and gender allow him to become a “whole” person again, for society has never prevented him from being one. Indeed, Grace Elizabeth Hale writes, this naïve or romantic attitude to the world,
which she terms “white romanticism,” was white privilege reincarnate: “If everyone was an outsider in some way,” she explains, “then everyone’s emotions and everyone’s liberation from oppression were important. This kind of thinking pushed white middle-class young people especially to imagine commonalities across race, class, and later gender divisions” (206). As a result, his holistic vision appears lacking at times, because it ignores the realities of race and gender.

Despite this serious shortcoming, juxtaposing these two poets remains productive and is perhaps all the more remarkable. For despite their different perspectives, their key objective remained the same: to spiritually regenerate their communities by “doing” poetry. Specifically, both poets saw language as a practice that harbored potential for actual, tangible social change — specifically, the move towards “wholeness” — because it was performed in front of an audience. This corporeal public presence functioned as a counterpublic, that is, a public called into being by a circulating text, aware of its subordination to hegemonic ideology, yet sustained precisely by views different from or even oppositional to those of hegemonic society, as I shall explain later.

By examining Sanchez’s and Snyder’s collections published between 1968-1975, when both poets were still in the early stages of their careers, yet active simultaneously, I will show how they, despite small differences in the ways they “did” poetry, aimed to spiritually regenerate their communities. Specifically, I will be looking at Snyder’s Back Country (1969), Regarding Wave (1970) and Turtle Island (1974), and Sanchez’s Homecoming (1969), We a BaddDDD People (1970), and Love Poems (1973). In doing so, I will argue that while each poet “did” language in slightly different ways, they both used their poetry to model behavior that they believed could lead to spiritual renewal, and thus to social change. In other words, both poets
used their work to “actualize” alternative social imaginaries that could replace existing hegemonic, oppressive social realities; a hope that was fortified by poetry readings in front of audiences that could be construed as counterpublics, in Michael Warner’s definition of the word.

In 1970, performance scholar Richard Schechner theorized poets’ performative and activist roles in society by arguing that they are able to render tangible that what is usually intangible in society, such as emotions or fantasies (Performance Theory 30). He calls this process “actualizing”: by rendering tangible the intangible, he argues that poets have “a special way of dealing with experiences that bridges the gap between past/present, individual/group, and inside/outside (32). This is how, according to him, they function in a way similar to shamans except in western societies: like shamans, they do the social work of “transforming vision into song,” or, to put it differently, of concretizing the inner workings of people’s experiences (34).

Wary of cultural appropriation, he acknowledges that a straightforward comparison between poets and shamans would be overly simplistic, which is why he offers that poets could be said to be somewhat like shamans instead. They, too, attempt to offer spiritual guidance and restore the community spiritually, Schechner suggests. In the 1960s and early 1970s, this restoration took the form of attempting to find new ways to express the yearning for wholeness, transcendental experiences, and organic living shared by a new generation of Americans.

In the case of Sonia Sanchez, this desire for wholeness meant, specifically, to make room for more complex notions of blackness, especially for black women. This was difficult, because – as I have shown with regards to Nikki Giovanni – the Black Arts movement’s rigid notions of (revolutionary) blackness led to a rejection of art that emphasized anything other than black pride. Madhu Dubey writes: “Black Aesthetic discourse, consolidated around the sign of race, discouraged any literary exploration of gender” (1). She goes on to argue that the black
nationalist aesthetic tended to “totalize” black subjects as merely black, regardless of gender, sexual, class, or other differences. In other words, since race was what united them, racial pride should be emphasized in black artists’ work. While this does not seem a problem in and of itself, it precludes any exploration of personal experiences that are not necessarily directly related to blackness. Needless to say, any references to being a black woman were seen as potentially divisive. This is why, as Dubey points out, black feminist theory needs to take into account that, on the one hand, black women were able to form a “cohesive self” in part by rooting themselves in a communal black history, yet paradoxically, doing so also obscured part of their individual identities. Black female novelists address that issue, Dubey argues, by challenging some of the totalizing tendencies of black nationalist discourse in a fictional context. Dubey’s project is concerned with novelists, so she does not discuss poetry. I would argue, however, that poets like Giovanni and Sanchez were engaged in similar efforts: they, too, highlighted the diversity of black experiences and reasserted the importance of learning to love one’s whole self. For Sanchez, then, exploding these rigid, often masculinist notions of black identity meant clearing a space for more complex conceptualizations of blackness, especially female blackness. Finally, by modeling practices common throughout black history, such as witnessing, she also offered a concrete method for practicing this new kind of three-dimensional blackness.

Despite Snyder’s and Sanchez’s different objectives, then (reconnecting people to nature, and reconnecting people to their cultural heritage in the hopes of making space for more complex black identities), their strategies are similar: to “do” poetry, that is, to model new, potentially transformative ways of being in poetry. These new modes of existence, called forth by both the language and the performance of their poetry, offered those alienated from hegemonic society “new forms of citizenship” by inviting them to participate in the “world-making” process.
(Warner 57). This process, concretized by the corporeal presence of audiences at poetry readings, created a “fullness of hope that outlines the possible” (Dolan 103). In other words, the poetry performance created a sense of possibility, a sense that society could be transformed, which was bolstered by belonging to a public consisting of seemingly like-minded others. Poets’ performances thus created a window into what the world could be like, ideally.

**Modeling Mindfulness: Snyder’s Environmental Poetry**

For Beat poet Gary Snyder, “doing” poetry constitutes revolutionary action, because for him this “doing primarily meant using so called “projective verse” to model Zen Buddhist ideas and practices for his audiences. Using “projective verse” meant having the opportunity to let the earth speak through him, as he puts it, and to foster mindfulness in the members of his audiences. Through both mindfulness and projective verse he aimed to revive the connection between human beings and the land they inhabit, which he hoped might restore the relationship between them and the rest of the universe.

To understand the activist nature of Snyder’s poetic discourse, it is important to define two terms: first, projective verse, which I have briefly mentioned before, was a way of writing poetry developed by poet Charles Olson in 1950. Olson, who was associated with the Black Mountain Poets (a group active at the same time as the Beats, except on the East Coast) advocated for using an open poetry form governed by the poet’s breath rather than by rhyme schemes or meter, which he termed “projective verse.” This principle was even more important to Snyder than it was to McClure. Letting the breath decide where a line ends leads to an organic, “kinetic” poem in which each impression is quickly followed by the next, which keeps the poem’s energy moving: too much description or too many rhetorical devices would drain the energy from a poem and sap public engagement, he believed (243). For Snyder, projective verse offered an opportunity to create poetry that both flowed organically from the poet’s body, since it
was shaped by his or her natural breath, and allowed him to model mindfulness for his audiences. Projective verse gave him the tools to really “do” poetry: it was not merely an aesthetic exercise or passive pastime, but a practice in which both the audience and the poet would be engaged.

The second key term that helps to shed light on the ways in which Snyder’s oeuvre could be considered activist is mindfulness. Put simply, to be mindful is to be fully aware of each experience, regardless of whether it is good or bad, and to not judge those experiences but to simply undergo and accept them. To model this practice, Snyder often demonstrates this principle in his poetry by refusing to discriminate between significant and seemingly trite experiences: rather than selecting standout-experiences, they all make their way into his poetry. Being mindful, then, functions as a kind of meditation on daily life. Snyder’s desire to encourage people to practice mindfulness for themselves, because he hopes it will restore their relationship with nature, and make them realize they are fundamentally part of nature. Indeed, he sees meditation as a “wild” practice because it is something virtually all beings know how to do instinctively. He writes: “Animals know all about [meditation]...The calmness of a deer at rest at midday is the order of meditation” (*The Real Work* 17). To which he adds a little bit later:

[M]editation is sitting still and cutting off the inputs and the distractions and the things that are always leading you from one thing to the next thing to the next – just stopping that stream of often very trivial and inattentive acts and creating a condition of attention in which you look within and try to see what the mind is doing on its own within you – a completely natural thing to do. (18)

By becoming aware of the mind’s movements and the body’s experiences, Snyder believes we become more in touch with our own bodies and grow closer to our surroundings.

Several scholars have commented on the ways in which Snyder tries to restore respect for our environments, and some agree that modeling how to pay close attention to nature is one of his key strategies. According to poet Wendell Berry, one of Snyder’s contemporaries, Snyder wants to create “a religious state of mind” which leads to “a sense of the presence of mystery or
divinity in the world” (qtd. in Altieri 128). Charles Altieri similarly suggests that Snyder tries to show how to “focus...the full energies of mind in moments of intense attention to familiar scenes so as to bring out their numinous aspects” (129). While these are slightly different interpretations of Snyder’s purported goals, both perceive Snyder’s poetry as an attempt to restore humans’ sense of wonder when encountering nature simply by teaching them how to look or concentrate intently. At the same time, he uses “projective verse” not only to model mindful experiences but also to shift people’s perspective from a dualistic one, in which human beings and the rest of nature are diametrically opposed, to a holistic one, in which those same two elements are inextricably interconnected. In this way then, his poetry offers mindfulness as a strategy for potentially realizing his alternative vision of society.

It might be difficult to see, at least at first glance, how this attempt to endow the public with a holistic perspective could be considered a form of political activism, as I have argued before. Put in the social and political context of 1960s and 1970s San Francisco, however, and framed by Warner’s theory of publics and counterpublics, its political nature becomes clearer. During the late 1960s and early 1970s America was deeply polarized, and San Francisco was no exception. Despite the hopeful optimism kindled by the Summer of Love, a series of incidents, including the violent suppression of protesters during the National Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968 and the apocalyptic Altamont Speedway Free Festival in San Francisco in 1969 (at which an eighteen-year-old was stabbed to death by a Hell’s Angel during a Rolling Stones performance) created a much darker political atmosphere that tested the ideals of peace and unity proffered by countercultural youth. Amidst this idealistic unraveling of the San Francisco social scene stood poets like Snyder and Sanchez who continued to harness the idea of San Francisco as a “different” city in which anything could happen if one only used her or his imagination. As
such, they remained committed to the realization of an alternative social imaginary rooted in love. In Snyder’s case, this loving society would be founded on the principles of holism; a theory suggesting everyone and everything is interconnected. Clearly, this threw the prevailing view of society in sharp relief. Presenting this holistic and mindful outlook as a feasible alternative to a violent, apparently futureless capitalist culture, was a political act that manifested itself in the connection between poet and audience. By publicly disclosing private moments of connection to the rest of the universe, and doing so in front of a physical audience, Snyder could elicit a visceral reaction. That kind of engagement, Warner suggests, is precisely what could lead to social transformation (63).

Many of the private experiences Snyder shares are mindful experiences, and while these are scattered throughout his oeuvre, they are particularly prominent in Back Country (1969) and Turtle Island (1974). In “A Walk” (1969), Snyder – an excellent example of projective verse – skips from one experience to the next seemingly without stopping, but the line breaks and short sentences encourage the reader to pay purposeful attention to each moment. The first few lines, for example, show how he does this:

Sunday the only day we don't work:
Mules farting around the meadow,
  Murphy fishing,
The tent flaps in the warm
Early sun: I've eaten breakfast and I'll take a walk
To Benson Lake. Packed a lunch,
Goodbye. Hopping on creekbed boulders
Up the rock throat three miles
  Piute Creek--- (1-10)

After the first two lines (two of the few longer sentences in the poem), which recall a kind of comfortable Sunday lethargy shared by people and animals (the “we” in “we don’t work” seems to include the “mules farting around the meadow…”), he turns his attention to each of his
sensory experiences: he watches “Murphy fishing” and listens to the sound of the tent that “flaps in the warm / early sun.” Breaking the line, he not only notices the flapping but calls attention to sensation of the sun on his skin. This unexpected early sunshine leads him to his decision to take a walk, and even the mental process preceding this decision unfolds at a measured pace: the break in the middle of the sentence (“I’ve eaten breakfast and I’ll / take a walk”) suggest a very brief pause that hints the speaker is making up his mind on what to do, before he actually decides to “take a walk.” Another pause occurs before he settles on his destination: “To Benson Lake.” The rest of the poem unfolds in this same way; with Snyder briefly stopping and noticing the things he does, feels, sees, thinks, hears, or otherwise experiences: “The clear sky. Deer tracks. / Bad place by a falls, boulders big as houses” (13-14). The poem ends with his arrival at camp, a welcome respite after the physical exertion of hiking, which is also evoked by the out-of-breath shortness of the sentences:

Through slide-aspen and talus, to the east end,
Down to grass, wading a wide smooth stream
Into camp. At last.
   By the rusty three-year-
   Ago left-behind cookstove
Of the old trail crew,
Stoppt and swam and ate my lunch. (28-34)

After “hopping on creekbed boulders,” “edging / Past dark creek pools on a long white slope,” and “wading a wide smooth stream” he comes “into camp. At last.” Having mentally walked along with Snyder, the reader feels the relief that is expressed by the short “into camp. At last,” which sounds and feels almost like a sigh when spoken out loud.

Throughout “A Walk,” Snyder’s attention to detail is compounded by his decision to let his breath determine the length of the line, as projective verse prescribes (Olson 242). The result is the insertion of the poet’s body into the poem. As Snyder writes in his nonfiction collection *Earth House Hold* (1969), which came out the same year as *Back Country*:
Breath is the outer world coming into one's body. With pulse. ---the two always harmonizing---the source of our inward sense of rhythm. Breath is spirit, "inspiration." Expiration, "voiced," makes the signals by which the species connects. Certain emotions and states occasionally seize the body, one becomes a whole tube of air vibrating; all voice. In mantra chanting, the magic utterances, built of seed-syllables such as OM and AYNG and AH, repeated over and over, fold and curl on the breath until---when most weary and bored---a new voice enters, a voice speaks through you clearer and stronger than what you know of yourself; with a sureness and melody of its own, singing out the inner song of the self, and of the planet. (123)

By emphasizing the breath, he not only encourages mindfulness, but also draws attention to the breath itself and with it, to the body. As he sees it, this, too, is a step towards establishing a new outlook on society and the way we live our lives. In Turtle Island, Snyder mentions that he wishes to emphasize the body in order to underscore the “ancient solidarity” he believes exists between all things in the universe (1). In other words, becoming aware of our shared “bodiliness” might restore our connection to other beings; a connection he believes existed in pre-modern times.

Nowhere do mindfulness, projective verse, and an emphasis on shared bodiliness converge more strikingly than in “The Bath,” a 91-line poem from his 1974 collection Turtle Island. In this poem he describes how he and his Japanese wife Masa wash their young son Kai. I cite the second section of the poem, which shows this bathing experience particularly well:

Sweating and panting in the stove-steam hot-stone
cedar-planking wooden bucket water-splashing
kerosene lantern-flicker wind-in-the-pines-out
sierra forest ridges night –
Masa comes in, letting fresh cool air
sweep down from the door
a deep sweet breath. (21-27)

By noting and emphasizing a shared bodiliness that extends beyond the bodies of him and his wife to the landscape beyond the bathing house he tries to encourage mindfulness in his readers
and listeners. The body, for him, is an extension of nature, and nature itself is a breathing “thing.” The latter becomes apparent when he writes “Masa comes in, letting fresh cool air / sweep down from the door / a deep sweet breath.” The origin of this “breath” is ambiguous: the syntax does not specify whether he is referring to the breeze or to Masa’s own as she starts bathing her son. Either way, he takes note of the breathing, and revels in it (it is “deep” and “sweet”). Later, when he eroticizes the moment by touching his wife, he presents the body as an extension of nature when he writes “the body of my lady, the winding valley spine,” which continues to do so as the poem progresses and he refers to the body as “the hidden place of seed” (line 42) and to his wife’s vagina as an “open curling lotus gate” (line 50).

These sexual advances do complicate his vision of a shared bodiliness between human beings, however, because they reveal an apparent ignorance of his own privileged status. As I have previously mentioned, Snyder fails to consider the effects of race and gender on his projected social imaginary, as becomes clear once again by his apparent disregard for his wife’s feelings as she washes their son’s hair. For all his emphasis on interconnectedness and “shared bodiliness,” in this section Snyder shows himself to be surprisingly self-centered: the poem is an account of how he feels, and how he connects to others, regardless of how these “others” feel about that. Because he does not have to think about his body as being “Othered,” he fails to realize that his vision of shared bodiliness, at least in this work, is often masculinist instead of universal.

While this raises questions about the extent to which human beings might be able to feel interconnected, it places no such limitations on the connections between human beings and nature. Indeed, “The Bath” draws some powerful connections between nature and the human body that suggest those two could, in fact, be considered interrelated. He extends the relationship
between nature and the body set out in the first few stanzas when he writes, in the second half of
the poem:

    Clean, and rinsed, and sweating more, we stretch
    out on the redwood benches hearts all beating
    Quiet to the simmer of the stove,
        the scent of cedar
    And then turn over,

        murmuring gossip of the grasses,
        talking firewood (63-69)

Not only to their hearts beat to the rhythm (“the simmer”) of the stove and “the scent of cedar,”
but their language has also become the “murmuring gossip of the grasses” as they
“talk...firewood,” erasing any distinction between their own speech and the sounds of nature. A
few lines down, he finally explicitly unifies the two by simply stating: ‘The cloud across the sky.
The windy pines. / the trickle gurgle in the swampy meadow / this is our body” (75-77,
emphasis in quote). He ends on a similar note, once more underscoring that our bodies are
extensions of the earth, when he states: “Laughing on the Great Earth / Come out from the bath
(90-91).

    Fully experiencing the body (through washing, touching, laughing, “hugging babies,
kissing bellies”) is the value of having a body, Snyder seems to emphasize. Being aware of the
close physical connection to others and to one’s surroundings might help one to ground oneself
in the body, which he believes can help us get more in touch with the parts of ourselves exiled by
a mid-century emphasis on materialism, and thus with our “natural” being. Hence, his emphasis
on physicality: throughout the poem the line “this is our body” (sometimes phrased “is this our
body?”) recurs like a mantra, attempting to ground the reader or listener in the present moment.6
As he explains in The Real Work: “[I]f we can live the work we have to do, knowing that we are
real, and it’s real, and that the world is real, then it becomes right. And that’s the real work: to

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make the world as real as it is, and to find ourselves as real as we are within it” (82, emphasis in quote). By being in the moment, connecting with others, and being aware of the ways in which we already are interconnected, simply by virtue of being mammals, we find “the real,” as he puts it.

He suggests something similar in several other early poems, notably “Fire in the Hole” (1969). Although Snyder wrote this poem around 1969, it appears to be a reflection on some fifteen years earlier, when he held several positions as a manual laborer in the mountains of Washington state, including that of trail crew member or “riprapper.” In this capacity, he was tasked with breaking up rock in order to create trails. Despite the tough nature of physical labor in the mountains, working with a “steeldrill” and “singlejack hammer” while the sun beats down on him, his arms ache, the sky is “blinding” and “sweat trickles down [his] back,” he is content. The pleasure seems to stem not so much from the destruction of nature but from the physical labor in nature: his body appears to be falling in step with the work that needs to be done, as he is fully concentrated (“mind/entered the tip of steel”) and moves naturally and rhythmically, like breathing (“the arm fell/like breath”). After setting off the dynamite, he “strolld back,” suggesting leisure, and felt “free.” By calling forth the impressions and sensations of that day, Snyder shows how mindfulness could serve as an alternative path to “actualizing” the self; one that is rooted in continual awareness of the body and its surroundings rather than in consumerism. Through both their projective verse-style and their intense attention to detail, then, poems such as “The Bath” and “Fire in the Hole” not only model mindfulness but also emphasize the value of being grounded in the body, and grounding the body in nature.

What is more, the emphasis on mindfulness in poems like “Fire in the Hole” also encourage what Snyder calls a “reinhabitation of the land.” All cultures, according to Snyder,
have evolved from more “primal” cultures that truly lived with the land they inhabited, and in that sense all human beings share a common past. In order to return to this harmonious way of living, we all need to become “inhabitants” of the earth again: that is, people who are knowledgeable about the flora and fauna that surrounds them and who are committed to using the land in the most ethical ways possible. True inhabitants, to Snyder, are those people who use what they need from the land, but also give back to it, and never overextend it in order to make a profit (Old Ways 60-61). In a 1977 interview, he states: “We haven’t discovered North America yet. People live on it without knowing what it is or where they are. They live on it literally like invaders. You know whether or not a person knows where he is by whether or not he knows the plants. By whether or not he knows what the soils and waters do” (The Real Work 69). Getting to know one’s neighbors is a big part of this, as he explains in the 2008 interview with The New Yorker, emphasizing that he does not differentiate between human and non-human “neighbors” but that “all of these beings are part of my community, and I would like to be able to say hello to each of them” (Goodyear).

Because he presumes a common heritage of more sustainable living, this ability to live with the land is something all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, have in common, and what ultimately unites them as one diverse species on earth. Once more skimming over the realities of race and gender, he holds steadfast to the vision of a holistic society and truly seems to believe that he first step to bringing about a peaceful society starts by recognizing this shared history of interconnectedness. This, he believes, can lay the foundation for erasing artificial boundaries between different states and cultures so that we can start seeing ourselves as part of one worldwide holistic community. The desirability of this vision lies primarily in the ease and
comfort that comes with living so close to nature, as he suggests in his poem “Rainbow Body” (1970):

Now,
sleep on the cliff
float on the surf
nap in the bamboo thicket
eyes closed
dazzled ears (43-47)

While the physical labor in nature is tough, it is balanced out by the serenity that comes from working so closely to the land: on the page, the hard-edged words “grubbing” and “hammering straight blunt / harpoon heads and spears” are visually surrounded by phrases that evoke pleasant sensations: it is preceded by climbing “delicately” and “eating melon and sweet potato / from this land” suggesting softness and sweetness, suggesting the hard work is mitigated by its rewards. This suggestion is followed by an all-around impression of comfort when he writes: “sleep on the cliff / float on the surf / nap in the bamboo thicket.” By working with and on the land, he seems to suggest, the dividing line between humans and the land starts to blur. Instead they become one community, one with the land, “dazzled” by what nature has to offer and content with the simple things in life.

In “Kyoto Born in Spring Song” (1970), he similarly stretches the idea of reinhabitation to such an extent that he changes the notion of community by blurring the line between humans and other aspects of the environment. The poem starts out:

Beautiful little children
found in melons,
in bamboo
in a "strangely glowing warbler egg"
a perfect baby girl--- (1-5)

In the same way that the poem follows from the breath, the baby is born from melons, bamboo, and eggs - not physically, of course, but spiritually. This close proximity between human child
and natural resources is “perfect” to Snyder (line 5), because it illustrates his view that human identity encompasses more than just the body: it could be conceptualized as an open-ended vessel that includes the land itself. In such a vision, there are no longer divisions between humans and other aspects of nature; they are all part of the same community. This notion of rebuilding community is central to Snyder’s philosophy, and is indeed why he engages in poetry in the first place: by “doing” language while writing and performing, he not only envisions the imaginary public all writers write for, but also manages to gather an actual, physical public that could be construed as a *sangha* (“community” in Buddhist practice) for which he models mindfulness and interrelatedness in the hopes of restoring a “notion of social responsibility to citizenship,” as Henry A. Giroux has called people’s willingness to challenge oppressive social conditions (Evans and Giroux).

By raising environmental consciousness and transforming people’s dualistic perspective on the world into a holistic one by modeling mindfulness, Snyder makes his alternative vision of society, and with it, spiritual regeneration, seem feasible. In this way, he fulfills a kind of shamanistic role (Schechner, *Performance Theory* 34; Robbins 203). Snyder himself embraced this label and called his poetry an entryway to “shamanistic consciousness” (*Old Ways* 12-14). While the 1950s and 1960s saw a rising interest in Hinduism and especially Buddhism, shamanism did not really appear to be on anyone’s mind until the English publication *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964) by Mircea Eliade, a professor of comparative religion who rose to prominence in the sixties and seventies especially. In his work, Eliade offers an extensive (though not exhaustive) treatise on shamanist practices around the world. Put simply, Eliade showed that while shamans differ the world over, most of them share certain defining characteristics: they inherit or feel “called” to the profession, they are initiated through a
dream, they can perform what appear to be miracles (extraordinary feats, such as swallowing hot coals), they can communicate with the dead, heal the ill, they have visions, and they can mediate between God/the gods, and the living. Clearly, not all of these can be transposed onto the role of poets, but poets have long seen themselves in some of these same roles, particularly that of prophet or teacher who tries to capture the vision of the community and renders it tangible (or who “actualizes” it, as Schechner would have it). Eliade writes: “[Shamans] work toward a religious revolution by the fact that they proclaim the spiritual regeneration of the entire community…” (314). This is precisely what poets such as Snyder, Sanchez, Giovanni and McClure believe they are also called to do: spiritually regenerating a community by presenting alternative imaginaries and modeling ways (mindfulness, reinhabitation, witnessing) to achieve them.

For Snyder, specifically, shamanism means reviving humans’ connection to nature and especially to what he calls “nonhuman others.” He writes that: “to step outside of that [social nexus] and make contact with a totally nonhuman other [which] is where a kind of power, wisdom, and experience comes from” (ibid.). Expounding on his vision of shamanism, it becomes clear that he perceives it to be a mode of being that allows for communion with nonhuman others such as forests and animals. Through poetry, he is able to share the ideas gleaned from that kind of communion with other human beings, thus indeed speaking on behalf of nature, as Robbins has called it (203). As Snyder explains in an interview with Chuck Simmons: “I guess I would define shamanism as man’s basic mind-science...interesting in that it was empirical, experiential, pragmatic, and international. Poetry within the civilized area of history is the fragmented attempt to recreate a ‘healing song’ aspect of the shaman’s practice”
(Simmons qtd. in “The Real Work” 175). By closing the distance between human beings and other beings, Snyder believes he is, to some extent, fulfilling that role of “healer.”

Conceptualizing poetry as a “healing song,” further solidifies the notion of poetry as a form of activism, because it is a practice geared towards re-establishing emotional ties to the land. For Snyder, using poetry to accomplish this is particularly valuable because he believes it is timeless, and will thus have a lasting impact, as he explains in *The Old Ways*:

> We’re just starting, in the last ten years here, to make songs that will speak for plants, mountains, animals and children. When you see your first deer of the day you sing your salute to the deer, or your first red-wing blackbird – I saw one this morning! Such poetries will be created by us as we reinhabit this land with people who know they belong to it; for whom “primitive” is not a word that means past, but primary, and future...The poems will leap out past the automobiles and TV sets of today into the vastness of the Milky Way (visible only when the electricity is turned down), to richen and humanize the scientific cosmologies. (42)

In his view, poetry remains long after seemingly established scientific theories are challenged and while fads come and go. It helps us to connect with the universe as a whole, including people past and present, because it is able to render tangible, and “actual” those things that cannot be understood rationally. By “doing” language with the help of projective verse and performance, he both encourages mindfulness and reinhabitation of the land in an attempt to restore people’s respect for the world they are living in, and “learn to be people of knowledge in this universe in community with other people – non-human included – brothers and sisters” (ibid. 43).

**Exploding Myths: Sanchez’s Witnessing and Verbal Hand Grenades**

Like Snyder, Sanchez believes poetry is a practice; something that concretizes a utopian longing in American society and that projects – and could potentially bring about – a new social imaginary. The nature of her social imaginary is different, however: her vision of society is not one in which people connect to their premodern selves, as Snyder wishes, but one in which these selves are less rigidly circumscribed and more in touch with the variegated nature of black
history. The former would be much harder to do as a woman of color, and the latter was much more difficult to accomplish within the framework of black nationalism. However, in the same way that Snyder models mindfulness to practice being in nature, Sanchez offers witnessing and self-affirmation as ways to locate oneself in a black cultural tradition. Although I will not be discussing the influence of black music here, it should be noted that Smethurst and Marcoux believe black music offered poets a new black imaginary, which they then conveyed through their poetry. Specifically, Smethurst argues that black artists “encod[ed] a counterhistory (or [found] an encoded counterhistory) within African American popular culture, especially black music” (77). Likewise Marcoux, on whose theory of black poets as “jazz griots” argues that black musicians laid the foundation for “poetic/political templates for new representations of blackness” (22). While musicians may have laid the groundwork for this kind of new imaginary, poets like Sonia Sanchez nudged audiences closer to achieving these new imaginaries by using her poetry to model practices such as self-affirmation and witnessing. “Doing” poetry in this way, she hoped, might make room for black people, especially black women, as complex, three-dimensional, “whole” people.

To clear out a space for this “wholeness,” Sanchez deconstructs old notions of the black, female self through self-affirmations and direct critiques of the masculinist nature of much of the Black Arts rhetoric. As I have shown, Black Power ideology considered poetry valuable only if it explicitly supported black nationalism. By defining revolutionary art so rigidly, they underestimated the potential power of art an sich, which – as both Giovanni and Sanchez show – does not have to drive home an explicit point in order to effect change. In Sanchez’s case, this practical purpose does not lie so much in direct explicit affirmation of revolutionary blackness, but in “doing” language by way of self-affirmations, chanting, or witnessing, which instructs
members of her public to tear down myths and misconceptions from the inside out. For Sanchez, these are not just myths that we tell about others, but primarily myths that black people, and especially black women, have come to believe about themselves. Through her poetry, she models ways to deconstruct and reconstruct these notions, and thus pluralize black identity.

Sanchez’s poem could be said to create a counterpublic in a way similar to Snyder’s poetry. She, too, primarily creates a counterpublic by presenting a perspective that runs counter to the hegemonic worldview. Yet, she also does something else that aids the creation of a counterpublic: she gives “whole” black women a public identity, both by emphasizing self-affirmation and locating them in history, and with it, a changed private self. Warner explains how identity politics heals the division between public and private that has “denied” those who are not white, male, or straight a “public existence” (26). When Warner writes, in the context of gender and sexuality, that “counterpublics can...elaborate new worlds in which gender and sexuality can be lived…” (57), one only has to replace “gender and sexuality” with “wholeness,” to see how Sanchez manages to do the same, except specifically for black women. By emphasizing that she is a whole, multifaceted woman with a history, she brings that new black female identity into the public sphere and makes it possible for other black women to do the same. By healing the rift between black female private and public selves, then, her poetic discourse can be said to create a counterpublic.

Her 1970 collection *We a BaddDDD People* offers some of the clearest examples of “exploding” and reinscribing blackness in her early work. In “a / needed / poem for my salvation” for example, Sanchez models how self-love and self-care provide armor against pervasive racist and sexist myths about black culture in general, and her identity as a black woman specifically. In this poem, Sanchez explodes rigid – and often masculinist – notions of
blackness by suggesting that being black encompasses more than doing the “serious” work of
evolution, listening to “day / time / nite / time / rhetoric” (8-9) and taking “parents / schoool /
children / friends / poets / seriously,” (3) but not herself. As a result, she has been “wounded.”
When she makes up her mind to start focusing on her own well-being, however, she decides she
will “smile at my image” and focus on the “bessssst,” which is an entirely different approach to
life that puts the personal and individual at the center and starts from a place of self-love. In that
sense, this poem also echoes Giovanni’s poem “Seduction,” in which she starts undressing in an
attempt to seduce a guy while he “rapp[s] on about ‘The revolution…’” here, as in Sanchez’s
poem, love trumps rhetoric as revolutionary strategy. Instead of pleasing others by taking their
“rhetoric” seriously, she will take care of herself first, building herself up with affirmations and
self-knowledge. Hence, when she studies herself (“git a phd in soniasanchezism”) she will still
be wounded, but it is a vulnerability of her own making and results from opening herself up to
“beauty/love,” which will be dangerous because it is self-chosen and empowering. After all, in
Sanchez’ view, being a “whole” person is what is truly revolutionary. Only by learning about
ourselves can we present ourselves as the complex people we are and truly “livvvvve.”

Her own reading of this poem on her 1971 spoken-word album A Sun Lady for All
Seasons Reads Her Poetry,⁸ is conversational, as if she is discussing this issue with an
interlocutor. But when she arrives at the word “livvvvve” she suddenly vocalizes, stretching out
the word as if it were a cheer or rallying cry. That impression is further strengthened by the way
she addresses her female public on this album, which she does directly before and after reading
each poem. Before reading this particular poem, she urges her listeners to first “deal with
ourselves [so] we can love each other, because it do be about that” (“a / needed / poem for my
salvation”). In this poem, then, Sanchez urges black women to learn about themselves first
before engaging in any other cause. In doing so, she shows how to use positive and self-affirmative language to become a “whole” person. Her early work, and especially *We a BaddDDD People* contains several other poems in which she uses language as a tool for the reconceptualization of blackness.

In “blk/wooooomen/chant,” for example, she calls on black men to start recognizing their women as *women* and as fellow revolutionaries (14-15):

> do u SEEEEEEE us? HEARRRRR us? KNOWWWW us?

black mennnnNNN/we bes here.

waiten. waiten. WAITEN. WAITENNNNNN (18-22)

By capitalizing and drawing out words, they become shouts for attention. It is clear that these words should be verbalized to have the effect she desires: the typography demands of the reader that they speak (shout!) the words out loud in order to make their presence known and be heard. This is not just important for women themselves, she suggests as the poem continues, but to the Black Power movement as a whole. For while the typographically loud language demands that black men “SEEEEEEE” “HEARRRRR” and “KNOWWWW” them, it also explodes the idea that black men are the sole catalysts of the cultural nationalist revolution and places black women at the center instead, “waiten” to be recognized. Comparing black revolutionaries to electricity, she suggests women are “high voltage,” which makes them indispensable to the revolutionary struggle (32). Without these women, black men will not maximize their full powers as revolutionaries and can forget about their roles as “warriors.” It is the women who are high voltage, so black men need to come to *them* to be fully charged (the women are “in charge,” and only by recognizing them will men be “in charge,” too).
In an interview Sanchez conducted with singer Jill Scott for *Essence* magazine in 2002, she offers an additional reason why she believes language is so powerful. It is not just potentially revolutionary because it is “explosive,” but “doing” it a certain way, by making poetry or chanting, can also connect one to one’s ancestors, she believes. Scott describes how singing helps her connect to her grandmother, who was always humming. She calls it “spirit talk,” this ability to “[G]o deep; deep into the history of who we are as a people...That kind of singing is not singing” (“Who is Jill Scott?” 85). Sanchez agrees, tying the ability to sing in front of an audience to the affirmation of one’s voice. She tells Jill: “[T]hat's why it's so important to have you onstage. You authenticate yourself and your audience. You say, ‘This can be done’” (ibid.). Language cannot only help us affirm ourselves but also model resilience and hope for other people in the community, she suggests.

Specifically, in some of her 1970 poems, Sanchez emphasizes the beauty and power that comes from fostering loving connections to family and community members, especially other women. In “summer words of a sistuh addict,” for example, she writes:

```
and as the sistuh
sits in her silent /
remembered/high
someone leans for
ward gently asks her:
    sistuh
    did u
    finally
learn how to hold yo/mother? (14-22)
```

While the speaker-addict is closing herself off from her community, someone takes the effort to reach through the drug-induced haze to help her remember the importance of love and family. They are willing to see her, that is, they are recognizing her as a person and a full subject despite her intoxication. In a sense, the person who reaches out is also practicing what they preach; that
is, they are fostering a positive relationship with someone else in their community by reaching out to them. By the end of the poem, the “I” at the beginning of the poem has come to be replaced by “we”: the speaker is no longer alone with her anger and sorrow, but gently lifted up by the music and the singing she shares with others. In a 1998 interview, Sanchez acknowledges that for her, personally, writing this kind of community-affirming poetry has been life-saving and empowering, because she experiences it as a link to a collective black past: “Poetry has kept me connected to this long line of African people who stayed alive just to tell their stories,” she states. “I understand why I keep doing this work. It is part of a long tradition. It is what I am supposed to do. Writing poetry has kept me alive. It kept me breathing. It kept me human. It kept me a human. It kept me from killing people. It kept me from killing myself” (Johnson-Bailey 79).

In addition to explicitly emphasizing the bonds between people in black communities, Sanchez also uses witnessing to preserve their rich cultural and historical legacies. Witnessing, in this case, means recording what is happening to communities in the present moment so that it is preserved for future generations. Marcoux argues that by recording the going-about of a community (or storing them in their memory, as traditional griots do), Black Arts poets are able to “authenticate events” (17). In other words, they mark the significance and value of whatever is taking place in a community by turning it into a story. According to Henry Louis Gates jr., this kind of personal witnessing has long been a crucial strategy in preserving black history. He writes:

Deprived of access to literacy, the tools of citizenship, denied the rights of selfhood by law, philosophy, and pseudo-science, and denied as well the possibility, even, of possessing a collective history as a people, black Americans...published their individual histories in astonishing numbers, in a larger attempt to narrate the collective history of “the race.” (4)
For Sanchez, then, the act of personal witnessing is another way of “doing” language, in the sense that it again harnesses the power of language to aid the construction of an alternative black imaginary; one in which black identity is more complex and three-dimensional than the masculinist ethics of the Black Arts movement often prescribes. In “Homecoming,” a poem from Sanchez’s first, eponymous collection (1968), she makes a commitment to this kind of witnessing, a practice that also firmly places her into black cultural history. She starts by saying:

i have been a way so long
once after college
i returned tourist
style to watch all
the niggers killing
themselves with
3 for oners (1-8)

The implication, of course, is that she – or, rather, the poem’s speaker – has not just returned from college, but from a foray into white culture. This culture has changed her so much that she returns to her own community with an outsider’s perspective; “tourist / style.” While it is of course not necessarily Sanchez speaking in this poem, she did have some college classes that were inimical to her experiences, just like the poem’s speaker. Yet, when she returns to her neighborhood a second time, it is with a new purpose and a new perspective: to experience the “real” (22). The poem does not make it clear what has caused this change of perspective, but the phrase “now woman” does signal a turning point of some sort: the fact that she suddenly directly addresses someone who is (presumably) a member of her community shows she does not want to observe things with a tourist’s detachment anymore, but be directly involved. Indeed, several of her references suggest a weariness with abstractions, and a commitment to becoming active in a practical sense: “this is for real.” she writes, rejecting both the “freudian dreams” at college and the things “they say / in the newspapers.” Both approaches to black life in America are too
abstract and imbued with white supremacist attitudes to serve as the basis for social change. In this respect, her poem echoes Giovanni’s disillusionment at college when several black activists, politicians, and civil rights workers are murdered just after she started to believe “all people could get / together and win without bloodshed” (33-34). Sanchez, likewise, rejects theorizing and returns to do work “on the ground” in order to record the history of what is really happening.

In *Homecoming*, the short first collection of which this poem is a part, Sanchez does exactly that, but she eschews the dry recording and focuses on creating a sense of community instead. Most of the poems in *Homecoming* bear titles such as “to all brothas,” “to all sisters” (twice), “definition for blk children,” “to blk record buyers” and “for unborn malcolm’s” (a reference to Malcolm X, whom she mentions in several other poems as well). While this may not immediately suggest an emphasis on witnessing, many of these seemingly inane poems about love, jealousy, and music are the records of a community. The newspaper may write about “the niggers killing / themselves with / 3 for oners,” that does not reflect the kind of love and ideology on which the community is built. It is simply not representative. By providing these snapshots of her and other people’s lives, she thus tries to counteract the image created by the newspapers, creating a black history that runs counter to the history transmitted by mainstream media. Like Snyder’s vision of an alternative social imaginary rooted in mindfulness, then, Sanchez’s projection of an alternative imaginary founded on love and witnessing is a political act.

In her second collection *We a BaddDDD People* (1970) she models the act of witnessing and encourages others to register what is happening in their communities as well. In the poem “a ballad for stirling street,” for example, she presents both the street itself and the act of writing about it as repositories of black culture that should be preserved. Reading the full poem, it
becomes clear that she is simultaneously recording black history and asking others to do the same. The beginning reads:

jést finished readen a book
bout howard street
guess it had to be written
bout howard street
now someone shud write one
bout stirling street
show the beauty of blk / culture
on stirling street (1-8)

Stirling Street was the location of Amiri Baraka’s Spirit House in Newark; a space intended for black theater performances but also used for other social, cultural, and political events. The first event organized there was the Afro-American Arts Festival (1966), which led to a magazine in which Sanchez published some of her work as well (Anadolu-Okur 86). According to Marcoux, Black Arts poets’ renewed emphasis on orality helped reconstitute a continuum or genealogy of African culture (11). In the case of “a ballad for stirling street,” Sanchez does this by witnessing the happenings on Stirling Street and recording them for future generations, adding to existing black cultural history and forging an identity of her own that is located on this continuum of black history. The line “TCB/en on stirling street” compounds that impression: the acronym “TCB” is slang for “taking care of business.” Expressing her desire to “hear bout brothers / TCB/en on stirling street,” she makes it clear she demands a historical narrative that includes the assertive characters that give form and expression to black culture in the 1960s.

Immediately following “a ballad for stirling street” is “now poem. for us.” in which she emphasizes the need for preserving black history more explicitly. This poem is, in a sense, an elaboration on “Homecoming,” as it stresses the necessity of recording black history more explicitly. A true homecoming also means a return to a larger web of interpersonal connections.
that make one feel part of a bigger unit, whether it is a family or a community. Sanchez emphasizes how these connections extend beyond the present to the past and the future, linking each individual to a long genealogy of black ancestors and future children, which makes recording black cultural history a particularly valuable act:

sit down with em brothas & sistuh

talk to em. listen to their
tales of victory / woes / sorrows. (11-13).

Those last two lines especially underscore the importance of witnessing and recording history for future generations: hearing the “ago” stories will help others during their “tomorrows,” she suggests. Kelly Oliver, drawing on the work of Henry Louis Gates jr., argues that narratives of witnessing restore black agency and subjectivity (105). She writes: “Bearing witness works through the trauma of objectification by reinstituting subjective agency as the ability to respond and address oneself” (ibid.). In that sense, bearing witness is a healing practice. For Sanchez, this healing does not just come from personally bearing witness, but from hearing about – and vicariously living through – the stories of other community members as well. Taken together, their narrative threads form a tapestry of experiences that offers a multitude of black realities beyond the rigid framework provided by black cultural nationalists. She urges her readers to question the older generation about their personal experiences in the past. All these things together form the “heritage” she references at the beginning of her poem, and that she so eagerly tries to preserve by writing it.

It is not necessarily the big events, but the more personal, seemingly mundane elements of life that make up this vast cultural historical knowledge. At the end of the poem, she underscores the empowering quality of this knowledge one last time: “let them tell us of their juju years / so ours will be that much stronger,” she writes, referring to the collective name by
which some West-African spiritual practices are known in the west, and thus further solidifying
the importance of knowing one’s cultural history (26-27). Doing language, in the sense of
actively harnessing language for one’s own purposes (empowerment) thus becomes once again
crucial to the alternative black imaginary Sanchez envisions. In this case, it is not literal self-
affirmation and the explosion of myths about black people, but the recording of stories that
testify to black experiences that reinscribe blackness as a complex, rich identity.

Regardless of whether she explicitly emphasizes (self-)love and self-definition, or
emphasizes its importance by calling to preserve black cultural heritage, Sanchez, like Snyder,
believes poetry can play a key role in changing society. By instilling the idea that self-definition
is crucial, and that both spoken affirmations and the testimonies of ancestors can alter one’s way
of looking at the world, she suggests that doing language, whether this takes the form of poetry
or not, constitutes the first step in resisting racist oppression and creating social change.

Underscoring her commitment to language as a tool of resistance, Sanchez has spoken about
political activists’ general lack of attention to culture in general, and language specifically,
lamenting: “Imagine all the songs we sing that inspire people to continue, but we push it to the
side,” and echoing, in another interview from 1999, that “words can change people's lives”
(Sanchez and Sims; Dyer). For her, poetry is a way of harnessing language and bringing it “to
the masses,” so to speak. It provides an arena in which personal experiences can be concretized
and made available to a larger audience. It could be said, then, that poetry by both Snyder and
Sanchez attempted to call counterpublics into existence, and that the direct contact with these
counterpublics during performances solidified the possibility of one day realizing the alternative
social imaginaries projected in their works. By offering these alternative visions to a live
audience, their poetry readings became spaces in which the realization of a completely different kind of society suddenly did not seem so far away.

“Poetry is not a Luxury”: Modeling Alternatives and the Creation of Counterpublics

In the 1960s, poetry performance became central to poets’ attempt to “actualize” their visions of society. In the context of Snyder’s and Sanchez’s poetry, this meant that their modeling of behavior (their primary mode of actualization) was bolstered by their performance, which brought them in direct contact with their publics. Because they performed poetry that projected alternative social imaginaries, I would argue that these poetry performances drew audiences that could be construed as counterpublics in Michael Warner’s sense of the word. In his book *Publics and Counterpublics* (2005), Warner describes publics as self-organized communities of attentive strangers called into existence by circulating discourses (51, 56). Strangers, he suggests, become a public by virtue of having read or heard the same discourse. Because it circulates, *any* stranger could theoretically be or become part of the public, and that possibility creates a sense of hope: a hope that the public called forth by the discourse might be numerous and receptive enough to have the power to transform society. As Warner writes, envisioning a public “requires our constant imagining” (57).

If these self-organized communities of strangers are formed based on a circulating discourse that conflicts with those of the dominant public, however, they become what Warner calls “counterpublics” (86). These counterpublics are not merely publics that consist of subalterns, as he hastens to add, but publics whose discourses and concomitant practices “would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” in a mainstream context (ibid.). In other words, the counterpublic is a public whose discourse expresses ideas or opinions that cause conflict or “friction” with the dominant discourses in society. Warner explains:
Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely. (88)

To illustrate his point, Warner uses queer counterpublics as his main example: in these counterpublics, gay men have transformed both intimacy and the discourse surrounding it in a way that is at odds with hegemonic conceptualizations of intimacy. Terms like “girlfriend” or “gal pal” are only recognized as intimate terms in gay male culture, he suggests (199), and promiscuity is not seen as anonymous but as yet another way to be intimate (201). Thus, excluded from dominant discourses on sexuality that tend to privilege heterosexual, “coupled” sex, queers carved out a new “scene” that rested on seemingly ephemeral discursive aspects like address (“girlfriend”). Since these discourses are at odds with dominant discourses, they are transgressive, empowering, and potentially revolutionary. Transposing this notion of the counterpublic onto Beat and Black Arts poetry and poetic performances, it is possible to argue that the discursive frameworks in which they existed similarly created counterpublics because they critiqued hegemonic (primarily capitalist, masculinist, and white supremacist) narratives and because they transformed the notion of poetry as a “bourgeois” aesthetic practice into a practical, activist tool.

While Gary Snyder never explicitly uses the word “counterpublic,” he has commented on the socio-political power of texts. In a 2008 profile of Snyder in The New Yorker, for example, he explains: “[The 1955 Six Gallery reading] made us realize that poetry was a social experience, more like storytelling” (Goodyear, my emphasis). As his work seems to imply, however, performing poetry goes further than merely telling stories. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett has argued that slam poetry, arguably the most recent incarnation of poetic performance, serves to critique dominant power structures while also offering new, counterpublic models at the same
time (5). According to her theory, the critique it offers has two functions: first, to resist poetry’s ensconcement in academia and other “official” institutes and publications, and second, to critique so-called WASP-y attitudes from a marginalized point of view (5-6). While her discussion is solely focused on the 1990s and 2000s slam poetry format, the first principle holds true for Black Arts and Beat poetry in the sixties and early seventies as well. They, too, performed primarily in bars and other public places (although it must be noted that many of them, including Snyder, Sanchez, and Giovanni, did become affiliated with universities later on), thus continuously welcoming new audiences, as Somers-Willett calls it, and facilitating easy access to anyone who wished to attend their readings.11 The second function can less easily be transposed, however, for while Black Arts poetry, like slam poetry, also critiqued whiteness and European cultural idea(l)s from a marginalized perspective, Beat poetry did not. For although Snyder was an indisputable outsider as an ecologically conscious, Beat-affiliated, Zen Buddhist poet in consumerist, fast-paced 1960s America, his subjectivity as a white, straight male hardly classifies him as a marginalized subject. For this reason, it would impossible to uncritically apply Somers-Willett’s assessment of slam poetry to the 1960s poetry scene. However, her analysis, which presents slam as a new “counter-cultural” force, does offer an entryway into discussing Beat and Black Arts poetry side by side as counter-hegemonic, political art forms.

The countercultural nature of Snyder’s and Sanchez’s poetry resides in their commitment to re-imagine society and model ways of realizing these alternative societies in their poetic performances. While for Snyder this alternative is grounded in Zen Buddhist ecology, with an emphasis on mindfulness as crucial to achieving environmentally-conscious living, Sanchez’s vision relies on actively showing how to counter and revise stories of the (black/woman) self constructed by society through both witnessing and self-affirmation. For both, however, the
subversive potential of language and the bodies that produce it are key to realizing their respective visions: it is the vehicle for attracting and holding the attention of a public, and thus for modeling alternative ways of being.

Snyder and Sanchez believed that their poetry could effect actual social change, and this belief hinged in part on the role of the public. As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, publics “exist by virtue of being addressed,” according to Warner’s theory (50). This leads to an interesting paradox: discourses are written or spoken so that they can be read or heard by a public, but this public does not exist until the text is actually written or spoken. Warner calls this conundrum “essential” to the nature of a public because it shows that publics are imaginary, but not unreal: they have a social basis (51, 55). For Snyder and Sanchez, then, the possibility of publics and especially counterpublics lies precisely in this space between an imagined public and its social reality. During a performance, publics have transformed from an imaginary collection of strangers into a corporeal presence, allowing poets to encounter them face-to-face. For poets such as Sanchez and Snyder, who truly believed poetry could jump-start social change, this provided a unique opportunity: they could both express and literally model alternative ways of being in front of a public.

Some performance scholars have seized on the possibilities of this aspect of performance. Jill Dolan, for example, argues that performance “offers a way to practice imagining new forms of social relationships” (90). Spectators, Dolan explains, are literally beholding an alternative to reality through the collective witnessing of a performance. Because these alternatives are acted out on stage, they start to appear more plausible. Both Warner and Dolan emphasize that being an attentive spectator is key to this hopeful aspect of performance: it is not enough to be present at the performance; one has to be alert in order to bear “witness” (97). In fact, according to
Warner, paying attention is the very act that turns a group of people into a public: if no one is paying attention, a public is not a public but simply a group of strangers (51, 53). This relation among attentive strangers, combined with their attentive, corporeal presence at poetry performances led poets like Sanchez and Snyder to believe that poetry could have the power to transform society.

For Snyder, effecting social change was mostly a matter of raising people’s environmental consciousness. He did not just do this by making them more ecologically aware, however, but by modeling mindfulness as a strategy that could help people experience the material world as an integral part of their own being. He does so mainly through using mindful language, which forgoes any linguistic flourishes. By asking readers and listeners to pay close attention to the things he (the poet) sees and hears, Snyder invites his public to join him in a kind of meditation. By putting the emphasis on mindfulness and meditation, then, Snyder also modeled the basics of a Zen approach to life, in which both play a key role. Clearly, such a Zen approach stood in stark opposition to the fast pace of the consumerist 1960s, which means that for both him and his public, this expanded awareness was not simply a gimmick or trend, but a gateway into a completely different lifestyle (69).

Richard Cándida Smith has called this new collection of ideals by which to live one’s life Snyder’s “new foundation myths.” (383). His invitation to join him in mindfulness seems to be the key “foundation myth” since much of his poetry emphasizes that mindfulness and meditation are fundamental to a new, more ecologically aware existence. Occasionally, this call to mindfulness during a performance also allows for a communal encounter with the present. This happens in “By Frazier Creek Falls,” for example, when he literally urges members of the audience to:
listen.

This living flowing land
is all there is, forever

We are it
it sings through us –

We could live on this Earth/without clothes or tools! (13-17)

After he shares his own observations with the audience, he integrates a three-line pause into the poem (after “listen”) to allow the audience to both share in his experiences and to fill in their own observations before he continues, thus making them part of his poem. He not only asks the audience to “listen” in order to enter their own experiences, however, but also to become aware of the way nature itself is not static. Like the public, the pine trees also “listen” and the whole landscape “sings through us.” By highlighting this, Snyder again emphasizes how he believes we are all interrelated and interconnected; humans and nonhumans alike. In his introductory note to *Turtle Island* (1974) he expands on this holistic principle by saying:

> Each living being is a swirl in the flow, a formal turbulence, a ‘song.’ The land, the planet itself, is also a living being—–at another pace. Anglos, Black people, Chicanos, and others beached up on these shores all share such views at the deepest levels of their old cultural traditions—–African, Asian, or European. Hark again to those roots, to see our ancient solidarity, and then to the work of being together on Turtle Island. (2)

In other words, all beings are energies that are connected, and by modeling awareness of these energies and their connectedness in his poetry, he tries to encourage a sense of continuity between his spectators and their environments. In doing so, he confirms Dolan’s observation that spectators to a performance are not just passive consumers of whatever is happening on stage,
they “also [come] to participate by actively imagining other worlds” (97). It is this “intersubjectivity,” she says, the collective imagining of an alternative and the belief that this alternative is feasible that “creates possibility, the potential for new understanding” (ibid.). In modeling a zazen attitude, then, Snyder also models the creation of a new society consisting of people who are mindful of their actions and reactions, and closer to the land they inhabit.

Sanchez similarly underscores the importance of recognizing oneself as part of a larger community with a common yet complex history. As I have shown, however, she first explodes too-rigid notions of the black self. Without this crucial first step, any attempt at re-imagining a common history would be void, because the place of black women in that history has largely been determined by men. Exploding outsiders’ definition of them, then, becomes a necessary first step towards rebuilding a communal history. This re-imagining of history as a herstory becomes particularly clear from Sanchez’s “life/poem,” (1970) which creates a collective space in which to rethink the role of death in black life. Violence, as I have already established, was ubiquitous during this time, but was repurposed by the Black Arts movement as a necessary strategy for reclaiming black lives. In this poem, Sanchez takes that idea quite far, as the speaker toys with the idea of suicide to help reclaim blackness. With this trope, she harks back to African American resistance during slavery, which – as Toni Morrison so hauntingly portrayed in Beloved – sometimes took the form of killing oneself or one’s children. Here, however, she revises that idea of suicide-as-resistance by instead presenting it as a spiritual suicide that hastens a rebirth. She writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{as i twirl /} \\
\text{move in to} \\
\text{killing hood. for} \\
\text{my people.} \\
\text{for my beautiful /} \\
\text{blk /}
\end{align*}
\]
At the time of publication, in 1970, a significant segment of her readers and listeners was likely familiar with Black Power rhetoric, so calls to forcefully resist oppression and reclaim black life were commonplace. Her poem deviates from most other calls to violence in Black Arts poetry, however, by suggesting suicide as the most radical mode of resistance to white supremacy. Yet, rather than advocating actual suicide, she uses it as a metaphor for killing her old attitudes and ideas. Thus, her “twirling” into death necessarily evokes images of dance, grace, and joy, because this marks a celebratory occasion: the death of white standards and white ideas, and the rebirth of black female subjectivity.

Throughout *Homecoming* and *We a BaddDDD People*, she makes it very clear that this “programming” or reprogramming can be done through affirmation and witness, as I have shown. In several poems, notably her “chant” poems, she makes it clear that in order to change society, one must shatter externally imposed ideas about oneself and substitute them with affirmative language. The next step is to bear witness and record what is happening in black communities, to preserve that (cultural) knowledge for future generations. Clearing space for a more “whole” blackness is thus very much a political act set in motion by poetry, which rests on faith in the public’s willingness to follow her example. Jennifer Nash argues that “[black-feminist] love-politics practitioners dream of a yet unwritten future; they imagine a world ordered by love, by a radical embrace of difference, by a set of subjects who work on/against themselves to work for each other“ (18). The work of “love-politics” is precisely the kind of practice in which Sanchez is engaged: she, too, projects a vision of an alternative future that very much relies on the execution of specific acts (much like Snyder’s vision rests on the act of
mindfulness meditation), and on the belief that poetry could serve as a vehicle for modeling how to engage in these acts.

In “Indianapolis/summer/1969/poem,” she probably comes closest to explicitly stating that a different, more loving kind of language could help create an alternative, radically new society. This poem starts by lamenting the sexual exploitation of young black Americans but then turns to a more loving attitude as a potential solution during the second half:

if we programmed/
loved / each
other in com/mun/al ways
so that no
blk/person starved
or killed
each other on
a sat/ur/day nite corner.
then may
be it wud all
come down to some
thing else
like RE VO LU TION.
i mean if
like. yeh. (144-58).

Recalling both bell hooks call for black men to see black women, as I showed with regards to Nikki Giovanni’s poetry, as well as Sanchez’s own call to “SEEEEUs” in “blk/woooomen/chant,” this poem wonders aloud whether “if we programmed / loved / each /
other in com/mun/al ways,” love itself would not be the true “RE VO LU TION.” By showing herself thinking out loud in front of her audience, as suggested by the “i mean if / like. yeh.” at the end, the speaker models how to envision black identity in a different way and to conceptualize revolution as something rooted in love and “good feelings” rather than violence. Of course, she also suggests “fighten the enemy” is revolutionary, but in the context of the poem
even this is an act of love: it would be a fight for the defense and preservation of the community. Without love, this community would be forced to witness members of the community who “starved / or killed / each other on / a sat / ur / day nite corner.”

Moreover, Sanchez also “actualizes” the poem’s sentiments for the public, rendering tangible both the despair caused by racism and sexism as well as the subsequent joy of self-definition and self-determination. As Audre Lorde’s famously wrote in 1977, “poetry is not a luxury...poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless, so it can be thought” (37). This description echoes Schechner’s theorization of the ways in which shamans “actualize” the intangible for their audiences, or how they transform “vision into song” as he put it (Performance Theory 34). To perform such a poem, then, meant twice affirming the possibility of seeming impossibilities: first in writing, second in speech. Vocalizing these possibilities showed the audience alternatives. It showed that “it can be done,” as Sanchez puts it, and that living an authentic, self-determined life is not just possible, but feasible. For the collective witnessing of such a performance is what makes it feasible: it shows that a room full of strangers (the other members of the public) are all bound together by “a filament of faith,” as Jill Dolan calls it (99). The public’s very presence and attentiveness indicates that it is receptive to what the poet-performer has to say. Of course, this does not guarantee the public actively engages in the practices Snyder and Sanchez presuppose – there is no way of measuring that – but rather that there is a possibility that they do. As Dolan writes: “[t]he experience of performance, the pleasure of a utopian performative, even if it doesn't change the world, certainly changes the people who feel it” (19). Like my alternative social imaginary, then, Dolan’s “utopian performative” presupposes attentiveness on the part of the audience that allows for collective moments of catharsis or redemption, regardless of whether those moments are fleeting.
Even more important than modeling alternatives, perhaps, is the fact that these poet-performers are already taking the first steps towards realizing the kind of society they envision. Simply by performing, they created a space for public engagement that drew a variety of people. In this space, audiences could “practice” new social relationships that took into account both cultural diversity and a shared communal history. To illustrate how this simultaneous imagining and practicing of new social relationships works, Luis Alvarez and Daniel Widener provide a concrete example. In their study of soul music in 1960s and 1970s Los Angeles, they explain how the popularity of so-called “brown-eyed soul” (soul music by self-proclaimed Chicano artists) in the late 1960s stemmed, in large part, from musicians having created a space to practice new ways of being together. Indeed, Alvarez and Widener call the cross-cultural and inter-ethnic collaborations within brown-eyed soul a “dress rehearsal for similarly diverse...political coalitions” in Los Angeles itself (215). Whereas official narratives of that time tell mainly about racial polarization in urban America, the music tells a different story: by mixing and borrowing from different cultures, they mirrored and appealed to the cultural and ethnic diversity of their audiences. Alvarez and Widener’s argument offers a concrete example of what Jill Dolan means when she claims that “performance...offers a way to practice imagining new forms of social relationships” (90). Poets do not just model an alternative society when they are writing and reading their poetry to a public, to be practiced when the reading is over, but offer an immediate space to practice the kinds of relationships they envision.

Although it is difficult to determine the exact demographics for Sanchez’s and Snyder’s poetry readings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were almost certainly racially diverse. This diversity resulted in part from the neighborhoods in which they performed – since these were generally diverse as well – but it was also, in part, the result of strong connections between
black and communist activism in the 1930s, as I have shown in my discussion of San Francisco’s history. James Smethurst traces the close relationships between black and white poets of the 1950s and early 1960s to the Popular Front, pointing to the involvement of African Americans in communist politics in the United States in the 1930s. Many of these writers and poets, both black and white, later became mentor figures for a younger generation in the 1950s and 1960s, as was Kenneth Rexroth to the likes of Snyder and Ginsberg, for example, and John Oliver Killens, a southern fiction writer who primarily wrote novels on black American life, to Nikki Giovanni (48). A third piece of evidence hinting at the racial diversity of 1960s poetry audiences also comes from Smethurst: by showing how the Beats took inspiration from jazz and bebop music, and pointing out there was considerable overlap between the Beats, black (jazz) poets, and Chicano poets, many of whom called Beats their predecessors, he solidifies the idea that poetry performances were not segregated by race (Novoa qtd. in Smethurst 42).

It is impossible to investigate to what extent the mixed demographics of the audiences at poetry readings did indeed “practice” relating to one another in new ways. However, if we accept that they did, these audiences could be seen considered what Nancy Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics.” In her definition, these are publics comprised of members considered “other” by mainstream society in which it is safe to discuss pressing social, political, and cultural issues. Yet, at the same time, these spaces also serve as “training grounds,” for critiquing and protesting society at large (68). Michael Warner has criticized Fraser’s definition for being seemingly limited in scope: while he agrees with the notion that counterpublics “criticize” the larger public sphere, he points out that counterpublics can take many forms and do not necessarily have to consist of “subalterns” to fulfill this function. For unlike a regular public, a counterpublic never loses the awareness that it is subordinate to mainstream culture, with the result that it necessarily
always defines itself in opposition to it. What is more, counterpublics are also subversive in terms of form, not just in terms of content. They differ from regular publics in what Warner calls “modes of address”; that is, they are not merely stylistically different, but they are so unusual by dominant discursive standards that they might be viewed with hostility, as I have mentioned before (86). By participating in such a counterpublic participants’ identities are formed. In other words, counterpublics do not merely use specific discourses in order to cater to specific people, but the discursive space also offers the opportunity to solidify one’s own identity, as is the case, to use Warner’s example, with gay magazines. In such magazines, people can test out, discursively, what it means to be gay. In the context of poetry readings and performances, the poems allow members of the counterpublic to test, discursively, how language can be used to serve as the foundation for a new society.

In short, both the content of their poetry and their modes of address turn their publics into counterpublics. This automatically also means that the discourses that constitute these counterpublics model the kind of criticism aimed at larger society and thus serve as “training grounds,” as Fraser calls it, for critiquing the larger public sphere. After all, a necessary part of modeling alternative societies and alternative ways of being includes critiquing the socio-political status quo, something poets already do implicitly by “directing the glances” of their audiences, as Warner suggests when he writes that “appellative energy of publics makes us believe our consciousness to be decisive. The direction of our glance can constitute our social world” (89). In other words, by modeling specific behaviors and practices that contrast starkly with those offered by the hegemonic society, they encourage members of the public to critically assess the behaviors and practices of that society. In that sense, Snyder’s emphasis on mindfulness, simplicity, and acceptance not only serve as guidelines by which to live one’s life,
but necessarily also function as a critique on capitalist society and materialism. Likewise, Sanchez, by purposely “screwing” expectations for black women, automatically also criticizes the standards set for black women and their poetry by both white society and the Black Arts movement.

To recapitulate, then, both Snyder and Sanchez recognize the importance of being able to locate oneself in a larger, communal history, and believe that by modeling how to do that they could lay the foundation for an alternative society. Snyder models mindfulness, meditation, and a reinhabitation of the land in order to become more ecologically aware and grasp the idea of “inter-being” with everything that is part of our universe, and Sanchez models the destruction of externally imposed definitions of oneself and replacing them with empowering self-affirmations and the act of witnessing, which complicate rigid notions of blackness. While these are different objectives, they show that both Snyder and Sanchez believe that language, especially poetic language, holds concrete power to change society. Although, as Warner points out, no public exists when a writer starts writing, they do have a specific audience in mind, and the specific style of the discourse limits the scope of address to those who are responsive to both its message and form. Once poets are physically face-to-face with their publics during poetry performances, then, they have the opportunity to literally model their alternatives for what they believe to be a receptive audience. Thus, the ability to “actualize” alternatives for an “actualized” counterpublic leads to a space in which, poets like Sanchez and Snyder believed, poetry could precipitate social change.

**A Window into Utopia: Creating Spaces for Change**

I have mentioned before that poet Wendell Berry saw Snyder’s work as an attempt to restore “a sense of the presence of mystery or divinity in the world” (qtd. in Altieri 128). Sanchez could be said to be doing the same, except in the context of black history. As Charles
Altieri points out, however, 1960s poets fueled by a desire to spiritually regenerate the community faced at least one major obstacle in pursuit of this goal: many young people were moving away from organized religion in the sixties, while the belief in secular, positivist knowledge was gaining traction. In other words, if they wished their poetry to reach a wide audience, they would have to try to frame their ideas in a way that would pre-empt any skepticism or cynicism. As Altieri puts it, they had to “find styles capable of presenting ‘a new speech, a speech that will cause the world to live and thrive in men’s minds,’” or to find a new way to use language in such a way that it would help people to experience the universe in the way that they did (ibid.). By saying this, Altieri seems to agree with Michael Warner’s suggestion that counterpublics, while rife with potential for social change, might only have limited potential if their vocabulary or tactics go unrecognized by dominant discourses (89).

However, as I have attempted to show here, poets like Snyder and Sanchez were well aware of the unconventionality of their ideas and the pushback they might experience as a result. In fact, it was precisely due to a desire to bridge this gap that they attempted to “actualize” their ideas by modeling the alternatives expressed in their poetry in front of an audience. By doing so they hoped to render abstract visions of alternative ways of living more tangible, which was bolstered by the presence of an actual, physically present audience during performances. In other words, while poets address an infinite number of strangers with their discourse, the people who show up for performances are a corporal reality, and so “the unknown element in the addressee enables a hope of transformation; the known, a scene of practical possibility” (64). Poetry performances thus take place in the exact space where dreaming and practicality converge: they address a public that is imagined and real at the same time. Altieri compares their efforts to those of the Romantic poets, by whom the Beats were inspired. They, too, were aware of the gap
between poetry and the rest of society, so they sought to make their language “real”: rooted in real experiences, in the real world (31). Both the Beats and Black Arts poets adopted this same goal when they vowed to write poetry that mirrored real people’s experiences and record and reflect on the realities of everyday life.

By taking their own ideas and experiences, and “actualizing” them through poetry, they took on the shamanic role Schechner believes poets embodied: they showed that “experience [is] indivisible but exchangeable...endlessly varied but on the same plane” (*Performance Theory* 36). In this capacity, poets were “universal” persons, in the sense that they attempted to capture so-called universal human experiences. In an interview with Sascha Feinstein, Sanchez elaborates on her own definition of being a universal person:

> I didn’t have to change my skin to become universal. The moment you pull out and you give out this sound, this lyricism, these lines that might be talking about my experience in Harlem, or my experience – wherever – someone will pick it up and say, “Oh, yeah. I had a similar experience.” That’s what happened when we went out to San Francisco: we left in search of ourselves – our history and herstory in the black studies – and we found everybody else, hidden. (172)

Like Snyder, she firmly believes her way of doing poetry might result in social change, simply because it conveys shared experiences on which the public be able to rebuild community. By showing language as something rooted in black culture and black history that can be harnessed to empower oneself Sanchez tries to offer a new social imaginary in which “wholeness” is desirable, because it transforms blackness into a more complex identity rooted in a cultural history.

Of course, the fact that the audience was present and seemingly receptive tells us little about the degree to which they actually accepted or adopted her vision. As I have already pointed out, it is difficult, if not to say impossible, to measure whether or not poetry readings literally altered people’s ways of thinking – by becoming more environmentally and historically aware,
for example, as Snyder and Sanchez hoped they would. However, perhaps the question of whether these poets literally changed people’s minds is beside the point, for it seems their transformative potential should be sought in their ability to consistently attract audiences that would be open to their experimenting with radically new ideas. For example, regardless of whether they actually convinced members of the audience to be more mindful, the poets’ own belief in mindfulness, communicated through their poems, consistently drew an audience. In other words, perhaps the extent to which these poems could be considered truly transformative should be measured by public interest, and the opportunities it created for experimenting with possibilities for building community. Simply by believing in those possibilities themselves, and offering them to others, they created a space dedicated to ideas that opposed the dominant discourses. Put differently, they managed to not only create but also sustain counterpublics. It does not seem too much of a stretch to argue that the existence of such a counterpublic helped sustain a countercultural undercurrent in society: in a repressive climate, the spaces that encourage the experimentation with alternative imaginaries are invigorating. The poet does not know more than anyone else whether or not his or her poems will be worthwhile, whether they will have an effect on society, or whether they should be of any “use” at all. Yet, as Snyder writes in *Earth House Hold*, it is their job to think beyond the customary boundaries of social norms and practical obstacles. It is their job to at least attempt to turn the unreal into the real, as Sanchez and Snyder do when they perceive transformative potential in “doing” language:

> Comes a time when the poet must choose: either to step deep in the stream of his people, history, tradition, folding and folding himself in wealth of persons and pasts; philosophy, humanity, to become richly foundationed and great and sane and ordered. Or, to step beyond the bound onto the way out, into horrors and angels, possible madness or silly Faustian doom, possible utter transcendence, possible enlightened return,
possible ignominious wormish perishing. (Snyder, Earth House Hold 39)

Opening people’s minds to other possibilities is what motivated countercultural poets, and that is what Snyder and Sanchez believe they have to offer.

Notes

1 Although there were, of course, musicians who also considered themselves poets, such as Jim Morrison, who was friends with Beat poet Michael McClure.

2 Stephen Vincent paints a sobering portrait of the changed poetry scene by 1967, listing all the poets associated with the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat movements who moved to Canada (including poets Robin Blaser, Harold Dull, Stan Persky, and George Stanley), Philip Whalen resided in Japan aided by a grant from the American Academy for Arts and Letters, Lew Welch’s health was deteriorating due to alcoholism (he would commit suicide four years later), and Jack Spicer had passed away.

3 As I mentioned in my chapter on San Francisco, when I use the term “social imaginary” I am referring specifically to the vision of an ideal society; one that serves as the driving force behind social change regardless of whether or not it will eventually be realized in all its facets.

4 These words echo the lines of Amiri Baraka’s well-known poem “Black Art,” in which he similarly calls for “poems that kill. / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns” (19-21).

5 Some scholars have criticized Snyder for what they perceive to be his appropriation of Japanese and Native American cultures, and some passages in Snyder’s nonfiction writing could be considered problematic (see Gray 226). However, as Timothy Gray has pointed out, Snyder did really make an effort not to engage in cultural appropriation by immersing himself in Japanese culture, learning the language, and training as a Buddhist monk among other Buddhist monks in Japan (227). Similarly, he committed to reading several Native American texts in their original languages (Old Ways 19). For a discussion of the Beats and cultural appropriation, see Masatsugu, Michael K. “Beyond this World of Transiency and Impermanence”: Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years.” Pacific Historical Review 77.3 (2008): 423-51. For a more sympathetic perspective on Snyder’s Buddhist commitment, see Shantz, Jeff. Specters of Anarchy: Literature and the Anarchist Imagination, New York: Algora, 2015. For a thorough exploration of the way in which Snyder fused Zen Buddhism with ecocriticism, see Payne, Richard K. How Much Is Enough?: Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010.

6 He attempts a similar chant-like feel that encourages the reader to stay in the present moment in his poem “Prayer for the Great Family” (1974).

7 On the whole, the work was well received by lay people and specialists alike: the New York Times called Eliade a “scientist-artist” and hailed the book as a “work by an important scholar,” and a writer for the American Anthropologist, while slightly more critical, likewise called it a “valuable contribution to the literature of religion” (Sykes; Park 1306). Even today, people continue to read Eliade for his counterculture contributions to comparative religion and anthropology.

8 It is unclear where this idea of African Americans as “sun people” originates, although it might be part of the effort to reclaim blackness as beautiful: Margo Natalie Crawford writes, for example, that Baraka, in his 1970 book In Our Terribleness, writes: “you shd been there man / like you shda been eatin sun.” Crawford sees this as a celebration of “black sun people.” See Collins and Crawford, New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement, 31.
In an English class, for example, she wrote about her “father and some of the trials he had gone through.” Her professor returned the paper with the note: “Things are not that terrible.” For the next assignment, Sanchez decided to write a fantasy story about a magic mirror, which the teacher loved. Feeling that the professor was only open to one kind of fiction, she dropped the course. See Cornwell, *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 4.

On a side note: Sanchez’s poem “let us begin the real work / (for Elijah Muhammad who / has begun)” (1969) provides an explicit bridge to Giovanni’s poetry as she claims that bearing witness in this way also leads to love: “let us teach our children / what is to be learnmmned / bout themselves” (11-14), she writes, and ends the poem: “with our blk/visions / for blk/lives. / let us begin / the begin/en work now. while our / children still / remember us & loooove” (22-28).

See the chapter on Sanchez and Snyder for a more in-depth discussion of the ways in which the spaces in which these poet’s performed helped create a counterpublic.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The Afterlife of Long 1960s Poetry: Towards a Common Humanity

I find myself with a keen desire to reclaim a commitment to human commonality. I know that gender, race, sexuality, ability, class, and other vectors of identity remain entrenched as discriminatory benchmarks in public discourse and in the distribution of social and political power. But more and more, I find myself feeling affinity without regard to the specifics of identity.

– Jill Dolan

_Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater_

When Jill Dolan writes these words at the end of her work _Utopia in Performance_, it is clear that performance in general and theater in particular are by no means solutions to social and political problems. They will not make war, violence, and oppression disappear, and they do not affect the socio-political establishment in any immediately noticeable way. What they do offer, however, shows that performance is nonetheless worthwhile: they offer hope. Watching a performance can suddenly make social change seem possible, because being suspended in a world of make-believe with a group of strangers emphasizes our common humanity, or, as Dolan calls it, or “human commonality” (140). Of course, this emphasis on human commonality could run the risk of flattening issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as sometimes happened in Gary Snyder’s and Michael McClure’s poetry, but Dolan is quick to point out that that is not her intent. Rather, social differences have to be taken into account, but seeing beyond those differences might also offers a common ground from which to start effectuating social change.

Throughout this study I have sought to highlight how Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure tried to challenge the capitalist and white-supremacist status quo by offering a utopian alternative based on really _recognizing_ others, forging (loving) relationships with them, and using language to project and enact more mindful ways of being. This alternative, they hoped, could challenge repressive (racist) violence and fill the spiritual

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void caused by this violence and materialism. Dolan points out, however, that whether or not this alternative was realized is beside the point: performance is meant to inspire, she points out, and that is its great strength (95). Measured by their ability to inspire social change through artistic performance, I would say that all four poets could, in fact, be considered part of the same counterculture. Their ultimate diverging goals cannot be overlooked, of course, but their emphasis on a common humanity and a politics of hope, and their shared strategy of carrying out that message through poetry and performance does unquestionably tie them together as intertwining strands of the same societal undercurrent.

The presence of a public offers hope to the poet-as-performer, and to other members of the public as they are bound together by the act of “attentive listening” and sharing in a common vision of an alternative society. The fact that other people are there, and are willing to share in this hopeful imagining of an alternative is in itself hopeful. Dolan writes:

“Perhaps this is what draws me to theater with such belief in its transformative powers...feeling myself part of a public newly constituted, held together in the moment of performance by a filament of faith. That common faith exercises itself through the active imagination necessary to flesh out the meanings of performance. Since performance is only a liminal, temporary locale, a no-place like utopia, it brings us to the threshold of change, offering a purchase from which to look over into an alternative – even if inaccessible – version of social relations” (99).

Even if inaccessible, she writes, and that underscores the value of what the Beats and the Black Arts movement tried to do: even if the actual social impact of these poets is hard to measure, even if it is unclear how precisely they played a role in transforming society, they offered a window into another version of reality. Their value lies in their ability to dream, to think beyond the parameters of collective action, of art-as-activism, of protest, and of social resistance.

Framing the value of Beats and Black Arts poetry in these terms, it also becomes possible to look at Snyder’s and McClure’s ignorance regarding race and gender in a new light. While they were undoubtedly - and inexcusably - naïve about these matters, they were not completely
blind to the realities of racial inequality, as both poets’ commentaries on the Vietnam War suggest (I cannot say the same about gender – as far as I am aware, neither man has commented on that). It would therefore seem strange for them to “forget” to include it in their alternative social imaginaries. In the light of Dolan’s theory of performance, however, this forgetting could be construed as intentional: since theirs are alternative social *imaginaries*, they play with the “what ifs” of a truly colorblind society, in which true wholeness and holism are a reality. Clearly, this not yet a reality, and is not likely to materialize any time in the near future. Yet, by imagining, they provide a look into what *could* be if it ever does come about.

Even Nikki Giovanni seems to resign herself to the idea that at a certain point in revolutionary thinking, categories become untenable: her 1972 collection *My House* contains the poem aptly named “Categories,” in which she writes:

> and you think  
> if she weren’t such an aggressive bitch she would see  
> that if you weren’t such a black one  
> there would be a relationship but anyway – it doesn’t matter (24-27)

Except it *does* matter: the conditional tense in which much of the poem is written underscores that the existence of categories and a history shaped by those categories is what stands in the way of coming closer together and recognizing that common humanity: “there would be a relationship,” Giovanni suggests, between a black and a white woman, if only they could really *see* one another, as hooks has also argued in the context of black men and women. Giovanni’s poem ends:

> if this seems  
> like somewhat of a tentative poem it’s probably  
> because i just realized that  
> i’m bored with categories. (37-40)

By taking a chance on feeling, rather than fighting, and seeing, rather than categorizing, Giovanni comes to realize that she is “bored with categories.” Since categories structure the
social-political status quo, one has to go beyond categories to be transformative. Michael McClure takes an even more explicit stance, exclaiming in his poem “Ode” (1973): “all conceptions / of boundaries / are lies!” (30-32). That does not mean pretending the United States is a post-racial society, which is clearly not the case, but it does mean emphasizing common humanity, mindfulness and kindness as starting points for realizing such a society sometime in the future. Only by breaking down rigid structures of separation might one unexpectedly find commonalities that lay the groundwork for social change.

This feeling of hope that comes from having witnessed an alternative through performance was not limited to San Francisco. Of course, San Francisco’s long history of cultural and ethnic diversity, coupled with its openness to radically new ways of thinking and imagining society did make it an ideal breeding ground for the ideas and ideals espoused by the counterculture – both its Black Arts and Beat aspects. Nicholas Jenkins, discussing what he perceives to be California’s importance as a “vanguard” state in both a literary and social sense, posits that “California will always defy definition” (Tannenbaum). Certainly, the reimaginative effort that appears to be a leitmotif throughout its history did make it uniquely suitable to the kind of poetic reimagining done by poets like Sanchez, Giovanni, Snyder and McClure. As James Smethurst has well documented, however, pockets of Black Arts activism existed throughout the country, from New York, to the Mid-West and the East Coast, albeit always in metropolitan areas. The Beats were far more localized, existing primarily in San Francisco with some members (most famously, Jack Kerouac) traveling back and forth to New York City. Still, the kind of poetic performance popularized by the Beats similarly proliferated throughout the United States.
Juxtaposing these two divergent movements and showing how, despite their differences, each harnessed the imagination to effect social change offers hope for the future. Now, more than ever, we need the imagination to think beyond the boundaries of the present. Political commentaries are laced with cynicism and weighed down by the apparent inevitability of political gridlock. Such pessimism, coupled with the disillusionment of many white voters and increased awareness of the high levels of police violence against black men and women, has resulted in a spiritual desolation that seems to rival that of the 1960s. Richard Schechner points out that in the latter decade, young people were pining for several things that artistic movements tried to provide. He summarizes these as yearnings for wholeness, organic growth, and transcendental experiences, or “the sacralization of everyday living” (Performance Theory 31-32). 2016 witnesses the revival of similar desires, as evidenced by a rising interesting mindfulness, yoga, tiny houses, and organic living. Through these practices, it seems, people are trying to restore their lives to “wholeness” in spite of the grim atmosphere fueled by social, economic, and political turmoil. While poetry does not appear to play as big a role in this restoration process as it did in the 1960s – although it must be said that slam poetry does retain sizable, if select audiences – performance as such does.

To illustrate, and in closing, I am now turning to a couple of recent performances that suggest performance can still offer hope, even now: first, Nikki Giovanni’s performance of the poem “We Are Virginia Tech” at a convocation at Virginia Tech after the mass shooting that took place there in April 2007; second, an impromptu performance of songs from the musical Fun Home in Orlando shortly after the Pulse nightclub shooting that killed 49 people; and finally, students’ responses to hearing personal stories from their classmates during an English class I taught in the spring of 2016. Unlike most of the poetry performances in the 1960s, which
were more oblique in their response to violence and critique of the status quo, two out of these recent performances took place as part of explicit responses to extreme violence. And while that is one thing they have in common, their crucial unifying element lies should be sought elsewhere: all performances show that they can “direct our glances,” as both Dolan and Warner suggest, and "make us believe our consciousness to be decisive. The direction of our glance can constitute our social world” (Warner qtd. in Dolan 141). In other words, they can turn our attention to what it feels like to belong to a certain community, to be part of a larger social entity, in moments when that social cohesion seems shattered and there seems to be no unity at all.

In April 2007, Nikki Giovanni performed the poem “We Are Virginia Tech” the day after a mass shooting took place at that university. Examining Nikki Giovanni’s performance, Robin Bernstein claims that Giovanni “coordinated a utopian performative (to use Jill Dolan’s term) that was not felt or imagined as an idealized futurity but instead enacted in the present through collective bodily movement” (341). He describes how Giovanni, who composed the poem in the aftermath of the shooting over the course of one night, brought about “an immediate, collective response” from the audience, who spontaneously gave a standing ovation that lasted nearly a full minute and kept chanting “Let’s Go, Hokies!” clapping an accompanying rhythm, well after the poem had ended (345). Bernstein collects responses from different audience members, both students and journalists, who all felt that the poem and the chanting and clapping that followed it “changed the course of events” (346). Undoubtedly, part of what made the recital such an emotionally powerful experience was the call for unity – “We are Virginia Tech” is repeated like a mantra throughout the poem – that was seemingly shattered just the day before. Calling on a common “we” and encouraging this “we” to “prevail,” Giovanni conjured up a common identity, a common ground from which they might start moving forward after the tragedy. Although the
neutral term “we” is emphasized throughout the poem, Giovanni explicitly cuts across racial and
national boundaries by underscoring that “no one deserves a tragedy,” neither the Virginia Tech
community nor “a child in Africa dying of AIDS…” she writes in the third stanza. Clearly, this
emphasis on a common humanity did not distract from the message to prevail: if anything, it
reinforced it, as the subsequent “Let’s Go, Hokies” chant suggests. This chant, which almost
immediately followed the poem, cemented the “emotional and spiritual” connection to strangers
in the stadium and returned agency over the “Hokie-identity” to the audience (Dolan 90). Thus,
for a brief moment in 2007, Giovanni’s poetry served the same purpose it did in the 1960s and
1970s: to inspire hope.

Inspiring hope is a key aspect of utopian visions, according to Dolan, which became
poignantly clear shortly after another mass shooting incident. In the aftermath of the killing of 49
people in gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida, the cast of the Broadway musical Fun Home
flew down to perform songs from the show in a theater in the club’s vicinity. The musical, which
is based on Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel by the same name, intertwines the dual narratives of
her own coming of age as a lesbian, and the story of her father, a closeted gay man. The cast
made a special trip to Florida on their day off, hoping to raise money for Equality Florida and for
victims’ families. More importantly, however, they wished to show their support. The few clips
available of the performance, all courtesy of local news networks, are peppered with
commentary from the actors as well as audience members that emphasize this showing of
support. At one point, Judy Kuhn, who plays Alison’s mother, states: “I think it is one thing to
raise money, which is an important thing, but I think it’s also important to show up and to say
‘we’re here, and we’re supporting you’ and sending a message that we care, and, you know, I
think that’s important” (OrlandoMyWay). An audience member at the Orlando Fun Home

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performance echoes that sentiment saying “[I]’m gay, so it means a lot to me, the support” (ibid.). Dolan, too, emphasizes the cruciality of “showing up,” as she writes: “[P]erformances require the presence of bodies and the act of showing up to perform or to witness” (97). The corporeal presence of both performers and audience are what allow for a cathartic experience due to the shared human connection, or what Dolan calls the “intersubjectivity” of performer and audience (ibid.). Both audience members and cast members, then, perceive showing up, being there, being present as “support” and feeling “supported,” because it offers the opportunity to share their grief in the space opened up by the performance.

The need to physically be there, in or at least near the space where the attack happened, was, in fact, also what prompted Michael Cerveris, who plays Bechdel’s father, to suggest flying down in the first place. In an essay for The New York Times he describes how awareness of the attack changed his performance on the night of the shooting: “the words were the same, but the play felt entirely different,” he writes. “Lines like Bruce’s ‘I know a bar, it’s kind of hidden away. …’ felt unnerving to sing.” Once in Orlando, Cerveris underscored that the intimate relationship with the audience induced a catharsis of sorts. The scenes set in a funeral home (the “fun home” to which the title refers) offered “a chance to find a moment’s shared relief in gentle laughter with neighbors at the painful absurdities of life.” Dolan’s “human commonality” resurfaces once again as Cerveris’ account of the evening is mainly defined by shared moments of intense emotion: cast members cried during a song that prominently included the word “pulse,” while the audience sat “holding [its] breath,” and the whole performance ended with a thunderous applause.² As Cerveris explains why he holds this particular performance so dear, his words seem to echo those of Dolan when she describes the magic of performance. He writes:

In murky, frightening times like these, that is the most essential thing theater offers an audience: a brief community, connecting us to one another in larger, lasting
ways. And stories that say different things to us, depending on the time and what we need to hear, as a way to make the darkness outside our circle seem penetrable. That is the same for every audience, no matter how different.

Dolan, likewise, argues that performance “requires that we listen attentively to the speech of others, that we hear people speak and feel their humanity and its connections with our own” (90). Feeling other people’s humanity in individual yet collective outpourings of emotion in response to the songs of this musical offered an instance of hope, if only briefly, enhanced by the presence of others equally suspended in time as they put their faith in the possibility for healing offered by the performance.3

Finally, I personally witnessed the transformative potential of performance on a small scale when I taught an undergraduate English class in the spring of 2016. For this class, an introduction to literature and academic writing called “The Politics of Storytelling, I assigned a creative project for the end of term. Since the “storytelling” in the course title referred to both ideology (as a collection of “stories” that shapes the way we think about the world) and literal narratives, I wanted to end with a personal-story project that could take any form they desired. Not wanting to curb students’ creativity, I made only one requirement: make sure your project shows what stories have shaped you. On the first day of presentations, I sat down with my students as a member of the audience and waited expectantly as the first student took the “stage.” She cleared her throat and unfurled a large piece of paper that turned out to be a game board, and removed the elastic from a stack of square cards. “This,” she said, “is the game of my life.”

Unlike audiences during regular class presentations – which are usually passive but respectful listeners at best, and bored at worst – the class responded immediately. Some laughed, others said “Wow!” and one called out “I wanna play!” “That’s kinda weird,” my student responded, “I mean, it’s my life” which led to more laughter. Although we could not actually play the game, she explained the rules she had come up with and used the game board to narrate the events that
had shaped her into who she was today. At the end, the class spontaneously applauded, and people commented and complimented her on her presentation. There was a general atmosphere of energy and excitement – I had never experienced such interactive student presentations before.

What was even more surprising, however, was students’ willingness to open up and share personal stories, and the way the rest of the class responded to those. After the great opening presentation by the girl with the game board, a freshman stepped in front of the class, visibly nervous. She quietly logged onto the computer while everyone waited in silence. A website appeared on screen: a blog about her life, specifically designed for this purpose. Speaking quickly, she talked about growing up in Delaware, “a state you can drive across in one day.” She knew everyone, she explained, and she liked it there, but seeing the same faces all the time grew old. She wanted to go away for college. Growing visibly more distressed, she started talking faster – and then she burst into tears. The class was dead silent, no-one making a move. Just as I was wondering whether I should say something, she continued. The “story” that shaped her most, she revealed, was the one she was living right that moment: living in Florida, but being deeply homesick for Delaware, and acutely aware how much growing up in that state had shaped her. Looking over at other students, I saw some smiling up at her or nodding encouragingly. At the end of the presentation, some students put their arms around her, or tapped her on the shoulder to praise her presentation. Across the room, another girl had tears in her eyes. She seemed to have touched a nerve, somehow, and the response was immediate. These responses were not limited to those first two presentations, either. The atmosphere in the classroom was so open and supportive that even those who had said little or nothing all semester told personal stories in front of the rest of the class. Several cried as they talked or showed videos they made. Each time, the other students smiled, nodded, offered an encouraging response, or hugged the
student after the performance. It was bewildering and spectacular to participate in what I can only call a transformative classroom experience.

Although it can be hard to see how these presentations could be construed as utopian, for me, in that moment, a kind of ideal social atmosphere was realized. For the two days of student performances (for that is what they were), there was no judgment. Everyone seemed to be getting along and supported each other regardless of race, gender, age, class or sexuality. We were briefly “lifted above” the bleak and mundane course environment, and were instead experiencing a way of being rooted in connection rather than division, competition, and rivalry. “I see and write about performance with hope for what it can mean politically, but also affectively, through my faith that emotions might move us to social action,” Dolan writes. “That is, I believe that being passionately and profoundly stirred in performance can be a transformative experience useful in other realms of social life” (15). At the end of that semester, for the brief two class periods we heard and saw these performances, the ideal of a nonjudgmental, open and affirming society seemed not only possible, but realized, if only briefly, as students – myself included – related to one another on a human level. The response of one of the quietest students in the course, collected on the last day of class, said it all. Commenting on the main thing he learned over the course of that semester, he wrote: “Respecting others, especially those who are different than myself.” The impact of Dolan’s “utopian performatives” or my alternative social imaginaries should thus not be underestimated. While performances such as these are unlikely to have an immediate, tangible impact on society, they might lay the groundwork for future change by facilitating thinking and dialogue on a range of social issues.

Of course, the performance in front of a class is different from performances in the public sphere: for one, these performances are not exactly in front of strangers, and the discourses do
not circulate. In other words, their address is not infinite, but limited to the classroom environment. On the other hand, many created something online that was and remained visible long after the class had ended, so in that sense they did leave open the possibility of circulation and expanded address. So while these student-performances were wildly different from 1960s poetry readings in form (for the most part), setting, and context, what they did have in common was one of its constitutive elements, namely, the use of emotion to transcend the present and offer the audience a fleeting glance into an alternative way of being in the world. Dolan, quoting Erin McKenna, even calls this the one telltale sign of a “utopian performative”: the moments during a performance that allow us to be “lift[ed]... slightly above the present” (5).

Throughout the 1960s, members of the counterculture revolutionized what “performance” meant, setting the stage for the kinds of transcendent experiences Dolan and McKenna describe. Aside from poetry performances, “happenings,” love-ins, marches and other kinds of performative action proliferated. Indeed, performance theorist Richard Schechner has said his own participation in happenings was one of the main reasons he became interested in performance in the first place (Performance Theory ix). Since then, Schechner points out, “[c]ertain procedures advanced in the 1960s have become commonplace,” such as performances happening in “untheaters”: places that are not specifically designed to be theaters but nonetheless function as a performance space (“Ritual and Performance” 624). Happenings were not reliant on a specific set, stage, or performance space, but “happened” anywhere, at any time – often spontaneously. Contemporary performances, too, are more reliant on the connection with the audience than on a typical performance space: aside from the performance by the Fun Home cast, which took place in a formal theater setting, the performances mentioned here happened in a football stadium and a classroom, respectively.
They were also concrete and immediate, imbued with a sense of urgency fueled by the direct interaction with the audience. This, Schechner emphasizes, is one of performance’s key qualities as well: “Down with theories, abstractions, generalizations…Make your demands known, act them out and get an answer now…Dig the physicality of the experience” (*Performance Theory* 31-32). Being physically present connects both artist and audience to the performance, and even makes that audience part of the performance. This happened in my classroom and at Virginia Tech – and, to a lesser extent, at the *Fun Home* performance – as well. Without these publics, the performance would not have been complete or would not have been possible at all: as both a member of the audience and Judy Kuhn pointed out with regards to the *Fun Home* event, physically showing up was what made their show of support so special. This physicality and literal proximity of strangers to each other and to the artists was what made (and makes) these performances potentially transformative, because they create the conditions for being able to see beyond the present.

Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Michael McClure and Gary Snyder saw this. They recognized that because poetry could project visions of alternative social imaginaries, and because performing these visions in front of live audiences reiterated our “human commonality,” to borrow Dolan’s phrase, it had the potential to effect change. While there is no denying that relative economic stability needs to foreground the turn to poetry as a tool for revolution, the power of a poetic counterpublic forged by this common humanity lies in its ability to show how to *live* rather than merely survive. In fact, Lorde herself says as much when she admits that “our children cannot dream unless they live” (38). After the basic necessities of life are taken care of, however, dreams are what turn an existence into a *life*. Like Sanchez, when she says that language has played an important role in black women’s history, and Snyder, when he shows
that language can help us to be fully present in the moment, Lorde reiterates that language is crucial to making tangible the possibilities of one’s life. To go beyond mere survival in order to dream and hope, poetry becomes crucial, because it gives people a space to imagine the seemingly impossible. Without dreams, both individuals and society will remain stagnant. It is likely that this is why dreams are a recurring theme throughout both Beat and Black Arts writing. As Sanchez and Lorde show, however, dreaming is not just for poets, but for anyone who is determined to live life on her or his own terms. For a country that feels almost “post-hope” at this historical juncture, as historian Gail Collins recently suggested in a joint interview with Arthur Brooks, making space for dreams and for the imagination is nothing short of revolutionary, for what they have to offer is precisely that: hope. By saying this she seemed to recall Audre Lorde, who said: “[O]ur dreams...point the way to freedom. [They] are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare” (37). Although the long 1960s ended over forty years ago, its impetus to project an alternative, utopian imaginary and use artistic performance to emphasize our common humanity persists. Or, as Gary Snyder writes in “For a Stone Girl at Sanchi” (1968): “this dream pops. it was real: / and it lasted forever” (22-23).

Notes


2 Likewise, a recent performance of the *Fun Home* song “Ring of Keys” by 12 year-old Gabriella Pizzolo at the SAGE Awards (an organization dedicated to helping elderly members of the LGBT community) led to a spontaneous burst of applause and cheering in the middle of song at the moment where Alison refers to a queer-looking woman as “handsome” rather than “beautiful.” See YouTube, “Gabby Pizzolo Performs "Ring of Keys” at the SAGE Awards,” by SAGE.

3 At the 2016 Tony Awards, which took place on the same day as the Orlando massacre, several people in the theater industry commented on or referred to theater’s potentially unifying power, as Michael Shulman eloquently noted in “The 2016 Tony Awards: After Orlando,” *The New Yorker* 13 June 2016.
WORKS CITED


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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