Introductory Notes

I am struck by the depth, complexity, and alternative logics present in many contemporary American experimental poetries, though I am also often turned off by the heavy demands they place on the reader. This so-called “experimental poetry” is in reality a wide group of work which hardly fits under a single umbrella of categorization, but shares in common an unavoidable inaccessibility. Obscurity, marginality, and difficulty are necessary to the works and their significance.

Yet I still feel drawn to the populist ideals at the foundation of my own poetics. While I am willing to push through the difficult texts, I find it hard to believe that the average reader is willing to devote such time and effort. Most readers would only ever interact with such exhausting poetry through dissemination by academics.

It is paradoxical to attempt to define, group, or canonize contemporary experimental poetry, which is centered around decentralization, on the indefinable, and on rejecting any confinements or limitations that could be placed around it in the name of understanding or explication. As Michael Palmer points out, “as soon as you propose a counter-poetics, it immediately becomes official and therefore it isn’t a counter-poetics anymore. It’s an illusion” (Active Boundaries 237). Yet Palmer and his contemporaries are willing to play along with such an illusion, and continue to treat their counter-poetics as if it was some sort of definable, identifiable theory of poetry. Perhaps because it is only through this limiting, restraining approach to such a poetics that one can begin any study or investigation of such an un-understandable poetics, however tainted or defiled such a study might be. As Nathaniel Mackey
posits, “Even the dissociative assault on language is finally a testimony to its importance and power – is, quite simply, a linguistic assault on language” (Discrepant Engagement 65). There are no alternatives, and the contemporary experimental poet must in many ways settle for this simplified, incomplete definition of its poetics.

This experimental aesthetic can be traced back through a number of lineages for indefinite amounts of time into literary history. However, one instance embodies the break and shift of this experimental poetry against the mainstream tradition. Donald Allen’s anthology The New American Poetry put forth a sharp alternative to its mainstream contemporaries at the time of its publication in 1960. The collection includes poets fundamental to the development of this “counter-poetics,” including Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Jack Spicer, and Barbara Guest. In his preface to the collection, Allen expresses the limitations in grouping these poets together, while also explaining the benefit in doing so. His groupings are “[o]ccasionally arbitrary and for the most part more historical than actual...justified finally only as a means to give the reader some sense of milieu” (Allen xiii). Allen also quotes Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse,” another fundamental turning point to which much of contemporary experimental poetics can be traced. The essay, which Allen includes in the “Statements on Poetics” section at the end of the anthology, explicitly lays out fundamental questions of poetics which experimental poets have wrestled with ever since, including open versus closed verse, composition by field, the breath, and the relationship between form and content.

This so-called “experimental poetry” is characterized (again, a false, contrived characterization, as well as the best we have to go on) by a radical rejection of closure and a desire for openness. As Susan Howe defends, poetry is not a medium suited to solidification, and any claims to do so are both false and damaging to the works they claim to clarify:
“Authoritative readings’ confuse” (Birth-Mark 139). Like Howe, Rosmarie Waldrop desires in her poetry a refusal of solidification, a perpetual internal motion, an “energy that knots and unknoks constellations before they can freeze into a map” (Dissonance 262). By closed verse, Charles Olson (and Waldrop) “means an emphasis on the result, the text on the page, the finished product, the art object; whereas he wants to show what verse ‘involves in its act of composition’” (Dissonance 59). Closure is unattainable; Waldrop sees closed forms as merely failed attempts at reaching such completion. Open form, on the other hand, makes no claims to such finality. It is the difference between the unable-to-be-finished and the not-meant-to-be-finished. The open form, admitting no finish line, inherently continues ad infinitum, “wave after wave of energy pushing outward, of ever-renewed efforts...” (Dissonance 69). This poetics of openness acknowledges the failings of poetry, its inability to be truly inclusive, and therefore its inability to be complete.

This toil for openness runs parallel to a common desire in experimental poetry to give voice to the voiceless and say the unsayable. John Cage plays with these paradoxes in his famous aphorism, which Waldrop writes an essay around: “Poetry is having nothing to say and saying it” (Dissonance 274). Howe’s focus on marginalia attests to her own interest in the voicelessness of marginalized people groups, frequently present in her work, who struggle to have their voices heard. These include the Native Americans subjugated to early Puritan settlements in New England, as well as fringe religious groups such as the antinomians voiced by Anne Hutchinson and the now extinct Labadists which give the title to her book Souls of the Labadie Tract. Mackey’s interest in outlier Caribbean writers relatively unknown in America allies him with such efforts. These artists create a silence with the ability to speak; “Brathwaite helps impeded speech find its voice, the way Thelonious Monk makes hesitation eloquent or the
way a scat singer makes inarticulacy speak” (Discrepant Engagement 274).

These dual notions of openness and marginality inevitably orbit around a vague sense of difficulty. The epistemological attempt to overturn accepted assumptions, challenge traditional logics, and introduce foreign thought processes almost inherently requires difficulty. It is a desire to force the mind to do things it is not prepared to do, is not comfortable with. This notion of turning the mind on its head, inversion as well as rotation around an axis, is one way in which difficulty repeatedly appears in this experimental poetry. This could be thought of as difficult on the level of content in these poems, reflecting the difficulty in confronting the marginalized “subject” of the poems, to the varying extent that such a subject exists in this experimental poetry. Difficulty in this poetry is analogous to the irritation necessarily evoked upon the comfortable mind in order to remind it of the discomfort that still exists in this world.

Other levels of difficulty include formal, narrative, grammatical, and narrative slippages, the breaks that open up closure. Susan Howe’s typographically radical poems in Singularities are physically difficult to read, forcing the reader to physically reorient the page in order to read upside down, diagonal, and vertical words, as well as leaving some words partially obscured and erased, limiting the reading of even individual letters open to conjecture (Singularities 56-57). Waldrop’s prose poems in Curves to the Apple, as well as Mackey’s long serial poems Songs of the Andoumboulou and Mu, continually suggest some sort of underlying narrative thread, but consistently refuse to allow any such narrative to take shape or develop. All three play with the meanings of individual words through clever punning and truncation of letters. Howe especially allows her poems to syntactically to break down, resulting in lines such as “Posit gaze level diminish lamp and asleep (selv) cannot see” (Singularities 14). These lapses in expectations result in a poetry which resists making sense in any obvious or surface way. It is difficult to say
what the poem is about, or even that any such “about” exists.

Much of the justification for these sort of difficulties stem from a loyalty to the marginalized subjects the poetry hopes to represent. Mackey believes “that there has been far too much emphasis on accessibility when it comes to writers from socially marginalized groups. This has resulted in shallow, simplistic readings that belabor the most obvious aspects of the writer’s work and situation” (Discrepant Engagement 17-18). I have based thoughts concerning difficulty in my own work on such an understanding, and it is largely for this reason that I have so adamantly needed to resist altering my poetry or creative process for the sake of accessibility, despite my own desire to achieve such accessibility. I am very much trying to have it both ways by subverting this paradox through collaboration.

This contingent of experimental poets through which I’m writing, which includes Palmer, Mackey, Howe, Waldrop, and others, also shares an emphasis on critical and theoretical writing, placing just as much importance on writing about poetry as on the poetry itself, often blurring and crossing the boundaries between the two. This poetry admits its own inadequacies, thus requiring such supplemental writing. Though it is foolish to think that further writing, or further saying, will somehow succeed in saying the unsayable where the poetry itself has failed, it still seems worthwhile to identify some possible, indefinite instances where significant action takes place within the poetry, where an attempt at saying has been made. Through this, it might be possible to demonstrate how readers might interact with the poem and give a general sense of how the poems attempt to at least hint at or point towards the unsayable.

It is from this foundation that I launch an explication and investigation of my own poetics and how it reacts with music in this project as a surrogate voice, advancing the poetry beyond what it is capable of on its own. This introduction will of course fail to precisely pin anything
down, and will slip into disjunctures and confusions of its own. This broken, opaque language is the only available language with which to discuss such poetics, and with it we must not only make due, but also push it to the fullest extent of its capabilities.

Thus, I will start with a sort of manifesto of my poetics. A necessarily short-sighted, limited, excluding, incomplete manifesto, but one which I hope takes enough bounds towards openness to serve as a synecdochical starting point upon which an understanding of the variable indefinite whole may be based.

Re:thinking

why must we, or must we,
eno ylno ni kniht yllauteprep
direction? Why does, must, even the skill of
siht ot su enifnoc gnidaer
singular law of thinking? I
,sciteop yaw-2 a esoporps
a poetics of reversibility, of conversation.
ssel hcum os skaerb enil ton erA
severe, harsh, in this manner? At least
em ot laicifeneb smees siht
when no such harshness is intended,
ssel eb dluohs ereht nehw
disparity between the end of one line
.txen eht fo trats eht dna
Physically on the page the eyes have
,esrevart ot ecnatsid ssel
there is less fracture between the lines.
t'nseod ti ,won siht gnidaer ,teY
really seem so, does it? Very interesting,
,ytidiulf hcus ,ssenhtooms hcus woh
causes such discrepancy, gap, breakage,
evah peed woH .ecnanossid ,erutcarf
their impositions worked their way into

our thought. I wish to attempt
,gniredroer ,gniructurs a
perhaps. To break free from uni-directional,
.seitilaicifitra ,lanoisnemid one

This is of course a desire I share with many contemporary writers, including the poets
named above, who form the framework and tradition from which my own work is spawned. As demonstrated above, this desire results in a movement away from easily recognizable forms and structures, pushing against mental comforts. I am, however, troubled by the hypocritical elitism resulting from such a poetics. For a poetry that claims to give voice to the other, to let the marginalized be heard, the end effect is quite contrary to these aims. Instead of giving voice to the outsider, such poetry simply creates a new locale of marginalization where the other for the most part again remains unheard and unnoticed by the rest of the world. Indeed, the difficult nature of this poetry results in an apparent elitism which excludes especially those outsiders the poetry claims most to represent.

For comparison, rock band Modest Mouse’s 2004 album *Good News for People Who Love Bad News* was certified Platinum by the RIAA just four months after its release for 1,000,000 sales (RIAA). Billy Collins, on the other hand, former American Poet Laureate and widely considered one of the most popular and accessible contemporary poets, has sold over an estimated 200,000 copies of all of his works over a 30-year career (Poetry Archive). How much smaller of an audience, then, is such opaque, obtrusive poetry reaching through small press publications? Though hard numbers are difficult to find, the numbers of out-of-print editions for Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop’s Burning Deck Press, a small press champion of contemporary experimental poetry, are telling indicators of the relatively tiny number of readers such difficult and marginalized poetry reaches. Burning Deck’s numbers are not in the thousands but the hundreds. Most of the publications listed have fewer than 1000 copies available, with some as few as 250 or less (Burning Deck). Often publication numbers are so low as to allow special editions personally signed by the author. The world of experimental poetry is decidedly smaller and its readership more limited than those enjoyed by other, more accessible artistic forms.
Yet again, I am aware of the necessity of such difficulty to the poetry. To imbue this confusing poetry with the accessible poetics found in Billy Collins’ work is to destroy the very significance of this poetry. Refusing compromises in either direction, I hoped to resolve this paradox by reaching outside the bounds of the poem itself, into collaboration. A number of experimental poets have turned to cross-disciplinary projects in attempts to overcome, or at least acknowledge, the shortcomings of poetry, or, in doing so, attempt a restructuring of the very definition of poetry. It is a grasping for the other, a surrogate voice which might lend aid to the deficient medium of language. Similar collaborations in the past have sought to push the poetry itself outward, using the aid of other artistic media to expand possibilities and awareness of impossibilities. Such collaborations significantly include Steve Swallow’s setting of Robert Creeley’s poetry after his death, Mackey’s numerous collaborations with jazz musicians and visual artists, Philip Glass’ composition of Allen Ginsberg’s poetry in Hydrogen Jukebox, and Susan Howe’s collaborations with experimental musician David Grubbs for Thieft and Souls of the Labadie Tract. I diverged from this foundation primarily through the intent of my collaborations. I instead hoped to find assistance in bringing my marginalized, demanding style of poetry to a greater level of accessibility through music. Though Collins’ sales numbers are impressive relative to the small press runs common to experimental poetry, they still pale in comparison to the massive audience reached by a fairly successful rock band—a band whose numbers are far from extraordinary relative to more mainstream musical acts. Thus, I hope to draw on the incredible power of music to open up demanding poetry to wider audiences and expand its visibility and importance to a wider population. I am not an experimental or jazz musician (as many of the collaborators in this tradition so often are, including the aforementioned Steve Swallow, Philip Glass, David Grubbs, as well as John Cage’s experimental
writings on poetry and music, which become for him a sort of collaboration with the self, significant to the artistic process of my own work). I have no qualms with setting experimental poetry to pop music in hopes of expanding readership. Musically this is more akin to Isaac Brock, primary songwriter of Modest Mouse, and David Berman, who shares a similar role in his band The Silver Jews, as well as being a published poet. This does not mean the music does not interact critically with the poetry or expand it, but simply that the primary purpose of the music is to increase accessibility.

It does seem to be getting yna nI  ?ti t’nseod reisae case, I’m finding it much easier to siht ni daer neve dna etirw manner as we go on. Perhaps then all ,gniriwer elttil a si sekat ti a simple retraining of the mind. s’taht ,ecitcarp elttil a tsuJ all. A little getting used to.

One question this project can’t help but evoke is the relationship between a speaker and a singer. What differentiates the two, and where is the line to be drawn? Rather than try to answer that question, my work attempts to draw attention to that line, to exacerbate it, and then as much as possible try to destroy it, cross it, and blur it. Discussing his own reading style in his essay “Sight-Specific, Sound Specific...” in Paracritical Hinge, Nathaniel Mackey expresses a resistance to the pull of music in his collaborations: “The presence of the music does exert an influence, an influence it took some getting used to...I found I needed to resist that sense of goad nonetheless. It took an effort to maintain a cooler approach” (Hinge 235). As a poet to whom I feel much of my own poetics are indebted, I find Mackey’s defense of a plain reading style merited and convincing. I must, however, ultimately disagree with his argument. I do not find
this resistance to the impact of music beneficial to the claims of the poetry, but see it instead as limiting and confining, hindering the possibilities inherent to the reaction between language and music. I attempted in my work to fully embrace this pull of music on the language, allowing further access to multiplicity, to the prosthetic voice of music. I understand Mackey’s aesthetic desire to avoid any sort of over-the-top reading style, such as might be found at a poetry slam. As Kamau Brathwaite puts it, “I don’t perform at all, it’s my poetry that does it...,” an assertion that Mackey agrees with (Hinge 228). However, I am unconvinced of the leap from this premise to the conclusion of a plain reading style. Indeed, it seems to me that such artificial constraints on the language actually prevent the words from performing to their fullest extent, rather than preserving them from an overpowering speaker, as Mackey asserts, avoiding the “declamatory mode” (Hinge 253). It is still the words, not I, that are performing in the collaborations. Physically, undeniably both Mackey and I are actually performing, our lungs and vocal chords carrying out a tangible act. It is at the level of theory and poetics that we might claim we are not actually performing in place of the words. I simply allow the words to give in to the sway of the music. Not an artificial, synthetic, or forced sway, but simply not resisting the natural pull of the music on the words—a move I feel increases the possibilities and power of the language, and acknowledges again the shortcomings of language. Shrinking the gap between music and poetry, and yet refusing to cross it, and therefore accentuating this gap, emphasizes the inability to bridge it.

In undertaking such a collaboration to begin with, one admits the music into the realm of language, allowing it to become a part of the work as a whole. The music becomes a part of the palimpsest on which the poem is written, just as does the tradition of past poetry, which informs it. The musical context undoubtedly affects the tone, mood, voice, feeling, and even sound of the
entire collaboration taken together; it would be pointless to include the music if it did not. Why then should the music be specifically prohibited from affecting the rhythm of the poem as well? As Mackey asserts, words on the page have a rhythm, but they are not necessarily determined by the page; the page is not a score. The aural rhythm then is not rigid or fixed by some predetermined measure, but rather is fluid and malleable, arising from somewhere specific to the speaker and informed by the context of the poem as a whole, just as are the feeling and sound of the poem. As such, rhythm is subject to musical influence as much as any other aspect of the poem.

This of course justifies only the possibility of rhythmic speaking interacting with the musical rhythm over the exclusively plain reading style Mackey espouses. It can be extended, however, to the notion of singing and melody as well. Again, as Mackey posits, there is not necessarily a score for the rhythm on the page, yet there is indeed a rhythm (Hinge 230). Similarly, there is no score for a melody on the page; this does not, however, preclude the possibility of its existence. Words inherently imbue some sense of melody just as they inevitably evoke some sort of rhythm. Andrew Welsh explains that, linguistically, rhythm and pitch are part of the “essential features of the language of everyday speech” (Welsh 191). Just as poetry draws its rhythmic roots from both music and conversational speech, so it also does with melody (Welsh 191-192). The distinction between traditionally read poetry and the notion of singing, then, seems to me a variation of degrees along a continuum, not a separation of two discrete entities. Traditionally read poetry—that is, poetry read aloud with no central concerns with melody, poetry which is definitively spoken rather than sung—could be thought of as melodically analogous to prose rhythmically. Melody is undoubtedly present, but lacking any specific attention or form. To continue the analogy, I attempted in this project to make a step
towards free verse, emphasizing the importance of melody and acknowledging its presence in the poetry while refraining from falling into any strict pattern or structure.

In his introduction to *Paracritical Hinge*, Mackey interestingly restructures Walter Pater’s famous statement: “if writing can be said to aspire to the condition of music, music can be said to aspire to the condition of writing” (*Hinge* 16). Would not these dual aspirations, if taken far enough, sound something like a singing voice? Words aspiring to the melody, the melody aspiring to the words. I hoped to embody this in the vocal performance of my poems, while allowing the two parts to remain distinct; the words and the melody acting in unison, in close collaboration, tightly woven together, and yet still two separate entities. The bridge remains incomplete at best, its fragmented remains drawing our attention to the gap it fails to cross.

Simply by placing poetry within this musical framework, one allows the music to become a part of the poem, essentially altering the poem at a fundamental level, creating a new work of art entirely distinct from the poem as it stands alone on the page. I believe my divergence from Mackey can be traced back to this point. Mackey does not see the collaboration as unavoidably distinct from the written work, but instead as a specific expression of the page, an instance of the poem in time. From this understanding, Mackey attempts to keep as true to the poem on the page as possible, refusing to allow the poem to be altered in the collaborative process, instead attempting to define a specific notion of the poem which must be reflected by the performance. I instead espouse Steven Paul Scher’s notion that the “composer engaged in the process of setting poetic texts operates not unlike the linguistically and literarily competent reader engaged in the art of reading poetry” (Scher 224). I apply this equation in both directions: not only is the act of composing an act of reading, but the act of reading itself is an act of creation that goes beyond the creativity on the page.
Mackey’s attempts to restrict, limit, and confine his readings of his poetry are nothing more than failed attempts to protect the poetry from music’s incursions. The music will make its impact upon the poetry once they have been placed in an arena together, whether acknowledged or not. Just as modernists and post-modernists have rejected unrealizable attempts of closure on the page, I have rejected similar claims of closure on the poetry as performance. Instead, those poets favor admissions of poetry’s inadequacies and a push outward against those failures towards openness, and likewise I have attempted to push performance of the poem beyond the closed authority of the page.

Again, it is thus a separate work of art from the poem on the page, as I believe all readings of poetry are. It is still poetry, but a different poetry from that which exists solely on the page. I have tried to utilize this distinction in my desire to open up inaccessible poetry to wider audiences by shaping this offspring (the child of poetry and music) of collaborative art into a gateway of accessibility. If one comes in contact with this gateway, it encourages an interaction with the experimental poetry on which it is founded, as the poetry itself acts as another gateway to further possibilities of thought and sound.

Re:nding

My hand seems galaxies away from
seyJm ,ecef ym
And I can’t help but feel the true
gnieb ym fo ssentsav
the trillions of atoms I encompass
ym gnitarapes selim etinifni ehT
fingertips
noitazilaer eht yb desirus thguac m'I dOA
That I, my mind, my face-centered self,
'tnemevom eht lortnoc llits tcaf ni nac
of my fingers, that the connection
emilbus a sleef'tl ,stisixe llits
amputation. A paradoxically connected
fles eht ,lufesu etiuq—bmil deidobmesid
made other, still subject to the self.
Liner Notes

“Don’t mistakethepurewhitefornonexistence”

Just as music pulls on words, the words also pull on the music. In this project, this results in oppositional pulls of accessibility and difficulty. That is to say, there is not only a musical pull on the language towards accessibility, but also a literary pull on the music towards difficulty in my work. This track, which is quite difficult to listen to at times, gives in to the poem’s push into experimentation and opacity. In contrast to my approach to such forces from a poetic perspective, this is a pull I have, as a musician, tried to resist (the above being an example of failing to do so). Harking back to the foundational goal of this project, I am willing to sacrifice artistic depth and complexity in the music for the sake of creating an entertaining, pleasurable vehicle through which my poetry can be delivered.

Chelsea Rice performs on piano on this track, while I speak the lone vocal line halfway through. Chelsea was heavily swayed by the extensive graphic experimentation of the poem as it appears on the page (the title of the poem existing only in a block of white text—visible only in its original digital form by physically altering the text to a visible color in a word processor, forcing the reader to become a part of the authorial process—the sole audible language on a page literally covered in text). I allowed Chelsea creative freedom to respond to the extreme nature of the poem as she saw fit, in an effort to further give up my own creative control of the piece and
open it to interpretative and associative possibilities. The piano is run through a number of
guitar effects, creating a sort of shotgun blast of sound, reflecting the effect of the mass of letters
on the page. The first half of the track is a digitally perfect reversal of the second half,
reciprocally informing and informed by notions of reversibility, beginning, and end in the poem;
the poem begins with the end, a capital ‘Z’ as well as ending with the end, a period. All the
while the notion of a beginning and end of an arbitrary and semantically meaningless
arrangement of letters is ridiculously and artificially contrived, calling into question the
significance and authority of such boundaries.

“Sent”

This poem stands out in the work for its apparent relative straight-forwardness. This I
feel speaks precisely to what I think of notions of difficulty: what it means, what is required of it,
and how it is necessary. I don’t find difficulty simply for the sake of difficulty in itself to be
necessary or valuable, but rather the results that difficulty so often brings, or at least
accompanies. From this, I don’t find that every poem necessarily needs to be excessively
difficult or confusing unless it is unavoidable, which it often is. But if the desired, or less
intentionally, chanced (or even put more divinely, purposed) effect of the poem can be brought
about in a simple, straightforward way, then the better for it. The catch is that my poetics and
others in this experimental aesthetic often deal with concepts that are not normally possible
through such clear means. It comments on the slippages between words, how these slippages
connect to thought, and how repentance has epistemological, theological, not to mention
etymological, connotations of breakage and repair. It puts out for investigation the significance
of traditional allusions and symbols, metaphor, and the relationship of the word to both abstract
and concrete reality. It accomplishes significant strides towards openness and restructuring assumed modes of thought without requiring immediate upheavals of those modes. “Sent,” then, serves as the exception that delineates the trend and its purpose. It seems to me, however, that such paradoxical, one might even say hypocritical, expressions succeed only sporadically and by chance. In this case, I believe it does; in most others, I feel it is impossible to get around the difficulties inherent when asking the reader to throw off a lifetime of assumptions and habits of thought.

Music for this track was written and recorded by Matt Pethel, the only collaborator not currently living in Athens. Matt plays in a few instrumental indie rock bands, as well as playing guitar for a church where I occasionally play bass. I asked Matt to contribute because of his potential insight into the religious implications of this poem. This is also the only track that I did not engineer and produce myself; Matt has a degree in sound engineering and did all of the pre-vocal production and mixing. Finally, this is also the only track in which I was not physically present for any part of the musical creative process. It was done entirely through e-mail, à la The Postal Service.

“Because Center Alignment is Amateur”

This piece is well suited for examining the significance of those moments when poetry crosses over into criticism and self-reference. Such instances are not only ends in themselves, attempting to refine and restructure the practice of poetry and the modes of thought that inform it. Meta-language also serves as a means to other ends, using the vocabulary (both lexical as well as philosophical and epistemological) as a mythology providing fodder for allegory and
allusion. It short-shifts the work to assume that any language relating to poetics is only that; it is an artificial confinement to stop it there. So my line: “What is the significance of the fact that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E takes up three times more space on the page than language?” acts as poetry about poetics and schools and cliques and hypocrisy, but also something more. It paradoxically asserts on an oral/aural level that language takes up three times more space on the page than language. It is larger than one anticipates, bulkier and clunkier. It will require more on the page than it does in the mind. Language is not constant or self-reflective, does not equal itself, but is perpetually a diminishing echo. Or perhaps not diminishing, but a paradoxically sustaining and expanding, yet fading and shifting, echo. Echoes mimic themselves, repeat themselves, and yet are different. An echo is perpetually louder than the original sound, causing exponential echo over echo of echo, an infinite push outward. But these ideas concerning the contradictory nature of language apply also to hypocrisy in philosophy or religion; the contradictory closed mindedness of an uncompromisingly open minded approach. An approach that is closed to absolutes, closed to legitimate blacks and whites, closed to uncompromising extremes, closed to the possibility of an incorrect answer, closed to closure. This poem is concerned with the cultural condemnation of condemners. It is wrapped up in the discrepancy between the mind and reality and the difficulty of carrying out what is in one’s mind. My primary interest is not in poetics; rather, the poetics serve for me as a mythology, a metaphor for those things I’m truly concerned with. Such is indeed the very reason for espousing such a poetics and the motivation behind a marginalized poetry. It is not for the ends of obscure poetry, but for what such boundary-ness means, for the other forms of marginalization analogous to it; cultural, religious, racial, philosophical, economic, and so on.

Much of this stems from what is perhaps a foolish sense of reverse marginalization in my
personal life, the push of the center to the margins. I am a Southern, Caucasian male from a middle-class family that most people would lump into the broad category of “Christian.” I fit what most people would call the majority. This understanding does not align with my own life experiences (I indulge myself that they rarely do); I often feel the expectations placed on the majority, both positive and negative, are damaging not only to myself but to society as a whole. Whether such feelings in myself are justified, I will not attempt to argue. Without straying too far into autobiographical details, suffice it to say that I personally identify with the marginalization of the truly marginalized. That is, I am interested in observing and interacting with barriers and boundaries and the traffic across them, specifically the boundaries of the majority.

The title of this poem comes from something my mentor Andrew Zawacki said regarding a center-aligned Susan Howe poem. He said that through the poem, Howe was declaring a rejection of established poetics, or even established counter-poetics, which would include the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. A poetic, which somehow, in some unspoken way (first given voice to me by Zawacki) ordained that “center alignment is amateur.” The fact that such a thought could exist, could even require a rejection to begin with, filled me with an anger that surprised me. My poem became a sort of restatement of that rejection, sarcastically giving in to the demands of the judgment on a formal level, but bluntly confronting it through content. Of course, stubbornly refusing to concede any victories, I make certain to center-align other poems. The fact that it is the center alignment that is in question draws me back to the paragraph above, and the paradoxical marginalization of the majority I sense in society (perhaps a self-marginalization—after all, the majority of poets push themselves up against the left margin).

In contrast to my interest in the majority, I would also like to emphasize my
unwillingness to compromise my poetry for my goal of accessibility; compromises are made towards this aim solely through the music. By this premise, I justify my use of the specific name of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of poets in the line quoted above. Though I recognize that such a reference will likely be lost on a majority of readers outside the circles of experimental poetry, I espouse the logic behind Mackey’s frequent use of obscure African mythology. I assume that my core group of readers will share interests similar to my own and will be familiar with such references or, if not, be willing to track them down. Beyond that, I am unwilling to compromise the poetry out of a fear that the wider audience I intend to reach through the musical collaborations might not get it. It is perfectly acceptable to read the line absent of such an understanding, identical to the oral/aural presentation of the line as “language takes up three times more space on the page than language,” evoking significant notions of paradox, inconsistency, contradiction and hypocrisy, and the relationship between the concrete reality of language on the page and the reality of language as abstraction. In other words, it is insignificant whether a reader understands the specific details of any allusion, as the absence of such details lends itself wonderfully to alternative and previously unimagined readings.

I played a cheap, out-of-tune banjo for this track. I also recorded myself thumping the drum-like body of the banjo with my fingertips, slightly off-rhythm in a few instances.

“Gazing Through the Keyhole”
I am tempted to refer to this as the title-track of the work. The immediate reading of the title serves for me as an image for what this poetry should do—create access to something
valuable, something locked and protected, separated from us by a door; an access that will accept any key. Gazing through the keyhole, then, is peeking into what lies within, a hint of the act of reading. The door not only leads to something new, but to another corridor entirely with doors of its own.

Tuna Fortuna plays the synth and upright bass. Stephen Pfannkuche also plays an atmospheric guitar line throughout. I wrote the end of the poem, beginning with “Reflect the oscillating echo,” while listening to Stephen and Tuna lay down the guitar and synth tracks. If one continues to follow this oscillating echo further, from echo to ok, the next iteration is ache-oh.

“Echoed Hub”

This was the first collaboration of the project. I showed a text of the poem to Tuna Fortuna, who wished to spin a rhythm out of the syllabic structure of the words. Not a rhythm based on stress patterns, but the aural beat of the consonants that divide syllables. It is in this first collaboration that I decided to give up all musical creative control to the musician. I tried to give as little creative direction to Tuna as possible, and let him hear the poem, and thus create it, without my authorial influence. This was, however, also perhaps the most closely collaborated of all the tracks, as I was present throughout his entire process over the course of a few hours. I also read the poem aloud to him over and over as he wrote the music, allowing him to hear my voice as he composed; I did not continue this process for the other collaborations. I also wrote the later half of this poem as Tuna composed and recorded parts on guitar and synth. The vocal overlap in the recording resulted by accident as I experimented recording my voice with different
effects. I appreciated the aural interplay it created between the lines and intentionally duplicated the effect on other lines.

“Levi as Anagram”

This is the first track in the project in which I took on the part of musician. I played guitar, bass, keyboard, and drums, as well as extensive work on the vocals. I feel like this track is one of the most successful in providing a backdrop of entertainment and pleasure through which the poem might be more easily accessed.

“Overorof Alloftheabove”

This poem was originally far more syntactically straightforward, describing a mental game I play with myself while bored on long car or bus trips. Taking cues from the “leaping” nature of the poem, I restructured it based on connections between individual letters and sounds in the words to create a semantic leaping back and forth, a crisscrossing of semantic “intersections.”

I read the words down the right side of the page with a sub-octave effect to create the repeating bass line of this track. I then took a guitar riff I wrote for a short-lived electronica band I formed with a friend in high school and stretched it out to match the tempo of this vocal base. I then read the rest of the poem over this, which I hope questions the reading’s left-to-right, top-to-bottom order of operations.

“Psychopomp”
This was the first collaboration I did with Chelsea Rice on piano. I feel the calm serenity and sublimity of this track allows it to succeed in creating a pleasurable space from which to interact with the poem. I sometimes consider this my favorite collaboration of the project.

“Population 148”

This poem spun out of a road trip I took with God one night during the long drive from college back to my parents’ house two hours away. God told me to purposefully miss my turn in the middle of nowhere, which I thought was insane, but I did it anyway. The entire experience was mind-blowing in a number of ways, but relating specifically to this poem, the road I was on took me through the city of Between, Georgia. I found this wonderfully appropriate to the poetics I had recently been thinking heavily on, and driving through the small town spawned a number of phrases in my head. I still have not quite figured out what I want to do with the name of this town; this poem is in many ways a statement simply that I would like to think about it.

Chelsea Rice again played piano. This is also the only track on which I share reading responsibilities, trading lines with Chelsea in an effort to give up authorial control.

“Re:thought”

Both ‘regarding thought’ and ‘thought-again,’ this title spins out of my series of Re: poems, but breaks the formal mold of those poems, serving to tear down the boundaries of serial poems, much as Mackey does with Songs of the Andoumboulou and Mu. Though in a way it seems trivial to mimic Mackey’s move, it also seems wrong to refuse to allow the serial poem to go beyond itself, to rebuild artificial barriers that Mackey has so appropriately broken down. Thus I have allowed this rupture. I find this single instance to be sufficient at this point, though,
and have not yet titled any other poems outside the see-sawing Re: poems in this manner.

I play guitar and bass for this track. I appreciate the technical simplicity of this composition, as I have been able to perform this collaboration live without any serious problems in execution.

“perpetual’s symmetry”

In a close examination of the physicality of the word perpetual, graphically I see the p’s as “down” the e’s, the r, the u, and the a as the planar “du”, and the t and the l as “up.” The sinusoidal nature of the word implies an infinity implicit in the word’s semantic meaning, creating a visual connection between signifier and signified, reinforcing the physicality of the word on the page. A hieroglyph of the English language, conveniently assigned to a word with significant implications to my poetics.

I play guitar and drums on this track, reflecting the rhythm of the “down du du down du up du du up du,” forcing the poem to serve as a score it never intended. I use a delay effect to speak the word perpetual, expanding the union between meaning and appearance to include audible existence as well. Like “Re:thought,” this composition is simple enough that I have been able to recreate it live with relative ease.

“Take”

I play guitar and bass, and it is my most technically complex composition of the project. It exists in an odd, alternating time signature. Appropriately and intentionally, this recording
took the most takes of any due to the fast guitar part, which is difficult beyond my skill level.
The recording could still at this point be considered a rehearsal, as could the poem (or my poems in general).

“search for the missing ‘L’”

This poem borrows from the title of Rosmarie Waldrop’s book *Dissonance* and the opening epigraph to the book, which she borrowed from William Carlos Williams. The disappearance of “Dissonance” from this borrowing is significant to my restructuring of the notion; the dissonance is still there, inevitably evoked by the rest of the allusion, but the strength of its presence is lessened, shifting the weight to “leads to discovery.” “Leads” shifts from verb to noun, a paradoxical shift towards stasis on a grammatical level that means a shift away from the concrete on the level of meaning. It also opens up the possible reading of pencil lead, a misnomer which physically traces along the page the path to discovery.

I open with a simple guitar riff that remembers the blues but does not speak the same dialect. I let it fall into a rolling, “tumbling” guitar riff that goes through various ascending iterations (irritations) before falling further into a repetition of the opening phrase. Though this piece is somewhat difficult for me to play on guitar, I have found it very conducive to improvisation, and with a bit of practice I have been able to satisfactorily perform it live.

Re:absorbing

I’m concerned that if we keep this
left lines on every other line will
quantities of writings will be lost into
Interesting, perhaps, but not, I think,
Anyway, at that point would we not
denifnoc dna deppart sa tsuj pu dne
as before? That would then require
evah dluow lla dna snoitulover rehtruf
been futile. Instead, our minds must
gnikaerb ,stnempartne hcus lla epacse
all such molds. To be able to read
fo ,ylsuivbo d\textsc{a} .noitcerid yna ni
course, this philosophy applies well beyond
,noitcnitsid laci\textsc{h}pargopyt laivirt siht
into the more significant structures of
\textsc{t}niop ot epoh I lareneg ni thguoht
towards. I have trouble reading other
siht fo edistuo smeo\textsc{p} .won smeop
contemporary experimental vein I’ve been so
\textsc{e}rom neve gnivah ma I \textsc{ni desremmi}
trouble re-restructuring my mind than

I did restructuring it the first

\textsc{em}it

An inability to back-track. I
s’ereht that revo dna revo gniki\textsc{n}ht pleh t’nac
far more to it, though I can’t quite say
\textsc{t}on spahrep r\textsc{O} .tahw yas t’n\textsc{a}C .tahw
I suppose it is not so much a question
\textsc{edutinif fo tub ,yticilpmis fo}

a mees seod sih\textsc{T} ?I dluohs tuB
paradoxical closedness towards closure. But
si tah\textsc{W}” fo gniksa tnatsnoc siht
this poem about?” That question grinds at me.
siht si tah\textsc{W}” daetsni ksa ew t’nac yh\textsc{W}
poem?”

\textit{The Skeleton Keyhole}

There have been a number of exterior constraints on this project, beyond those immediate
limitations inherent in poetry and music. Due to the student nature of this project, it was
necessarily limited in its breadth and scope. It was under the time constraints of the academic year, having to be completed in two semesters (it was originally planned to be completed in one, but the demands of the project pushed it beyond these initial limits, and would have pushed it much further, if it had been possible within the university structure). As a result, a number of poems could not be opened up to musical collaboration. I wished to experiment musically with my Re: poems, specifically the longer derivative poem “Re:reading” (included later in this text), which, with its massive amounts of repetition, would be particularly suited to interesting musical refrains and variations.

The project was also limited by the predetermined dimensions for its physical publication. Due to the practical formatting requirements attached to submitting and completing an Honors Thesis at the University of Georgia, any questions of how the text should physically exist—whether digitally or in print, and if in print, what size and shape it is printed in—were answered for me. The relationship between the publication of the text and the publication of the music was predetermined as well; the audio tracks will necessarily be secondary, simply an addendum to the texts, forced to the appendix.

I do not mean this as a critique of the way Honors Theses are conducted at the University of Georgia, but rather an acknowledgment of the external limitations often unavoidably present in artistic endeavors which, desired or not, contribute to the shape of their existence.
Works Cited


