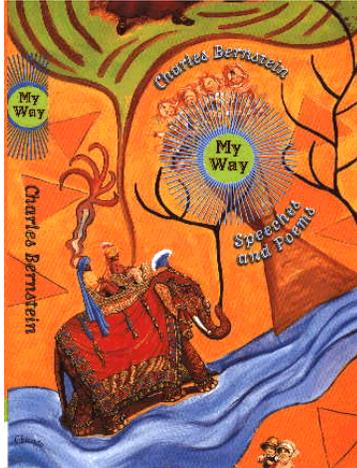


Charles Bernstein

Poetics of the Americas



Collected in [My Way: Speeches and Poems](#) (University of Chicago Press, 1999). This version corrects several errors in the book publication. © Charles Bernstein. Digital version: [Sibyl/Sibila](#), 2011.

Speaking in Buffalo in 1994, the Argentinean poet Jorge Santiago Perednik ended his talk on cultural resistance to the recent reign of terror in his country by saying "the struggle is impossible and for that reason it took place." Without wanting to violate the cultural specificity of Perednik's comment, I understand this also to mean that poetry, insofar as it resists reification as culturally-sanctioned Poetry, is also impossible — and for that reason takes place. For the sake of this collection, I would like to add America to this list, for America is impossible and for this reason, also, it exists.

Or Americas, for it is in the resistance to any singular unity of identity that the impossibility of America, of a Poetics of the Americas, may be said to dwell. The cultural space of this impossible America is not carved up by national borders or language borders but transected by innumerable overlaying, contradictory or polydictory, traditions and proclivities and histories and regions and peoples and circumstances and identities and families and collectivities and dissolutions — dialects and

ideolects not National Tongues, localities and habitations not States.

But such an America is imaginary, for everywhere the local is under fire from the imposed standard of a transnational consumer culture and undermined by the imperative to extract it and export it as product.

In the United States we are particularly bedeviled by our own history of cultural resistance, often confusing the struggles for cultural legitimation of the last century with our own reversed roles in this one. I am thinking of the specific needs, a century ago, that gave rise to the invention of "American literature" as an academic category within the university system that had only recently countenanced English, or British, literature as a suitable appendix to the study of the classics (primarily Greek and Roman works). At that time, there was a clear necessity for breaking away from the perceived limitations of "Island" English literature in order to build an audience for, and give a measure of respectability and legitimation to, certain New England and "middle-Atlantic" and Southern English language texts. "American" in this context was a strategic rather than an essential category; as a result, the multiethnic and polylinguistic reality of the U.S. was not accented in early formations of "American literature". By 1925, William Carlos Williams, in *In the American Grain*, had given new breadth to the concept of America; yet his related insistence on an American speech suggested a false essence to a concept useful only as a negation: NOT English verse diction. That is, as a negative category American literature was a useful hypothesis. In contrast, for the present, the idea of American literature understood as a positive, expressive "totalization" needs to continue to be dismantled.

The problem here is twofold: the totalization of "America" and the globally dominant position of the U.S. Since the U.S. is the dominant English language (as well as Western) nation in the political, economic, and mass-cultural spheres, its monopolizing powers need to be cracked — from the inside and outside — as surely as one version of England's grip on our language's literature needed to be loosened in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The same logic that led to the invention of American, as distinct from English, literature now leads to the invention of, on the one hand, a non-American-centered English language literature and, on the other, a poetics of the Americas. Any unitary concept of America is an affront to the multiplicity of Americas that make U.S. culture as vital as it is. America is, to echo Perednik, an "unclassifiable" totality. For there is no one

America. The U.S. is less a melting pot than a simultaneity of inconsolable coexistences — from the all-too-audible spokespeople of the state to the ghostly voices of the almost lost languages of the sovereign nations of Arapaho, Mohawk, Shoshone, Pawnee, Pueblo, Navaho, Crow, Cree, Kickapoo, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Zuni ...; though in truth there are no sovereigns, only sojourners.

For writing, or reading, to assume — and consequently "express" or "project" — a national identity is as problematic as for writing to assume a self or group identity. However, in jettisoning such presumptions, some sense of what such entities might be may be revealed. Such exploratory writing does not escape from its sociohistorical situation but rather contributes to an interrogation and reformulation of the *description* of that sociohistorical situation, foregrounding heterogenous and anomalous elements rather than homogenizing ones. In contrast, attempts to represent an already constituted idea of identity may preclude the possibility of encountering newly emerging identity formations.

I feel much closer to the concerns of some small press magazines in the U.K., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia than to most poetry magazines in the U.S. As for the Americas, I would say that *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and *XUL*, the magazine with which Perednik is associated, probably share more than *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* shared with most other poetry magazines published in New York.¹ The national focus of "American poetry" tends to encamp poets who would do better to share work and readership; similarly, it tends to arbitrarily limit the horizons of much current criticism of poetry. At the same time, "internationalism", like its Anglophonic cousin the "trans-Atlantic", has provided models of connoisseurship that have removed poems from the local contexts that give them meaning while at the same time developing a canon of works that undervalues the untranslatable particularities not only in given poems but also in the selection of poets. (A related problem of decontextualization is apparent in the reception of "Latin American" fiction in the U.S.) Perednik speaks of the serendipitous colliding of different poetics as the "law of poetic coincidence"; this poetic law provides a way to navigate between

¹ See *The Xul Reader*, ed. Ernesto Grosman (New York: Roof Books, 1997). An initial version of this essay was prompted, in part, by a panel on the "Poetics of Americas" organized by Grosman and presented at New York University in March 1994.

the universalizing humanisms of internationalism and the parochialism of regionalism and nationalism.

This is not to say that our different national and cultural circumstances are not marked in our poems; on the contrary it is the insistence on registering these social circumferences in the forms of our poems that may be our shared methodological approach. I am also conscious that U.S. poets tend to be less aware of developments in other English-writing countries than the other way around. Often, our boasting about the significance of a non-European American poetry has deafened us to the newness of English language poetries and non-English language poetries even further from Europe than our own, including some being written right in the heart of that "old" world.

The impossible poetics of the Americas does not seek a literature that unifies us as one national or even continental culture – America (the U.S.), North America (the U.S. and Anglophonic Canada), Multicultural North America (Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.), Latin America (south of the U.S.), South America (the "seventh" continent, since in the U.S. we learn that the Americas are two separate continents). Rather, the impossible poetics of the Americas insists that our commonness is in our partiality and disregard for the norm, the standard, the overarching, the universal. Such poetry will always be despised by those who wish to use literature to foster identification rather than to explore it.

So I hope it will be apparent that while I welcome the challenge of multiculturalism as it has entered U.S. arts and education in the past decade, I continue to find many of its proponents more interested in reinforcing traditional modes of representation than allowing the heterogeneity of forms and peoples that make up the cultural diversity of the Americas to transform poetic styles and personal and group identities. Yet it is hardly surprising that static conceptions of group identity represented by authentic spokespersons continue to ride roughshod over works and individuals whose identities are complex, multiple, mixed, confused, hyperactivated, miscegenated, synthetic, mutant, forming, or virtual.

American literary multiculturalism, insofar as it seeks to promote representative figures, runs the risk of becoming a kind of domestic "internationalism". When we seek representativeness from a poet we often do so at the cost of misrepresenting the poem. At the same time, official verse culture remains dominated by a poetics of individuality and subjectivity that has tried to remain resistant to (not to say "above") not only questions of identity politics but also aesthetic position, a double evasion often

expressed, apparently without irony, as "disaffiliation". The result is an homogenization of poetic values and practices undreamt of among poets willing to acknowledge their affiliations.

The problem is how to pursue affinities while resisting unities and how to resist unities without losing the capacity to be poetically responsible, that is, responsive to and supportive of those poetic tendencies and affiliations that deepen, intensify, and extend the activity of poetry. And that means enacting poetry's contemporaneity – the willingness of poets and ability of poems to act on and in the present social and cultural circumstances, including working with the cultural forms and linguistic materials specific to the present. The point is to pursue the collective and dialogic nature of poetry without necessarily defining the nature of this collectivity — call it a virtual collectivity or, to appropriate Stanley Cavell's phrase for Emersonian moral perfectionism, "this new yet unapproachable America": this unrepresentable yet ever presenting collectivity.

In a recent book, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, the British critic Peter Nicholls schematically contrasts two modernisms that may be applied to American poetry. The first and more familiar kind, associated with a partial reading of Ezra Pound and Thomas Eliot, "rests upon assumptions of a unitary self that carefully differentiates itself from the world of the Object and thus asserts codes of mastery."² In this type of modernism, the poem imposes a (masculine) order and form on the this world; the self is imagined as closed, autonomous, distant, and antagonistic in its effort to establish stable authority. Another modernism can be associated especially with Gertrude Stein and her nonsymbological or constructive practice. In Nicholls's words, this poetic practice is "preoccupied with what seems other but turns out to be the same", thus unsettling the autonomy of the self central to the first type of modernism. "Stein shares with H.D. the desire to move beyond the object-based poetics which derives its force from the repudiation of the feminine, and to discover in its place a form of writing that reveals continuities between self and world" by opening the self to that which is outside it.

² The formulation here is Peter Quatermain's, from a letter (May 17, 1994). See Nicholls' *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), especially pp. 200 and 202, which are quoted in this paragraph.

I would propose at least three modernist projects: subjective, objective, and constructive. By nonsymbological or constructive, I am referring to the fact that in many of her works Stein does not depend upon supplemental literary or narrative contexts to secure her meaning but enacts her subjects as continuously actualized presentations of meaning. Unlike Pound or Eliot, with their myriad literary and other references, or James Joyce, with his etymological anaphora, with Stein you are left with the words on the page and the Imaginary structures they build.

In the poetry of the past two decades, I think we have moved away from the choice of subjective, objective, or even constructive and toward a synthesizing or juxtaposing of these approaches. Here the influence of the dialect poetries of the modernist period gives way to a dialectical poetry that refuses allegiance to Standard English without necessarily basing its claim on an affiliation with a definable group's speaking practice. The norm enforces a conduct of representation that precludes poetry as an active agent to further thought, unbound to the restrictions of rationalized ordering systems. Poetry can be a process of thinking rather than a report of things already settled; an investigation of figuration rather than a picture of something figured out. Such ideologically informed nonstandard language practice I call *ideolectical* and I find it equally present in British poets such as Maggie O'Sullivan, Tom Leonard and Tom Raworth; in U.S. poets such as Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Leslie Scalapino, Haryette Mullen, and Clark Coolidge; in Canadian poets such as Steve McCaffery, Deanna Ferguson, Nicole Brossard, Christopher Dewdney, Karen MacCormack, Lisa Robertson, and Catriona Strang; or in such South American poets as Perednik and Cecilia Vicuna.³

The invention of an ideolectical English language poetry, as a poetry of the Americas, involves the replacement of the national and geographically centered category of English (or Spanish) poetry not with the equally essentialist category of American poetry but with a field of potentialities, a virtual America that we

³ For related discussion of the multiplicitous chartings of American identity in Lyn Hejinian, Haryette Mullen, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, situated in the context of a reading of Stein and Dickinson, see Julianna Spahr, "Re Letter and Read Her: The Reader-Centered Text in American Literature" (Doctoral Dissertation, SUNY-Buffalo, 1995).

approach but never possess. English languages, set adrift from the sight/sound sensorium of the concrete experiences of the English people, are at their hearts uprooted and translated: nomadic in origin, absolutely particular in practice. Invention in this context is not a matter of choice: it is as necessary as the ground we walk on.

The impossible poetics of the Americas of which I speak has, in the U.S., a history of breaks from the received literary language of England. The vernacular was a crucial factor in many of those breaks, particularly as explored by such African-Americans poets as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, J. W. Johnson, and Melvin Tolson. At the same time, the American language was being transformed by the "bad" or "broken" English of the European immigrants from the 1880s through the early years of the new century: "new" syntaxes, new expressions came along with the new world. Here it is significant that Williams, Stein, Louis Zukofsky and other makers of a new American poetry were themselves second-language speakers of English, while others were children of second-language speakers, as Peter Quartermain notes in *Disjunctive Poetics*. So for these children of immigrants, English became less transparent, more a medium subject to reforming. Correlatively, on the other side of the Atlantic, the explorations of dialect traditions by Basil Bunting and Hugh MacDiarmid and in the Caribbean by Claude McKay and more recently by Linton Kwesi Johnson, Louise Bennett, Michael Smith, or Kamau Brathwaite (who rejects the term dialect, preferring "nation language"), become a source of shared language resources among English language poetries.

I realize that my emphasis on nonstandard language practices makes for unexpected affiliations. Tony Crowley, in *Standard English and the Politics of Language*, points to two senses of "standard". A standard is a rallying point for the forward movement of an ideology or group, by means of which a unity is invoked, as for example a flag in battle. But a standard is also an objective unit of measure and regulator of uniformity, and as such a product of normalization and averaging. Standard American English involves both these senses: it is a sociohistorical construction, embedding class, ethnic, and racial preferences, that serves to build national unity; and it is also a regulator of language practices, serving to curb deviance. Under the aegis of standardization, problems of social coherence are displaced onto questions of linguistic correctness:

The search for linguistic unity and identity is one that is founded on acts of violence and repression: a denial of

heteroglossia — discursive and historical — in favour of centralizing, static forms. And the victory of one dialect or language over others produces a hierarchy, an ordering of discourse which excludes, distributes and defines what is to count as discourse and what is to be relegated to oblivion. It brings into being the 'authoritative word' [that in Bakhtin's words] 'is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be organically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers.' There is then no possibility of challenging this discourse. ... Its authority is already borne along with it and it is the authority of the ruling patriarchal tradition.⁴

In "our" "own" literature, the most significant past debates on these issues took place in two distinct quarters. Disowning and deflating the "authoritative word" was a central project for Stein and other constructivist poets of the modernist period. Even more explicitly, however, standard English was the center of a debate that took place within the frame of the Harlem Renaissance, itself a geographic displacement of what is more accurately described as African-American arts of the 1920s and 30s. Writers such as Hughes and Brown invented and defended a vernacular poetry that refused the standards of literary English advocated by poets such as Countee Cullen: a controversy that in complicated ways echoes the debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. The issue in both controversies is the nature, terms, and price of assimilation.

As our literary history is usually told, the nonstandard language practices of the radical modernists, and their descendants, are not linked to the dialect and vernacular practices of African-American poets.⁵ But the construction of a vernacular poetry was

⁴ Tony Crowley, *Standard English and the Politics of Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 9-10. Crowley's citation of Bakhtin is from *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 271.

⁵ A new and important exception is Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). North contrasts the mimicry of black dialect by white modernists and the skepticism of some African-American poets toward dialect. "Linguistic imitation and racial masquerade are so important to transatlantic modernism because they allow the writer to play at self-fashioning. Jazz means freedom to Jackie Rabinowitz [the Jolson character in *The Jazz Singer*] partly because it is

a major project for many poets, black and white, during the modernist period, and the fact that these developments often took place without reference to each other — the fact of the color line — should not now obscure their intimate formal and sociohistorical connection. Stein's breakthrough into the ideolectical practice of *Tender Buttons*, for example, was prepared by her problematic improvisations on African-American vernacular in "Melanctha". A generation later, both Tolson and Louis Zukofsky used complex literary framing devices as a means of working with, and against — I'd say torquing — vernacular linguistic materials. By linking dialect and idelect I wish to emphasize the common ground of linguistic exploration, the invention of new syntaxes as akin to the invention of new Americas, or possibilities for America. In Brathwaite's account, however, dialect is better called "nation language" and if that is the case it would seem to run counter to idelect, whose nations may be described, in Robin Blaser's phrase, as image nations, imaginary, ideological; dialectical in that other sense. I don't wish to relieve this tension so much as to try to locate it as pivotal to our literary history and contemporary poetics. I am convinced, however, that nonstandard writing practices share a technical commonality that overrides the necessary differences in interpretation and motivation, and this commonality may be the vortical prosodic force that gives us footing with one another.

In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite's 1979 talk about the "process of using English in a different way from the `norm'", Brathwaite speaks of the break with the pentameter metric of

fast and rhythmically unrestrained but also because it is not ancestrally his . . . For African-American poets of this generation, however, dialect is a `chain.' In the version created by the white minstrel tradition, it is a constant reminder of the literal unfreedom of slavery" and what followed (p. 11). This reflects, in part, the view of James Weldon Johnson, who in his "Preface" to *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927; New York: Penguin, 1990) underscores that dialect verse is a "limited instrument . . . with but two complete stops, pathos and humor" (p. 7; see also note 22, below).

North goes on to scrutinize dialect and "primitivist" elements in such modernists as Eliot, Stein, Williams, and Mina Loy, which he sees not as forging a new poetics of the Americas but as trapped in a racist ventriloquism. Indeed, North suggests that "white interest in African-American language and culture was, if anything, more dangerous than indifference" (p. 11) — a conclusion that is sucked into the very vicious circles North's book sets out to critique.

English verse as decisive in establishing a distinct Caribbean national language rooted in an oral tradition:

It is *nation language* in the Caribbean that, in fact, largely ignores the pentameter. ... English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythms and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree. ... But it is an English which is not the standard, imported, educated English. ... It is what I call, as I say, *nation language*. I use the term in contrast to *dialect*. The word 'dialect' has been bandied about for a long time, and it carries very pejorative overtones. ... Nation language, on the other hand, is the *submerged* area of dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean.⁶

Brathwaite's "nation language" is as much a new standard to rally national spirit as it is a break from standardization. Any comparison of ideolectical and dialectical poetry must confront this obvious contradiction: dialect, understood as nation language, has a centripetal force, regrouping often denigrated and dispirited language practices around a common center; idelect, in contrast, suggests a centrifugal force, moving away from normative practices without necessarily replacing them with a new center of gravity, at least defined by self or group. Furthermore, the social positions from which these practices emerge will often be quite distinct. Dialect poets may be regarded by the dominant literary culture as outsiders, but they are often also at the center of collective formations that are struggling to obtain self-respect and cultural legitimacy. Idelect poets often eschew the center with which they may be associated by education or social position, to the point of refusing the collective identities with which they might otherwise be affiliated. The point of a social reading of these forms is neither to elide nor reify such differences, but to bring them into conVERSation. The meaning of poetic forms can never be

⁶ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 13; subsequent references to Brathwaite are from this book. This essay is reprinted, without the extensive bibliography, in Brathwaite's collection *Roots* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1993).

separated from the social contexts in which they are used, since meaning is never uniform, always informed by time and place. My emphasis is on how poetic forms can be used to question, rather than reinforce, the representations – and one might say the enactments – of these social contexts. For the social meaning of these forms is not given but made.

The work of Bunting and MacDiarmid is useful to consider in this respect for they are both poets whose work, dialect and not, insisted on a "northern" identity — Northumbrian and Scottish — while rejecting closed forms of Scots or Northumbrian nationalism. MacDiarmid's sympathy for but ultimate rejection by both Communist and Nationalist political parties is exemplary of the tension between localism and socialism or anarchism. Writing next to the Island center of traditional English verse, their poetry skirts the distinction between dialect and idiolect in a continuing dialog between language and place that dances around and within such ideological fractures and fractals, exposing the materiality of sound patterns to the territorialization of desire. MacDiarmid and Bunting had to invent aspects of the Scots and Northumbrian in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and *Briggflatts* (albeit the inventions were quite different in each case). *Briggflatts* is more a work of constructed syntax than an idiomatic reconstruction of an oral tradition; aurality is its most salient feature.⁷ If we understand the direction of "English" away from its Island English center as a structural question, then we can begin to see links among poetic projects involving secession, dispersal, and regrouping. We may

⁷ Peter Quatermain, in a letter (March 18 1995), comments: "The new English that each uses is inescapably itself, a shade alien to the ear and at the same time a shade more 'authentically' English, because it departs from the koine, standard English, even though it is comprehensible in an ordinary English context and to an ordinary English ear (whatever ordinary means there — one used to [hear] 'standard' I suppose, but that concept has been decaying for the last forty or so years I think). You'll have noted that I'm saying nothing about what sort of syntax that is, but I do think it cultivates turbulence and roughness to the ear and tongue because the smooth and the graceful and the beautiful ... are not only 'southron' but also 'literary', gesturing lazily as they do to a pitifully limited concept of what constitutes the sublime. Like Mina Loy, they cultivate 'gracelessness' (but then one has to define 'grace,' no?) and might indeed be said to share with her the project which says 'I do not write poetry' — if what the centre produces is poetry, then they want none of it, reaching to another definition of sense and discourse, derived from dialect/ideolect speech, and from prose."

understand disparate practices as sharing a poetic space that is grounded not in an identical social position but in the English language itself as the material with which we make our regroupings and refoundings. Never just English but always a new English that is an object and a subject of our Verse. As Louise Bennett so eloquently and hilariously points out in her 1944 poem "Bans O' Killing", this issue is as much one of the past as of the present and future:

So yuh a de man, me hear bout!
Ah yuh dem sey dah-teck
Whole heap o' English oat sey dat
Yuh gwine kill dialect!

Meck me get it straight Mass Charlie
For me noh quite undastan,
Yuh gwine kill all English dialect
Or jus Jamaica one?

Ef yuh dah-equal up wid English
Language, den wha meck
Yuh gwine go feel inferior, wen
It come to dialect?

Ef yuh kean sing "Linstead Market"
An "Wata come a me y'eye",
Yuh wi haffi tap sing "Auld lang syne"
An "Comin thru de rye".

Dah language weh yuh proad o',
Weh yuh honour and respeck,
Po' Mass Charlie! Yuh noh know sey
Dat it spring from dialect!

Dat dem start fe try tun language,
From de fourteen century,
Five hundred years gawn an dem got
More dialect dan we!

Yuh wi haffe kill de Lancashire
De Yorkshire, de Cockney
De broad Scotch an de Irish brogue
Before yuh start to kill me!

Yuh wi haffe get de Oxford book
O' English verse, an tear
Out Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle
An plenty o' Shakespeare!

Wen yuh done kill "wit" an "humour"
Wen yuh kill "Variety"
Yuh wi haffe fine a way fe kill
Originality!

An mine how yuh dah-read dem English
Book deh pon yuh shelf
For ef yuh drop a "h" yuh mighta
Haffe kill yuhself.⁸

Bennett's wit makes all the more disturbing her point that suppression of "variety" in language produces the cultural suppression of a people: "Bans O' Killing". A people invents and sustains itself through its shared language so it is not surprising that colonial governments have often prohibited the use of native languages, dialects, patois, creoles, and pidgins in an effort to maintain social control. Bennett, all of whose poetry is written in Jamaican idiom, points to, and defuses, the stigma attached to dialect use; but she also makes patent the deep social scar left by the denigration of a particular language practice as inferior. In this sense, dialect becomes the verbal equivalent of skin color: an "objective" mark of alterity.

The explicitly political use of dialect in contemporary poetry is apparent in the work of Jamaican "dub" poet Michael Smith, even as he toys with old English rhymes: "Say / Natty-Natty, / no bodder / das weh / yuh culture!"⁹ Or consider not only Linton Kwesi Johnson's deforming spelling *Inglan* but also these raucous lyrics from "Fite Dem Back" in *Inglan Is a Bitch*:

we gonna smash their brains in
cause they ain't got *nofink* in 'em ...

⁸ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966), pp. 209-210. Bennett, a popular performer in Jamaica, was born in 1919. Bennett's poems might usefully be compared with the Hawaiian pidgin of Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater* (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1993).

⁹ Michael Smith, *It a Come* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), p.50. Smith, who was born in Kingston in 1954, was killed in 1983.

fashist an di attack
noh baddah worry 'bout dat¹⁰

where Johnson switches from a quoted dialect that he mocks — the first two lines are in the voice of the neofascist "paki bashah" — back to his own dialect voice. Note that brains, in the quoted dialect, is spelled in the standard fashion but that nothing manages to suggest fink and, more tellingly, in Johnson's comment, fascist manages to suggest *shit*. Similarly, in "Sonny's Lettah", Johnson can use a traditional, heavily rhyming "letter from jail" form more effectively than any contemporary poet I can think of. "For these inheritors of the revolution," says Brathwaite, "nation-language is no longer anything to argue about or experiment with; it is their classical norm and comes out of the same experience as the music of contemporary popular songs: using the same riddims, the same voice-spreads, syllable clusters, blue notes, ostinado, syncopation, and pauses." (pp. 45-46) The British poet John Agard puts the case directly, in "Listen Mr Oxford Don":

I ent have no gun
I ent have no knife
but mugging de Queen's English
is the story of my life

I don't need no axe
to split/ up yu syntax
I dont need no hammer
to mash/ up yu grammar¹¹

¹⁰ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Inglan Is a Bitch* (London: Race Today Publications, 1980), p. 20. The distinction between the two voices is even more marked in Johnson's performance. Thanks to Nick Lawrence for his comments on this poem/song, as well as other comments on the manuscript.

¹¹ John Agard, "Listen Mr Oxford Don" in *The New British Poetry*, ed. Gillian Allnutt, Fred D'Aguiar, Ken Edwards, and Eric Mottram (London: Palladin, 1988), p. 5. It is significant that this poem opens the anthology as well as the section of black poets, which includes Johnson, as well as several other poets working with dialect (or nation language) — Valerie Bloom, Jean Binta Breeze, Merle Collins, Grace Nichols, Levi Tafari. Mottram's and Edwards's sections in the anthology specifically chart poets working in the wake of Bunting and MacDiarmid. Thus, at least in Britain, the two streams I navigate in this essay are brought into close proximity.

As Brathwaite puts it, "It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master, and it was in his (mis-)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled."¹²

But rebelled into what? Not, I think, a more authentic representation of speech but an even more marvelous realization of the yammering gap between speech and writing (the stammering gaps among speeches and writings).¹³ "Writing wrongs speech", as Neil Schmitz puts it in *Of Huck and Alice*¹⁴. In these senses, the nonstandard spelling of dialect writing doesn't so much transcribe words as underscores the sensuous/sinuous materiality of language. The pleasure is in this play between the written word and the impossible objects of its desires.¹⁵

Little has been written about Claude McKay's early dialect work, no doubt due to the ambiguous status of certain literary dialect practices even for such eloquent proponents of "nation language" as Brathwaite¹⁶:

McKay's first two books of poetry (1912), written in Jamaica, are unique in that they are the first all-dialect collections of an anglophone Caribbean poet. They are however *dialect* as distinct from *nation* because McKay allowed himself to be

¹² Quoted in J. Edward Chamberlin, *Come Back to Me My Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 67. In the U.S. the explicitly political dimension of these issues emerges in the English First movement as well as in confrontations over the use of Black English.

¹³ On the poetics of limping, staggering, stuttering and stammering, see Nathaniel Mackey, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Ch. Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990).

¹⁴ Neil Schmitz, *Of Huck and Alice: Humorous Writing in American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 97.

¹⁵ This is a good place to thank Robert von Hallberg for his detailed reading of the manuscript and for his many helpful suggestions.

¹⁶ North's *The Dialect of Modernism* includes a chapter on McKay, "Quashie to Buccra: The Linguistic Expatriation of Claude McKay", which begins with a discussion of his dialect poetry.

imprisoned in the pentameter; he didn't let his language find its own parameters." (p. 20)

Dialect practice can appear to be a form of self-deprecation as it approaches "black face" — the minstrel mocking of black vernacular by white as well as black performers. As Brathwaite remarks:

Dialect is thought of as 'bad English'. Dialect is 'inferior English'. Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history of coming from the plantation where people's dignity is distorted through their language and the descriptions which the dialect gave to them. (p. 13)

The anxiety of dialect is inscribed already in Paul Laurence Dunbar's work, where poems in "plantation" dialect are placed side-by-side with poems in standard English, both sharing the heavily accented pentameter that for Brathwaite marks them as problematic but which nonetheless makes Dunbar's *Complete Poems* (1913) one of the most unsettling and provocative works of early modernism. Brathwaite goes on to criticize McKay for his turn to the sonnet in the poems for which he is most famous, noting the heavy cost of McKay's desire for "universality". This echoes the debate between advocates of standard literary verse such as Countee Cullen and practitioners of the vernacular such as Sterling Brown, a debate that is at the heart of Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Baker identifies the controversy as between "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery". In contrast to my approach here, Baker champions the assimilationist poetics of Cullen and Washington, arguing for the long-term efficacy of using dominant cultural forms as one would a mask, to provide camouflage while precluding total identification. At the same time, he rebukes, unfortunately in my view, what he calls the "guerrilla" tactics of resistance and secession represented by Dunbar and others involved with "sounding" "deformation", a position he associates with DuBois.

The use of dialectical or ideolectical language in a poem marks a refusal of standard English as the common ground of communication. For poets wishing to obliterate or overcome such marks of difference, the choice of the conventional literary language, whether understood as mask or not, reflects a willingness to abide by the linguistic norms of a culture and to

negotiate within these norms. Nonstandard language practice suggests an element of cultural resistance that has as its lower limit dialogic self-questioning and its upper limit secession and autonomy.

Cullen took up the forms valued as "universal" by a dominant culture in which the use of African-American, as opposed to midwestern or northeastern, dialect was taken to be a mark of inferiority; his work wears its humanity on its sleeve, the only place where it could be seen in a society defined in large measure by the color line. In such a reading, Cullen can be understood as an American pragmatist par excellence.

Brathwaite, an advocate of "nation language", that is of linguistic autonomy and self-sufficiency, makes an argument against the compromised form of dialect practiced by McKay, seeing it, at best, as the beginning of a cultural practice that comes to fruition, in the Caribbean, with Bennett, Smith, Johnson, and his own work. In the U.S. during the modernist period, Sterling Brown is probably the foremost practitioner of such a poetics. For Brathwaite, "nation language" is not a deformation of mastery but the sign of a newly forming collective identity. It moves beyond critique and subversion to positive expressivity; that is, beyond a bogus universality to what Brathwaite, problematically in my view, understands as a genuine locality.

The tension between universality and locality is not simply a deformation or an embryonic phase of group consciousness to be shed at maturity. As against the positive expressivity of nation language I would speak of the negative dialectics of ideolect, where ideolect would mark those poetic sites of contest between the hegemonic and the subaltern, to use the terms of Antonio Gramsci. Here indeed would be a poetics of compromise and dependency — of hybridization and contradiction and multivocality. Under this sign of radical modernism, I would include not only Dunbar and McKay, but also Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Tolson; and I would add, among others, in the U.S., Louis Zukofsky, Hart Crane, and Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, and in U.K., Bunting and MacDiarmid.

One thing these poets have in common is the influence of Marxism on their poetic practice (Toomer may be the exception.)¹⁷

¹⁷ Peter Quartermain, in a letter (March 18, 1995), notes that Bunting had read *Capital*. Despite his often stated antipathy to Marx "as economist and call it historian -- it's the Hegelian side of Marx, the notion of that historical dialectic which will inevitably (or not) bring about historical change, the withering away of the state ... Bunting had great sympathy for

Marxism is a universalist philosophy with a checkered history of (often contradictory) critiques of nationalism as well as ethnic and racial and sexual essentialisms. Perhaps the most useful approach to this issue is found in the work of Gramsci, a Sardinian Marxist whose critique of hegemony is grounded in his own experience as a "subaltern" Southerner whose language was marked as inferior by its dialectical difference from the Italian of the North.

In considering the internal contradictions between the local and the universal, the subaltern and the hegemonic, I turn to McKay, who, in poems of breathtaking duplicity and paradox, uses proto-Marxist ideas of universalism to contest the hegemony of British culture in Jamaica. In 1912, when he was 22 and still living in Jamaica, McKay published two collections of dialect poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. No one reading or commenting on these poems can fail to note the many compromising aspects of this collection. Most obvious are running translations and glosses at the foot of each page, providing unnecessary and misleading translations of dialect words and often giving blatantly, not to say comically, ameliorist interpretations of the poems. Like Dunbar's *Collected Poems*, McKay's dialect poetry is a schizophrenic presentation, foregrounding two unequally powerful readerships, black and white. Given McKay's association with, as Brathwaite puts it, "a Svengali like Walter Jekyll" (p. 20), the controlling hand of white editorial authority is always present on the page.¹⁸ Another equally marked gesture of "complicity" is the title *Constab Ballads* itself, for what kind of poetic autonomy can we expect from poems written from the point of view of a Jamaican native working for the British as a policeman?

How is it possible for an act of linguistic defiance bordering on revolt to appear in a cultural space that would

Marx as social critic, as let's say 'humanist,' and was especially taken with [his] diagnoses of the conditions of the working (and unemployed) poor."

¹⁸. According to McKay in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970) Jekyll "became my intellectual and literary mentor and encouraged me to continue writing verses in Negro dialect." Jekyll, McKay continued, "had gone among the peasants and collected their field-and-yard songs (words and music) and African folk tales and published them in a book called *Jamaica Song and Story* [1907]." Jekyll "became interested when he first saw my verses — enthusiastic really — and said they sounded like the articulate consciousness of the peasants". (p. 13)

suppress any explicit expression of political opposition? In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (*Arts de faire*, literally the art of doing), in a section titled "a diversionary practice", de Certeau speaks of an "enunciative" tactic he calls "la perruque" or the wig:

La perruque is the worker's own work disguised as the work of his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. ... the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) ... for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit. ... to deal with everyday tactics in this way would be to practice an "ordinary art", to find oneself in the common situation, and to make a kind of *perruque* of writing itself.¹⁹

In McKay's 1912 collections, rhyming pentameter and hexameter dialect is the ruse or wig that allows a running double play of ingratiation and defiance. For the "white" audience, the dialect plays as minstrel show: charming, even ingratiating in its gratuitous nods to British sentiment and in its self-glossing self-deprecations. At the same time, the poems compose a song to the aesthetic power of difference, of the sonic and semantic richness of vernacular Jamaican, while in their themes they corrode the very authoritativeness to which they appear to be kowtowing, accumulating a counter-hegemonic force that mocks every surface pretence of accommodation. This double play brings to mind Melville's *Benito Cereno*, which, as Aldon Nielsen points out "is a dramatization of the white racist mind *not reacting* in the face of a slave insurrection; for the dramatic irony of the novel derives from Delano's inability to recognize that which is palpably before him. He is so much inhabited by the discourse agreements of white mythology" that he (mis)interprets "the actuality of the slave revolt" as stereotypical gestures of "servile loyalty".²⁰

Certainly the most ingratiatingly Anglophilic, doggedly iambic, and apparently self-deprecating, poem in *Songs of Jamaica*

¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Stephen Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 25 and 28.

²⁰ Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 16-18.

is "Old England":

Just to view de homeland England, in de streets of London
walk ...
I would see Saint Paul's Cathedral, an' would hear some of
de great
Learnin' comin' from de bishops, preachin' relics of old
fait';
I would ope me mout' wid wonder at de massive organ
soun',
An' would 'train me eyes to see de beauty lyin' all aroun' //
I'd go to de City Temple, where de old fait' is a wreck
An' de parson is a-preachin' views dat most folks will not
tek;
I'd go where de men of science meet togeder in deir hall,
To give light unto de real truths, to obey king Reason's
call.²¹

On the surface, this is a poem of nostalgia and complacency, even ending on the subservient note of the native returning home from the Mother country, resting "glad an' contented in me min' for evermore" (p. 65). No wonder Brathwaite points to this poem as an example of McKay's "literary colonialism in the primordial (?) anglicanism" (p. 20). But the poem overplays the sentiment in a way that, at least at the distance from which I am reading it, calls attention to itself, or calls for a different kind of attention, a reading between the lines. What, after all, is this great learning coming from "relics" of an "old fait'" but the old *fate* of racism and colonialism; what is this "beauty lyin' all aroun'" but more relics of lying beauty, overturned by the "real truths" or Reason. For this poem, after all, is unambiguous in enforcing the truths (plural) of Reason (cap R): the cant of the preachers is a lying beauty, a wreck of learning that appears beautiful or truthful only with eyes "trained" (by whom?). Read as wig, the poem begins to destabilize, though a line like "I would ope me mout' wid wonder at de massive organ soun'" remains difficult, as far as I can see, to turn round. Yet even the textual glosses can seem to take on significance; here, only two words, among a number equally nonstandard, are singled out for definition: "t'o't" - thought, and

²¹. Claude McKay, *Songs of Jamaica*, reprinted in *The Dialect Poems of Claude McKay* (Plainville, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), pp. 63-64.

"min" - mind. It's as if we are to be reminded that the "native" has thoughts and a mind of his own: in this sense *mine* is synonymous with *mind*. Perhaps this poem is not so far from Louise Bennett's work after all, considering that McKay's work was Bennett's first example of Jamaican dialect poetry (Brathwaite, p. 28). Even the "old" in "Old England" begins to seem more ominous.

Am I overreading? McKay is careful to note in *A Long Way Home*, that he became a "free-thinker" before he was 13, discovering "like a comet ... the romance of science in Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature* and Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe*."²² By the time he was writing *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, McKay was steeped in Spinoza (for a while he considered himself a pantheist), Schopenhauer, and Spencer (and by extension Darwin).

Consider McKay's "Cudjoe Fresh from de Lecture" about "How de buccra te-day tek time an' bégin teach / All of us dat was deh in a clear open speech" (pp. 55-58). The buccra's, or whiteman's, "open speech" is about evolution, a humanist scientific theory that, in Cudjoe's interpretation, undermines the racist ideas that are lived out in the plantation system reflected in the "imprisoned pentameter", or closed (constrained) speech, of the poem: "Him tell us 'bout we self, an' mek we fresh again". This idea of being made "fresh" (not used, exploited) is what Cudjoe tells as the urgent "news" from this lecture:

Me look 'pon me black 'kin, an' so me head grow big, ...
For ebery single man, no car' about dem rank,
Him bring us ebery one an' put 'pon same plank.

Looking upon his black skin he also sees his black *kin* in this collective vision of the equality of "ebery man". On one reading "me head grow big" has the same stereotyping gesture of self-patronization as "ope me mout wid wonder", but taken literally it means the opposite — the news reverses the patronizing of Cudjoe and his kin, returns heads to actual size. If evolution "tell us 'traight 'bout how de whole t'ing came", then Christianity, which preaches that blackness is a "cuss", tells it crooked:

An' looking close at t'ings, we hab to pray quite hard
Fe swaller wha' him say an' don't t'ink bad o' Gahd

²². Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 12.

Ingratiation or defiance hidden in a smirk as broad as the face of "Gahd"? If evolution preaches chance not predetermination, then the scenario of Benito Cereno is closer to hand for no natural law precludes the justice of insurrection (the hound, let's say, being on the other tooth):

But suppose eberyt'ing could tu'n right upside down,
Den p'rhaps we'd be on top an' givin' some one houn'.

The very next stanza quells such an interpretation, noting that were the Africans not brought to the Americas they might still be "half-naked ... tearin' t'rough de bush wid all de monkey" — "Wile an' uncibilise', an' neber comin' tame." Yet the poem is not about the taming effect of this "clear open speech" but how this way of thinking inspires strong feelings that lead to Cudjoe's *own* uncorked "talk". Acknowledging that his talk is going in two directions, Cudjoe then ends by saying maybe not:

Yet both horse partly runnin' in de selfsame gallop
For it is nearly so de way de buccra pull up:
Him say, how de wul' stan', dat right will neber be,
But wrong will eber gwon till dis wul' en' fe we. (p. 58)

The buccara stops the gallop of Cudjoe's racing thoughts by saying right will never be. But the last line of the poem is ambiguous: for if wrong will grow till this world ends *for us*, doesn't that mean that we will have to end it ourselves, so that we may establish the truth of a new world? I hear this, anyway, with all the doubling I have so far noted, in the title of a poem that might be read as a hymn to accommodation, "Whe' Fe Do?". The gloss provided for this title encapsulates the issues sharply; it runs like this: "What to do? — equivalent to 'What can't be cured, must be endured.'" Each stanza of the poem ends with a variation on the title's question: "All we can do" "Dat we might do" "For dat caan' do" "Whe' else fe do?" "De best to do" and finally "But whe' fe do?" But can't (caan') the title also mean What Is to Be Done? — all that can be done, what's best to do, what must be done?

What to make of this? In McKay's Jamaica poems, iambic pentameter (or hexameter) is made the metrical mark of colonialism, the chains around a corrosive dialect. Pentameter (or hexameter) is used to serve as the acoustic trappings of "old England", yoked to a diffident creole, the weird ordinary of verse dialect. It is an oxymoronic form. In this sense, the dialect poems

have a similar implosive power to McKay's "If We Must Die", written five years after his move to the U.S. in 1914, which creates a tension between the conventional expectations of the Elizabethan sonnet form and its violent and unsettling subject matter.

Claude McKay's Jamaica poems are not free verse. They are marked by their uneasy relation to the cultural regime under which they were written. But what is the natural form for a vernacular poetry?²³ MacDiarmid and Bunting offer a radically modernist setting for their dialect work that is a far cry from the more direct, sometimes ethnographic, representations of Sterling Brown. Hughes's style is fluid but often sets itself apart from the quoted vernacular that peoples his work (as in "The Weary Blues"); unlike in Brown, identification with the demotic voices is not total. In his *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator*, Melvin Tolson chooses a radically defamiliarizing form to set his multilectical excursions:

High as the ace of trumps,
as egghead says, "'The artist is a strange bird,' Lenin says."
Dipping in every direction like a quaquaversal,
the M.C. guffaws: "Hideho, that swig would make
a squirrel spit in the eye of a bulldog!"
Bedlam beggars
at a poet's feast in a people's dusk of dawn counterpoint
protest and pride
in honkey tonk rhythms
hot as an ache in a cold hand warmed. ...
A Creole co-ed from Basin street by way of
Morningside Heights ...
brushes my shattered cocktail glass into a tray ...
O spiritual, work-song, ragtime, blues jazz —
consorts of
the march, quadrille, polka, and waltz!²⁴

²³ Lorenzo Thomas points to the significance of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927) as "an attempt to distinguish an authentic African-American vernacular from dialect stereotypes using Modernist poetic form" in a review of *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in African-American Fiction* by Eric J. Sundquist in *American Book Review*, March-May, 1995, p. 4. I am grateful to Thomas's discussion of Johnson as part of a Poetics Program lecture on Melvin Tolson at SUNY-Buffalo on Nov. 14, 1991.

²⁴ Melvin Tolson, "XI", *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965), pp. 82-83.

This is neither universal poetry nor nation language, it is "quaqaversal poetry", a close relative to ideolect. Tolson's hybridization of discourse, featuring the music of shattering glass (pentameter anyone?) on the tray of a Creole coed from New Orleans by way of the Upper West Side, mixes cultural references with the sophisticated elan of a poet who makes language his home: the poet's feast this counterpoint of contrasting rhythms, protest and pride. It's not that the indigenous cultural forms of African Americans — spiritual, work-song, ragtime, and blues, so remarkably and directly charted in Brown's poetry — are the same as the European dance forms but that a process of Creolization is underway: they consort with each other in the dance of America.

The closest thing I can think of to Tolson's dazzling mix of citations and refutations, discourse as concourse, is Zukofsky's collage poems, from "Poem Beginning 'The'" to "A". I think the Creole coed may even be a kissing cousin to Zukofsky's "A Foin Lass" in his translation into Brooklynese of "Donna mi Prega", "A Foin Lass Boddors". Zukofsky's use of slang is not, to be sure, an instance of cultural identification, and Zukofsky's sense of his Jewishness reflected the ambivalence of many leftists of his generation. He had, after all, chosen not to write in his native tongue, or at least the language of his parents, Yiddish, specifically choosing not to join with some of his differently radical contemporaries who wrote Yiddish poetry as an assertion of what could well be called Jewish nation language. But Zukofsky's ear was tuned to the local and the vernacular and even as he transforms the demotic into his own brand of ideolect the origin in the ordinary is patent.

When de Certeau writes of the practice of the wig as "an ordinary art" he provides a reminder that dialect and ideolect practices are practices of the ordinary, and in this way linked to other demotic literary practices; but also that the ordinary grounds itself in provisional constructions not natural facts. The ordinary eludes fixed forms of representation; it can be evoked, not captured. For the ordinary captured becomes merely captions on a vanished object, an evacuated site for the residual rubbernecking of exhausted passers-by. The poetic practice of the ordinary is synthetic and synthesizing, not essentializing. Verse dialect, like any representation of speech in writing, is always a form of invention.

One of the extraordinary things about the poetics of the ordinary is that it can make poems that look so strange. Any approach to the ordinary is partial because the ordinary, like

materiality itself, is inexhaustible. The poetics of the ordinary can set its sights on a series of aspects — on meter, on diction, on theme, on lexicon. Poetic attention to any one of these aspects may make a poem that will seem alien to those accustomed to different literary conventions. Transcribed speech, for example, may seem more unnatural than the idealized conventions for representing speech. Dialect, because it uses a nonstandard lexicon, can look as odd as the zaum or neologistic poems of Velimer Khlebnikov or David Melnick or Gillespie or P. Inman, even to the native speaker of the represented idiom. The ordinary erodes and resists the standard, just as standard English and normative verse forms exoticize and defamiliarize the ordinary. There can be no completely ordinary poetry because there can be no poetry without style or form. "We fling ourselves, constantly longing, on this form."²⁵

Very little has been written about the ideolectical writing of Abraham Lincoln Gillespie. Gillespie's pervasively neologistic work bears some resemblance to *Finnigans Wake*; certainly, Gillespie knew Joyce. Unlike Joyce, Gillespie was not interested in maximizing the etymologic resonances of words but rather in creating a kind of scat writing, with jazz as a significant influence. American identity, along with "Self" expression, is certainly under erasure, more likely actively being erased, in "Expatriation" (out from fatherland and race/roots), Gillespie's response to a 1928 *transition* questionnaire on Americans living in Europe:

the Spiritual Future of America is not to evolve till a present diabetes is admit > removed, t'wit: America's total lack of parent-sagacity to exprimply an especially-while-correcting them goodwill toward, and to cull an early admiration from the children ... THEN — the American Spirit will commence-sing as naive-direct-elimgoalpursue-clearly as its present FolkMelod — "PopularSong," frequently as blare-OutréFruct-freely as its dynaSaxophoneyc. ... (i.e. Fair, groove-compulsed into an inevitaBanter-Fair — we *are* a Good Will-Collective — will assume social sensitude, a BodyClap-RazzCourtly deft-joice-skew-Apply-akin (somehow) to the finesse of France's Golden period. ... Semitised Russia will certainly

²⁵. Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 470.

psychYap doubly, its individuentremainingscorn-
evadedDefeatists, speaking their present
flapdoodleNonDigninholdLiable'd rushout-heedless-O-
Self!-stuff.²⁶

If dialect poetry seems to foster group identification, idelect poetry may seem to foster the opposite: a rejection or troubling of identity structures, group or individual. Yet the rejection of received ideas of identity can also be understood as the continuation of the politics of identity by other means. The poetics of identity cannot be symmetrical for the subaltern and for that which it is subaltern to. For every poetics of cultural legitimation might not there also need to be a poetics of delegitimation?, as in, Please move over; or else we fall in the "groove-compulsed ... Banter" of America as (we are not) "Good Will-Collective". This passage from Gillespie reminds me of nothing so much as one of Bruce Andrews's "dynaSaxophoneyc" riffs of invented slang in *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*, which, like Gillespie's work, approaches the vernacular question from the other end of the stick, i.e., none too pretty out there. The evisceration of a preassigned cultural identity, as in Andrews (son, like Gillespie, of affluent white America), is also a form of identity politics.

Khlebnikov's *zaum*, or transense poetry, was made to transcend the divisions of national languages; he wanted to write an idelect that all could understand. *Zaum's* desire for universality is marked by its high coefficient of weirdness, which is to say its abiding and enchanting peculiarity. At another subdivision of this spectrum, David Melnick's homophonic, and therefore ideolectical, translation of Homer, *Men in Aida*, may first be read for the sheer pleasure of its sonic plenitude; but after a while the playful signification of both a gay and poetic "sub"culture, an erotic and writerly community, is unmistakable:

Ache I on a rope alone, guy guard on a wreck, day oh say
sting.
Hose cape pee, oh tit, toes on echo sat. O Phoibos Apollo ...
Egg are oh yummy. Andrews call o' semen hose Meg a
pant on.

²⁶ Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, "Expatracination", in *The Syntactic Revolution*, ed. Richard Milazzo (New York: Out of London Press, 1980), pp. 17-18. Gillespie was born in Philadelphia in 1895; he died in 1950.

Argue on, critic. All high pay, then tie Achaioi.²⁷

No more a poet of the Americas than Bunting or MacDiarmid, Javant Biarujia, an Australian poet, has embarked on the most systematically and literally idiolectical poetry of which I am aware. Over the past 25 years, since he was a teenager, Biarujia has been working with an invented language that he calls Taneraic; he also edits an (in effect) poetry magazine, *taboo jadoo*, dedicated to "the discussion and expression of private language (*langue close*)", which is in the process of publishing an extensive Taneraic-English dictionary:

MEPA. 1. present (n.). 2. being in the process of. 3 in (*often with gerund*). A *mepa* xirardi celini armin. A is wearing a beautiful shirt. Vadas ibescya *mepa* avi bouain. I failed *in* my attempt. Anqaudi rasra ilir *mepa* virda. There's no point [*in*] waiting.
mepaceti. nowadays
mepadesqesati. this morning
mepadesqovati. this evening; tonight
mepadesusati. this afternoon
mepaiveti. today
mepajabeti. up-to-date; modern
mepanintati. for the night; tonight
mepa yu. whereas
mepeili. in every place: everywhere
MEPIR. imagination. **mepirdi.** imagine. **mepiri.** imaginary. **mepirocya.** imagination; fantasy; hallucination. **mepirsya.** fancy ...
mepir rin. delusion. **das mepir rindi.** delude
mepir tane. vision.
mepir troutou. fancy.
mepir uza. vision, foresight. **das mepir uzadi.** envision; visualize, envisage
MEQ sexual prowess *or* potency.²⁸

This is from a dream recorded in Biarujia's diary:

²⁷. David Melnick, *Men in Aida, Book One* (Berkeley: Tuumba, 1983).

²⁸. Javant Biarujia, *Nainougacyou Tanerai Sasescya Sepou E - Na: Taneraic-English Dictionary E - Na*, in *taboo jadoo* #6 (Melbourne: Nosukomo; Summer, 1992-1993), p. 94.

Mepadesqesati, vamahusatta ye trahemoqá e *Abdeleslam*. ...
Ayoí vasyenda, tusqeriaru yole bayada e tusqer yoca, busai
go ayoí vajesda vaireubda yole ayoí qussada. Vasezoqda
gon. ... Oubqendiyo. Amahusatta, busai sezoqiaru duvondi
aiban desqes.²⁹

As dialect becomes vernacular, as the demotic is traded for ideolect, we may hear a complication or evasion or erasure of identity more than a celebration of it: an exploration of the space between identities more than the establishment of a primary identity. Then again, perhaps what we hear is a writing that moves beyond the present definitions and inscriptions of collective and individual identifications and toward a virtual or coming identity about which these confusions and comminglings, call them confabulations, hint; as if such writing leaves room for readers' multifoliate projections.

I am conscious that an ideolectical poetry, insofar as it may dismantle whatever self or group identities we may have already developed, risks making us more atomized and so more passive. In this state of "postmodern" paranoia, all collective formations — real or imagined — are ironized or aestheticized, that is, debunked as arbitrary codes, with fashion and market ascendent as the arbiters of value. If social identities are to be made problematic as part of the poetic process, this may be in order to forge new collective identities that will enable a more resourceful resistance to rigidly territorializing clannishness and paralyzingly depoliticizing codicity.

The problem is how to be resistant to the reductiveness of all forms of positivism without succumbing to the relativistic erosions of market value that transform poetry from an arena for social exploration or expression to an empty marker of

²⁹. Biarujia provides the text and translation in an offprint identified as from *Vehicle* #3 (1992): "This morning I awoke from a nightmare about Abdeleslam ... I ran to him, moving in slow motion, and when I reached him I cried out that I loved him. I cried ... I kissed him. I woke up, and spent breakfast in tears."

In a letter (May 23, 1995) responding to a draft of this essay, and correcting a few typos I had made in his Taneraic, Biarujia says he has translated the word ideolectical into a Taneraic paraphrase: "*aspelasi remou abaq sancyab e sava mamale* (lit., nonfigurative thought-basis-way and personal-speech)".

"subjectivity" in designated Free Trade Zones (to which both poet and reader are subject). That is, to presume a realm of social truths against the one truth of technorationality and its schizoid doubles, triumphalist capitalism and religious fundamentalism.

Blake remains the greatest emblem of this "Mental Fight" in the English poetry traditions and Blake's active, oppositional Imagination — "Image Nations" — is a vital source for a poetics of the Americas.

The point is not to display imagination but to mobilize imaginations.

But how can we mobilize imaginations, those imaginary nations, when, for the most part, "imagination" and "subjectivity" have become housepets of the personal lifestyle industry, cousins to a "creativity" that seems to apply more to earrings than to hearing? This is no doubt Adorno's fear in questioning the historical role of lyric poetry in the wake of a systematic extermination process that shows up all our means of representation as thin, palely inadequate to the realities at hand.

For most conventional verse practice, like many other forms of cultural production, are more the products of an ideological system than of any putative author. As a result, they can be read as cultural "symptoms" rather than as the inspired and original works of an autonomous author. However, the current movement of "cultural studies" risks levelling all art to the status of symptom. For poetry can, even if it often doesn't, resist absorption into the *zeitgeist*. No artist can remain entirely free from "collaboration" with the society in which she or he works, history is too consuming for that, but relative degrees of resistance are possible. Art can provide a means by which to read culture, cognitive maps if you will. New forms provide new methods of critique.

Surely, the subjectivized, gutted lyric that pervades poetry today proves Adorno's point. Nonetheless, from this same historical point of view, I would say that poetry is the most necessary form of language practice after the wars: but a different poetry than we have known. The task of creating this poetry is impossible and for that reason takes place.