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AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: MAGICAL POETICS AND QUEER ALCHEMY

&

A PLANETARY SPELL

By

Robert Eric Shoemaker

B.A., University of Chicago, 2014

M.F.A., Naropa University, 2018

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2022

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A Dissertation Approved on

March 24, 2022

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-

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The poem "Moon" is after a poem by Ellie Swensson.



## ABSTRACT

### "AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: MAGICAL POETICS AND QUEER ALCHEMY"

Robert Eric Shoemaker

March 24, 2022

"Words have power": no more obvious statement has perhaps ever been made in an essay. However, the nature of that power is quite complicated, with a long and contentious history. I think of poetry as magic. Poetry is magical in the sense that it has ineffable qualities to it that enable readers to experience new thoughts and feelings when experiencing poetry, but when I say magic I mean that I think of poetry as actual, practical magic. As I will argue, poetry has magical qualities to it regardless of who is weaving the words, while intentional use of a self-aware magical poetics renders the effects of poetry palpable and controllable by the poet. A magical poetics, as I argue, is an effective (and affective) sociopolitical tool.

In this essay, I approach a definition of magic pertaining to language and poetics and outline the historical origins of magical poetry in efficacious language practices and rituals since antiquity. I explore these practices as ancestral predecessors of the aesthetics of magic in poetry, emphasizing the English Romantics and stretching to the present day, in order to better understand how and why certain poems and poets attempt to evoke, conjure, banish, channel, and otherwise incant through language use, particularly by leveraging the semiotic slippage of meaning.

I tell the story of magical poetics using a variety of methods and styles based on close reading and literary analysis, cultural and historical theory, queer and feminist perspectives, memoir, self-reflection and poetics statement, anecdote, Twitter critique, oral history, #BlackLivesMatter counter-hegemony, and other counter-moves in the hope of creating an "alchemical" formula — a spell of its own, intended to encourage belief and practice. This essay depends upon a theoretical backbone based in liminality and theories of the margins, and so I feel that only a queered scholarly style will convey meaning as I intend for it to be conveyed, matching form to content — as above, so below.

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## INTRODUCTION

MAGICK is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will.

- Aleister Crowley (1, formatting preserved)

That is where the real magic happens. It doesn't happen through attempting to craft a thought through clarity. "And let me just move you into a beautiful image of a garden..." That's rudimentary. The ultimate magician is the one who can put together paradoxes and words that don't actually go together; you know, have someone who's receiving that enter into a state of deep, deep confusion...and then at the end say, oh, huh. That's a change in energy. That's a trans-migration.

- Kristin Prevallet, oral history interview (10, emphasis preserved)

When I interviewed poet Kristin Prevallet on September 18th, 2021, the world was changing before our eyes. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found ourselves sitting together on the University of Louisville campus, two writers serendipitously encountering each other at different career junctures, yet on the same path. I consider Prevallet an elder poet whom I include in my lineage, though I did not know until this interview that we both felt the same winds of change in the poetry spheres. Our discussion hinged on the reformulation of systems of power and agency, both in the United States and in the world at large, because of the 20th and 21st centuries' erosion of a status quo that, perhaps partly because of COVID-19, was beginning to visibly rupture. The meteoric rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and related protests against police violence, the critical mass of climate change and its growing impact on individual lives, the violent polarization of political perspectives in America,

and more factors like these had grown more potent during quarantine. Prevallet and I met in this middle, this liminal and changing space, to discuss our ideas of poetry and how it impacts this 2020s world.

Poetry today is no aesthetic backdrop to some more important sociopolitical play, and it never has been. Pop poets like Rupi Kaur, however you feel about the work itself, are bringing poetry to the mainstream and are changing the role of poets and poetry, possibly through bringing back the idea of the people's poet. Writers like Amanda Gorman, who, though young and likely at the very beginning of a life in poetry, brought her poem "The Hill We Climb" to the national stage at President Joe Biden's 2021 inauguration, are imagining new possibilities. Gorman's poem of an America that "isn't broken, / but simply unfinished" gestures at and continues to create a space for the poet (perhaps Gorman herself) as political leader:

We, the successors of a country and a time  
where a skinny Black girl  
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother  
can dream of becoming president,  
only to find herself reciting for one... (CNBC)

Because of and through public acts like these, poetry is having a popular renaissance, and in more ways than one. As poets, what do we make of this moment, and what does this moment require of us?

Kristin Prevallet and I believe in the inherent power of language, especially as wielded through poetry, and as the epigraph quoting Prevallet shows, she believes that the work of paradox or metaphor that brings together the irreconcilable, and of energy migration as manifested in words, is poetry's ideological sway and purview. Words are never simple. Words are never blanks; when fired, words put holes in the world by



riddling "meaning" with pits and pockmarks. We change the world by and through using words, and in this way, words have power. And that power is magic.

To see the connections of poetry and magic, we must forego certain ideas of poetry. Poetry, in both the historical sense and in one sociopolitical sense today, is an integral element of human exchange. As cultural historian Johan Huizinga writes of what he calls the "play element" in language:

The first thing we have to do to gain such an understanding [of poetry as unified with esoteric doctrine, wisdom, and ritual] is to discard the idea that poetry has only an aesthetic function or can only be explained in terms of aesthetics. In any flourishing, living civilization...poetry has a vital function that is both social and liturgical. All antique poetry is at one and the same time ritual, entertainment, artistry, riddle-making, doctrine, persuasion, sorcery, soothsaying, prophecy, and competition. (120)

Poetry has only recently, regarding the span of human history, been dis-enchanted. One aim of this essay is to see how the spell is being cast anew.

I offer one heuristic definition of magical language and poetics. As implied by the epigraph from Aleister Crowley, my definition of magical poetics is rooted in the efficacy of magic and language. Magical poetics is an umbrella term for a theory of language and practices of poetry rooted in language's imaginative and efficacious potential as channeled through intentional acts and performances. In other words, magic uses the power inherent in language and is explored as an agent of change by poets and in poems. As I discuss these ideas in this essay, I will also outline the historical origins of powerful magical poetry in efficacious language practices and rituals since antiquity. I explore these practices as ancestral predecessors for the aesthetics of magic in poetry, emphasizing the English Romantics of the 19th century and stretching to the present day,

in order to better understand how and why certain poems and poets incant through language use, particularly by leveraging semiotic slippages of meaning.

I will tell the story of magical poetics using a variety of methods and styles based on close reading and literary analysis, cultural and historical theory, queer and feminist perspectives, memoir, self-reflection and poetics statement, anecdote, Twitter critique, oral history, #BlackLivesMatter counter-hegemony, and other counter-moves in the hope of creating an "alchemical" formula – a spell of its own, intended to encourage belief and practice. As I explore it in the contemporary poetry scene, magic can be seen as subversive and counter-hegemonic, which for me necessitates a non-normative writing style that denies the reader simple, denotative answers. This essay depends upon a theoretical backbone based in liminality and theories of the margins, and so I feel that only a queered scholarly style aligned with the works of bell hooks (open to diverse audiences) and Jack Halberstam (referential, allusive, and playful) will convey meaning as I intend for it to be conveyed, matching form to content – as above, so below.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase "as above, so below," which serves as the title of my essay, stands metaphorically for the spiritual and scientific processes of alchemy (Principe 30). Alchemy, generally thought of as the medieval precursor to science, was not only the practical pursuit of the transformation of matter but the transformation of the self and the spirit through these attempts. Popularized by alchemical writings including the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the 1st–3rd c. CE, the phrase "as above, so below" originates in the brief, cryptic *Arabic Emerald Tablet* in the 8th or 9th c. CE (Principe). Both the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Emerald Tablet* are sources attributed to the figure Hermes

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<sup>1</sup> See Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* (2012) and *Wild Things* (2020), both from Duke UP; also, bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (Routledge, 1994).

Trismegistus, both a writer figure and a combination of Hermes and Thoth, who is a symbol of syncretism and alchemical transformation. As scientific and spiritual processes, alchemy is a convergence of the aesthetic and pragmatic aspects of magic. Because of this, alchemy is one ideal descriptor for magic in poetry. "As above, so below" signifies the interconnectedness yet also discreteness of all aspects of life: the mind, body, and spirit trinity, as well as the heavens and earth, all of which is mirrored in the relationship of the word to its meaning as described by linguistic theories of signs and signifiers, which will factor heavily in this theorization. Ultimately, this essay, just one in a history of attempts, is both an experiment in and an examination of the efficacy of language that I hope encourages further scholarly and creative treatments of magic and poetry.

## MAGIC IN POETRY

"Words have power": no more obvious statement has perhaps ever been made in an essay. However, the nature of that power is quite complicated, with a long and contentious history. In line with my aims for this paper, I think of poetry as magic. Poetry is magical in the sense that it has ineffable qualities to it that enable readers to experience new thoughts and feelings when experiencing poetry, but when I say magic I mean that I think of poetry as actual, practical magic, the closest one can get to becoming a wizard of the word. When Amanda Gorman took the stage and read "The Hill We Climb," she wasn't just reading a poem; she was, in effect, weaving a spell, a spell that showed to all of us watching the power that collective experiences of language events can have, as well as the power that a young, spirited, Black woman can wield when she uses words to

create and mold space. As I will argue, poetry has these magical qualities to it regardless of who is weaving the words, while intentional use of a self-aware magical poetics renders the effects of poetry palpable and controllable by the poet. A magical poetics, as I argue, is an effective (and affective) sociopolitical tool.

Aleister Crowley, infamous 19th-century occultist, poet, artist, queer man, and creator of the Thoth Tarot as well as the quasi-alchemical theology of Thelema, was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and, along with other writers including the magical poet and occultist William Butler Yeats, successfully and very problematically merged poetry and magical thinking. Despite his egomaniacal black magic and his misogynistic worldviews, I use Crowley's quotation from his 1929 *Magick in Theory and Practice* because, as I will show, the understanding of today's magic as a science and as an artistic practice is crucial to defining magical poetics. Crowley's definition of change as associated with the will of the caster aligns with the poet's capacity for effect in magical poetics. In Crowley's reckoning and in my own, magic is a practice that involves both scientific, procedural aspects and linguistic and other aesthetic choices that, when manipulated with intent, cause actual transformation. The degree of this alchemical change in poetry may be as minute as a flickering thought in a reader's or listener's mind, but that thought is manifest, affective change that can alter writers and readers in the same way that magic alters perception.

Witches, magi, and other magic-weavers have always been described as knowing in the sense that the arcane knowledge or gnosis (in the occult sense) that magicians gain access to is beyond that of the normative mortal, meaning that witches and magicians are both knowledgeable and powerful. Because this special knowledge is outside that of

normative sociopolitical groups, its power can be counter-hegemonic, threatening systems of power and lines of thinking that depend on conformity and thus condemn witchcraft and other forms of individual, magical empowerment. As Silvia Federici argues in her 2004 milestone feminist study *Caliban and the Witch*, witch-hunting was instrumental to "the construction of a new patriarchal order where women's bodies [along with queer and BIPOC bodies], their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under control" of the masculinist state (170). Because of the historical persecution of witches and, in some cultural contexts, practitioners of magic or "mageia" in the ancient derogatory sense, "alterity" can be a crucial factor in the witch's and poet's self-identification and/or practice, extending to both demographic identities (queer/straight, of-color/white, etc.) and self-ascribed identities like "occultist" (Frankfurter 11). Magic is power for use in otherwise powerless situations of sociopolitical "impotence," as theorist Bronislaw Malinowski describes (239), or is agency from liminal positions, in Frankfurter's analysis (19). For all of these reasons, I offer one functional definition of "magic" as the intentional manipulation of energetic interrelation and correspondence between subjects, objects, and ideas through language and performance to leverage or create power and effect, sometimes based in the subject's marginal orientation towards an authoritative center.

Poets, too, can and have been called witches, wizards, magi, occultists, and gnostics because of the power of the word and the knowledge associated with words. It is commonplace today for kitschy gift books like *Literary Witches: A Celebration of Magical Women Writers* (2017) to describe poets like Sylvia Plath and Mirabai as witches to align them with popular feminist interpretations of the word, but poetics works

like *Mandragora: Further Explorations in Esoteric Poesis* (2012) more deeply connect poets with the actions of the mystic, "exploring a deeper nature and bringing their gnosis to the reader in verse" (Legard 43). Poets gain access to meaning-making and to casting spells by experimenting with language, by warping words beyond the utilitarian or purely symbolic order, and by moving language beyond into the semiotic pool of meaning described by Julia Kristeva. This semiotic and the meaning beyond signs is "the precondition of language" though not the signs of language itself, "dependent on meaning but in a way that is not of linguistic signs nor of the symbolic order they found" (Kristeva 72, emphasis preserved). Kristin Prevallet, too, during our interview, described magical language as being in the semiotic and the slippery "sea" of syntax, "the river that runs through all language" (37). In this sea, meanings slip, intentionally, effectively, and affectively, and merge with other meanings.

#### KRISTEVAN SEMIOTICS, CONJUNCTIVE LINGUISTICS, AND MAGICAL THEORIES

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in her 1980 *Powers of Horror* provides a poetic truth that many, including myself, find effective at describing the workings of language. Central to Kristeva's theory is her notion of *jouissance*, an effect produced by literary and other aesthetic texts that affectively move the reader closer to the abject maternal body, that is, the pre-symbolic, semiotic space before worldly language (Kristeva 62). Phallogocentric western culture eschews the semiotic, unnameable, and "meaningless" because society coaches that sense and sense-making are equal to control and understanding, particularly of language. That which evades understanding also

evades ownership, manipulation, and use in the utilitarian and capitalistic sense, which leads to many ideas of poetry and other arts as "useless."

Kristeva proposes that writing, rather than determine its importance through utilitarian, phallogocentric meaning, often effectively evades that meaning, which brings the poem and the reader closer to the semiotic and to *jouissance* (16). *Jouissance* is experienced in the breakages or ruptures of meaning and in our experience of liminality, the space of possibility and meaninglessness – a glimpse of Prevallet's sea. "Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power" (77), Kristeva writes; this generative power of the maternal body is the spell of the semiotic, which we may relate very closely to the possibilities of alchemical transformation or the Romantic sublime. Other writers including Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have similarly pointed at the feminine, original, and semiotic slippage–space of meaning lacking "discursive coherence" as the transformational and magical rupture which poets touch and channel, often through somatic and embodied writing practices (Irigaray 149). In her seminal 1984 poetics essay "The Rejection of Closure," Lyn Hejinian bucks patriarchal narrative-making in a similar way, insisting on "open" texts embodying the semiotic feminine rather than the logocentric masculine (375). Hejinian references the idea in Irigaray and Cixous of the "feminine textual body" as manifest movement against the closedness of language to embrace rupture, "a displacement" between what is said or can be said and what it means that produces "a gap" that effects a different type of meaning that, in its liminality and connection to the semiotic, can be described as magical (372).

How poets create a semiotic rupture in the symbolic fabric is unclear as far as Kristeva is concerned, though I will approach some technical ideas in this essay.

Jouissance and “writing as well” are dependent on the “unnameable otherness” of the in-between, which aims the poet towards hybridity, queerness, and liminality rather than denotation (59). We find examples of semiotic and counter-logical hybrids like this in theories of language that embrace multiplicity of meaning, including conjunctive linguistics. As linguist Thomas Greene argues, the idea of conjunctive meaning, the inherent correspondence of words and meanings both with each other and with other words and meanings and physical objects, was once at the center of spiritual practice and folk understanding (30). The tree in the forest could mean, essentially, the word "tree" and the meaning of tree-ness as well. I think of these "essences," like "tree-ness," as part of a matrix of corresponding meanings evocative of Platonic ideals, part of the semiotic sea in the way that Jungian archetypes are theorized as a universal root system of storytelling and meaning-making (Pollack). The archetypes, which are storytelling essences like "shaman" and "warrior," can be denoted by a variety of stand-in words and metaphors (Gordon-Bramer 3). This system has been used extensively by poets such as Sylvia Plath whom Julia Gordon-Bramer analyzes in light of universal archetypes included in the Jungian cosmos, Tarot, and the Qabalah. Perhaps that individual tree is also representative of all other trees, rather than just one isolated entity. There is an inherent power in a tree named, so to speak, with its own essential nature. As philosopher Federico Campagna puts it in an elaboration on Sartre, "ineffable existence [what I am calling "essence"] precedes linguistic essence [the "sign"] (186). Conjunctive linguistics gives us one possible method of connecting words and syntactical arrangements in poetry with the semiotic.



For example, conjunction and correspondence of the self with the name is an essential sort of power. The control of names has long been a source of power and of colonization, from colonizers' violent re-naming of indigenous entities in their language to the much less violent naming of children into a lineage or family tree by use of the family name. For instance, ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish magicks long cataloged the names of their respective gods, any or all of which may have been invoked during the litany of magical names portion of a spell: for a Jewish spell, Abrasax, Abraxas, Yahweh, Eloi, and Elohim may have all been invoked as references to the same essential energy (Trachtenberg 80, 91). Magically speaking, knowing the name of an entity endows some control over said entity through semiotic essence. Knowledge is, in fact, power, and naming words is the primary vehicle of this power.

Approaching the semiotic entails approaching the slips between meanings as well as eliding words and signifiers and creating multiples. Multiplicity allows for transformation, the alchemy of words and signifiers and the objects they signify, which is the effective action of magic. The many names of the divine or of god are put together practically because, as a unit, they approach essential god-ness more effectively when they are a collective; each compounded iteration of the name of god adds its own power towards the spell's approach to god's essence in order to borrow power from the reference.

The semiotic approach to language in which words slip among meanings, implying no "true" or "authentic" meaning, may seem contradictory to this conjunctive theory of linguistics because conjunction seems to imply denotation. Closely reading Greene's writing can yield an isolation from the semiotic and denial of contemporary

Saussurian linguistics and deconstructionism as in some ways "wrong" or contrary to conjunctive linguistics, but the concept of conjunction does not deny the power of deconstructive practice in language. Meaning or essence, that which is denoted by the sign, need not be as simple as this-for-that. Essence is exactly "essential" and beyond expression in signs. The straightforward arithmetic approach of sign = signified is inapplicable to the semiotic theory of language because there is an ideal, but not an exactitude, behind the meaning of a sign, just as there is an ideal denoted but not fully achieved in conjunctive semiotics. "Tree" aims at or implies the existence of essential tree-ness, and many words (oak, maple, pole, log, trunk) invoke a similar basic essence as the word "tree." The word "tree" denotes, because multiple words may point at the same essence, the essence of "tree-ness " without mandating a one-to-one exchange. Denotative, conjunctive linguistics is compatible with the semiotic usage of language, the magical use of language, because both gesture at essence and are, in a sense, mystically or spiritually inclined theories of language. We might usefully call conjunctive denotations "spiritual denotations" to remind ourselves that we do not mean logocentric denotation, which connotes a word's ownership of its correspondent essence.

Deconstructionist uses of language are also compatible, in certain ways, with magical thinking because of this same impossibility of creating a one-to-one direct relationship between sign and signified. This is not to say that all deconstructionism can be reconciled with conjunctive linguistics, as the theories can be mutually exclusive, but rather, certain examples will teach us that language usage is inherently fluid and can appear both disjointed and essential, sometimes simultaneously, in practices like poetry. Likewise, there are correspondences between conjunction and metaphor (similarity,

selection, and substitution) and disjunction and metonymy (contiguity, combination, and contexture), as the terms are used by Roman Jakobson in his discussion of aphasia (109). In metaphor, this tenor is this vehicle and, though they are entirely disparate objects, both can be substituted for one another in this syntactical arrangement. The tenor and vehicle are conjoined holistically, whereas in metonymy, a disjointed part or aspect, something adjacent, stands in for the whole. The metonym's part standing in for the whole is already seen as connected to the whole intrinsically. Metaphor and metonymy are both figures of speech that can be used magically, as well. Frazer's definition of sympathetic magic in the landmark 1890 *The Golden Bough* has two valences: similarity and contagion (12). Similarity or homeopathic magic relies on correspondence between disparate objects that are similar in certain ways, such as may be seen in a metaphor. For instance, an effigy and a person are similar and conjoined in that this effigy is that person, metaphorically (Frazer 15). Contagious magic relies on disjointed parts of wholes – the magical qualities of this piece (a person's severed hair or nails) of something persist even when the parts are distant from one another, as in metonymy (Frazer 43). We can see this principle active in the earlier example of naming god-ness in ancient Jewish magic. The many names of god-ness are metonyms, parts of the essential whole that are magically connected through contagion. There is also a conjunction and correspondence between the word and the essence. Metaphor, conjunction, and similarity correlate as metonymy, disjunction, and contagion correlate. Jakobson observed this in his aphasia study, though he used this observation of Frazer's "bipartition" of magical rites more by way of conclusion on aphasia than further discussion of magic (113). By more completely

exploring these terms in magical poetics, one would perhaps yield a more complete picture of the syntactical mechanics of magic in language acts like poetry.

One poetic excursion involving conjunction and disjunction will provide insight into the connections of magical poetics with alchemy. H.D.'s *Trilogy* is a prime example of both conjunctive and disjunctive uses of language and demonstrates through slippage that no direct relationship is possible between words and meanings and also that using a pool of words to denote the same essential meaning generates a powerful interplay approaching *jouissance*. In this alchemical poetic series, H.D. slips among the words Mary, myrrh, mere, and mara as a way of approaching the eternal feminine or the eternal generative in language. "Through my will and my power," the character Mary evokes in an authoritative spell-opener reminiscent of claims to power by ancient magi, "Mary shall be myrrh" (135). H.D.'s shepherding of etymological and homophonic correspondence among the words for Mary collects them all around a central sound that comes to stand in for the reader's idea of the essence denoted – metaphorical myrrh-ness. In the final pages of *Trilogy*'s final movement, *The Flowering of the Rod*, these words amalgamate around "Isis, Astarte, Cyprus / and the other four; / he might re-name them, / Ge-meter, De-meter, earth-mother / or Venus / in a star" (145). The goddesses named denote the eternal feminine but in different systems of spiritual belief, implying the existence of the divine feminine but resisting one-to-one denotation. By slipping among these names and emphasizing the similarity of the words by adding a hyphen to Demeter and Gemeter (perhaps a constructed goddess referencing Gaia), H.D. both disjoins pure signification of word and signified and shows that spiritual denotation to essence is possible in language. The goddesses named are disjoined parts of the essential whole of

the divine feminine, thus metonyms for its qualities. The "he" re-naming these Marian figures is Kaspar, the alchemist and protagonist of Flowering, who remembers the true essence of Mary's meaning in "an echo of an echo in a shell" (149). It is the alchemist, the magician, who recalls the spiritually denotative essence of language, understands the semiotic slippage between signs corresponding with universal truths, and is able to reconcile these seeming contradictions in spell-work.

As opposed to the idea of "representation as truth and truth as representation" purported by a logocentric linguistics theory, and to the concept of the disassociation between sign and signified which aims to put irreconcilable distance between a sign and the essence beyond the sign, conjunctive semiotics, as a worldview, can position language at the nexus of being and meaning, connecting signs to a multiplicity of denotative meanings through essential correspondence (Campagna vii). Some beliefs in essence-as-being and universal animism also power historical theories of magic and alchemize magical language. Magical poetics, furthermore, queers spiritual denotation through excessive plurality or perhaps excessive collapse, emphasizing connectivity, liminality, and correspondence, which both disrupts logocentric denotation and one-to-one ratios of sign and signified while affirming connotation and referentiality. "Trunk" is essentially "tree" in certain ways but also connotes a body part or the boot of a car. It is through queered connotations that magical poets prove their capacity to provoke affective power. As my partner puts it, in a sense, magic is the destruction of words as using direct one-to-one "meaningful" signifiers, which in turn destroys our clear rational understanding of them and encourages slips into the sea of the semiotic. Arthur Evans writes of magic as a similar tapping-into of non-rationality, a "corrective" for industrial

devastation (148–149). This destruction is inherently transformative – alchemical and magical. Speech acts that utilize correspondence and slippage generate affective responses including *jouissance*, which is not purely physical or emotional but also cognitive, and manifest an overall somatic experience. Magic makes possible, and the conjunctive semiotic with spiritual denotation represents this multiplicity.

#### DEFINING MAGICAL POETICS AND EFFICACY

Metaphor is a primary evasion of exactitude that becomes, for many poets and magicians, the most perfect construction of semiotic slippage with conjunction and spiritual denotation. Imagine a metaphor or conjunction that brings together the irreconcilable in the way that Prevallet points at in the opening epigraph, causing your neurons to dance and spin in new directions and nerves to fire in your body. Though perhaps cliché, I cherish my memory of first reading T.S. Eliot's line "April is the cruellest month" from "The Waste Land" because of this concept; sitting in the high school library, digging through a pile of books for an English class project, I found this bizarre poem that transported me from the first line with the metaphorical connection of spring and life to what I thought of as cruel existential dread as one of my first brushes with poetic alchemy. I felt changed because of this brush with juxtaposition. Magic, in poetry, can look like the creation of paradox through correspondence, like April rains with pain. Spells and poems are ways of reinventing from the semiotic space of abstraction and possibility; poets are these inventors, these magicians.

Magic holds scientific, procedural capacities as well as aesthetic dimensions that, when manipulated, cause actual change. This sort of change, affective and physical,

manifests in readers and writers through the elision of meaning in aesthetics and practice, which is affective change in the caster and the audience. Magic and poetry rely on authority, intended effect, and the poet's and audience's belief that magical poetry can do something beyond the page. Because of belief in its effectiveness, affective engagement with poetry and magic can be considered its effect. By believing in or being "charmed," as Herbert Tucker calls one effect declining in the modern era, by poetry or by magic, one feels protected, cursed, hexed, or exorcised. In my reckoning, it doesn't matter if something physically manifests in the world or if one can register a physical change in reality; one is already changed, emotionally and cognitively, simply by reading or performing the spell that is also a poem.

Nathaniel Mackey writes that "poetry's upper limit is enchantment," and he is not the only one to claim such a rubric (xii). Poiesis is a making and unmaking of the world – from “a doing” or “to make,” “that which leads (a thing) into being” (Whitehead). This definition can be literal. A magical poetics is a poetry that makes and makes happen, to amend the (in)famously extracted line from “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” by W.H. Auden, “For poetry makes nothing happen” (2). Because of language's inherent magical qualities, all poetry can be magical and can effect change as described in this essay. However, some poets purposefully consider this power, craft poems that use and/or reference this power, and generally perform what might be considered a magician or alchemist role that conflates with the role of the poet. Magical poetics, as a theory, encompasses the magic inherent in language as well as the intentional use of that potential by poets.

Poetry, especially poetry intentionally written in service to its magical potential, achieves effects. To come back to Auden, the poem may not admit of specific political

"happenings" caused directly by an individual poet, as in, Auden doesn't admit the alteration of Ireland's political madness or actual weather because of Yeats's poetry. However, Auden does admit poetry's survival, "A way of happening/a mouth," as an ongoing result or happening due to poetry's effectiveness (2). Poetry's happening is not on the historical record as a cause or resolution for this or that conflict, but its survival and its impact on individual understandings of the world, as Auden writes them, are clear indicators of its power. One critic writing of Auden's rejection of magical poetics, Matthew Mutter, makes an interesting distinction between Auden's poetic effects and magical effects:

The fundamental difference between Auden and the contemporary celebrants of magical thinking is this: the critics believe that to subvert the hierarchies one must eliminate the dualisms...to draw a significant distinction between, for instance, reason and instinct is to devalue the body. Magical thinking therefore tends towards a monism that collapses all binaries. Auden, however, maintains...that there is an essential dualism — between history and nature — that is critical to the modern sense of historical responsibility and historical critique. For Auden, one must maintain a distinction between the legitimate claims of the human person...and, on the other, the legitimate claims of the body and material life, which are the sources of pleasure and happiness, but which constrain, limit and often frustrate experience and agency. History is a personal order; nature is an impersonal order. Neither should be devalued, but they cannot be magically conflated. Auden's thinking is characterized by an affirmative dualism... (66–67)

I disagree that magical thinking necessarily and completely collapses categories into monism – rather, alchemical magic and other magicks rely on boundaries and separation to function and to celebrate and create identity, as I will further show. I do not contend that Auden or other canonical Modernist poets were especially keen on the magical thinking potentiated by the occult, by Spiritualism<sup>2</sup>, or by other magicks of their day, as

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<sup>2</sup> Spiritualism and occultism are often confused; occultism implies higher meaning to be gained, generally through ancient esoteric texts and rites, while spiritualism implies nearer and more accessible meaning gained through popular practices (Sword xi).



critics including Timothy Materer have argued that these writers, including Eliot, were not what he would consider magical poets (15). However, Mutter's claims on Auden's poetics distinguish what is, for me, important: Auden was not rejecting all of the potency of poetry, despite that one extracted line. Rather, Auden was proving the power of poetry by forcing a confrontation with poetry's political (Mutter's "historical") impotence. As Archambeau observes regarding poetry and uselessness, "the notion that poetry makes nothing happen is itself what makes things happen" (1).

To redirect Mutter's earlier assertion, I will say that magic's and poetry's power of suggestion are so closely entwined that, just perhaps, certain political occurrences are somehow affected by a remembered feeling, thought, or breath of a line of poetry. It is difficult to say certainly that poetry is historically powerless. People are built from experiences, which include the poems they have read. In a similar sense, Allen Ginsberg's declaration of the "end of the War!" does, somehow, end the War by saying and potentiating it – through the "mouth" as a happening, in a sense that Auden, Olson, or others might have found interesting. We might call this an actual or attempted perlocutionary act, in J.L. Austin's reckoning of language acts intended to "bring about or achieve by saying" (108). In retrospect, whatever war one chooses (either Ginsberg's 1966 Vietnam or the "war against the imagination," as Diane di Prima calls it) was ended by that line in "Wichita Vortex Sutra." If we as readers invest in and believe in the poem and poet and hope for similar conclusions, to some extent, the poem, effectively, works. The poem is a spell cast, is a doing by way of saying, a performance of the written word that potentially has linguistic meaning but has other valences of effect spiraling beyond this, valences of the metaphorical or symbolic or paradoxical and also of the magical that

occurs, in reality, on and in the reader or the audience of the poem. As Archambeau concludes of Auden's poetics, Auden sees poetry as historically moving from Keatsian aestheticism through a divorce from efficacy to, finally, a new efficacy in which poetry's effect is purely subjective (198). Subjective effect – affect – is still one version of effect and, in many ways, closely aligns with magical effect, whether it is politically or historical "actual" or not.

### POETIC EVOCATION, EFFICACY, AND POLITICS

Though I study and am writing my own "magical" poetry, I do not claim to be an expert magus or poet. I do not hold the alchemical secrets of past kings and prophets, nor do the spells I write into my poetry "work," necessarily. In terms of efficacy, I am more interested in the alchemical experiment than in the product. For me, poetry and writing remain, always, experimental and iterative. Alchemy is a pivotal concept for poets because of alchemy's backbone in metaphor and its commitment to continual evocation of change in the world through changing of the self. Alchemy, like science, is about the hypothesis and the resulting experiment. There is always a question at the heart of the alchemist's experiment – will this become that – and the process, not the product, is often the entire point. The imagination involved, the journey involved, in going from A to B is the essential alchemy gestured at, not the lead or the gold. Experimental poetics is quite similar to alchemy, particularly in the sense of the essay's attempting or hypothesis, a definition brought through Adorno that writers frequently cite (Saterstrom *Ideal Suggestions* xxiv, Retallack "Essay as Wager" 41). Alchemists, poets, and scientists develop formulae over time and plug new variables in to "see what happens"; similarly,

as I plug different language into known magical spells, I am creating new containers for imagination.

My current attempts at spell/poems weave together formulae from ancient spells with poetic "formulae" from ancestral writers and with my own imagination. One example, A Planetary Spell, is a gender-bending narrative poem starring the prophet Tiresias that integrates spells as various as the SATOR square of early Christian origin and invocations of stars and angels from the ancient Greek Magical Papyri (Betz) with the poems of writers like Ginsberg, whose "Howl" I emulate in my sequence "American Moloch." "Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch!" Ginsberg cries out, railing against America's "sphinx of cement and aluminum" synonymous with "unobtainable dollars," here meaning the American "dream" (21). Down the "American river" go visions, miracles, and ecstasies, the "sensitive bullshit" of the poet as categorized by capitalism, leaving the writer in loneliness and, of course, leaving the best minds destroyed (22, 9). Ginsberg's "Howl" is a quintessential magical poem because of his invocational and exorcistic writing style, the banishment he attempts of capitalism's woes and his simultaneous conjuring of compassion and gentleness through friends like Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg imaginatively joins in Rockland in the last sections of his poem (26). Ginsberg's "Howl" is an attempt at exorcism and conjuring, and also at healing an America he saw as dangerously near extinction.

The solution Ginsberg approaches in "Howl" is sanctification, a declaration of holiness – "everything is holy!" – among the dissolution of compassion and "kindness of the soul" which capitalism, nationalism, xenophobia, queer-phobia, and other evil Molochs precipitate (27–28). Though we still face the same evils rooted in capitalism and

white supremacy, I do not claim the same courage as Ginsberg in declaring himself "the universe tonite riding in all my Power," but, through channeling Tiresias, I approach healing spells in A Planetary Spell using similar formulae as Ginsberg (Planet News 114). My Moloch, perhaps also the insidious central ore of Ginsberg's Moloch, is racism and the construction of whiteness that I call "our feral ancestry...that box that lies at the bottom of a pool of Black sweat" (Shoemaker 81). I name the evil, as does Ginsberg, in order to effectively banish it by name, an exorcism technique that dates back to defixiones in Ancient Egypt (Frankfurter 351).

Another key component to my own iterations of spells that I share with Ginsberg is the incantatory, performative quality of my writing. I write with one ear to performance and with attention to the page. Performance is the ritual with which I cast the spell, and for me, this breath of the line brings the spell, and belief in its magic, to life. Reading poetry or giving breath to poetry is evocation, spellcasting that creates perceptible emotional, affective, and cognitive effects on and in the recipient. We have heard how "evocative" a poem can be; this idea is rooted in magic. Evocation is "the act of bringing or recalling a feeling, memory, or image to the conscious mind," and "the action of eliciting a response," and also "the action of invoking a spirit or deity" ("Evocation," Merriam-Webster). Writers and readers talk about the evocative properties of a poem in the sense that they create images or affective responses in the reader's mind and heart, but we also talk about these responses as actions created, conjurations, or spirit forms in the mind, in the sense of magical evocation. How different, in terms of our understanding of meaning through language, is the essence of a bird from the bird itself? By writing himself in as falcon to his mother's falconess in "My Mother Would Be a Falconess,"

Robert Duncan casts himself as the bird (112). Duncan is both poet and bird at once because the poem exists in the reader rather than manifested. Duncan is also neither of those things, but something gestured at, in the semiotic sea, between bird and poet. Duncan's metaphor grows the wings of the falcon and, if we recall that moment and that metaphor, Duncan is the poet or instance of writing and he is also the "gay falcon," in both senses of the word, according to Jack Halberstam (100). Duncan, who compared homosexuality to witchcraft in his essay "The Homosexual in Society," evokes what Halberstam calls "a gorgeous rendition of freedom and unfreedom, of constraint and release, of violence and belonging and offers a better, wilder rendering of modern sexuality than the ones we cleave to today" (102). Duncan's evocative metaphor of falcon and falconer/falconess points at the magical gap of meaning between words in way that I will explore through the historical application of practical and aesthetic magicks.

#### A HISTORY OF MAGIC: PRACTICAL MAGIC

There are a variety of techniques of poetic evocation and magic that can fall into categories of writing or syntactical constructions like the metaphor Duncan uses so well. Many of these forms fall into familiar rubrics of poetry, such as the sonnet, chant poem, rhyme, or riddle. Many of these practices also have roots in related magical forms that predate modern poetry and, in fact, developed with and through ancient magic.

Historically speaking, before around the 17th century with poetry's growing aesthetic interventions in and through magical practice, magic was regarded as a practical enterprise using instrumental language. J.R.R. Tolkien provides a clear and valuable

distinction between practical magic and enchantment, which is his word for an aesthetic magic:

Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World...it is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills. (Tolkien, quoted in Davies 103)

Though the exact definition of magic, particularly historical magic, is widely debated and the purity of the division between Tolkien's primary and secondary worlds is disputable, practical magic as the efficacious, authoritative manipulation of naturally occurring sympathetic qualities is regarded as a nearly universal aspect of human cultures (Goldin, Montgomery, Frazer). Contemporary practices have changed since earlier societies in which practical magic was a daily, observable, and even mundane occurrence – normative, in many contexts. Some ancient magical practices, such as the use of charm–inscribed phylacteries and bowls, stretch back to the Babylonian era (Mesopotamia ~2000–1600 CE) (Montgomery). All of these practices involved language acts and performances of formulae that resembled scientific chemical or procedural recipes. Coptic spells, for instance, generally involved the invocation of deities or spirits, recitation of precedent–setting myths or "historiolae," ingredient listing, instructions on performance, and a concluding declaration (Frankfurter 333–334). The purpose of formulaic practices like this was the same then as it is now: to change the world and our understanding of it in relation to us and to our experience. However, it is vital to note that, because of what I will describe as the historical rise of hegemonic structures that exercised more universal categorical control, such as Christianity, magic as we might now describe it diverged from normative to non–normative, counter–hegemonic practice.

Importantly to our understanding of magic as a practical, ritual, and eventually aesthetic enterprise, common people in the ancient and early medieval worlds did not separate science, magic, religion, or their related practices and rituals into disparate categories (Goldin, Betz). Most of the categories we now use to differentiate between belief systems are anachronistic to ancient worldviews. This is not to say that magical language or magical language usage has always been the same as what we might call "sacred language," words that were and continue to be used in religious and spiritual rituals. Individual customs have distinguished among the religious, magical, ritual, spiritual, and other cultural uses of language since records begin. Two notable scholarly explorations of the intersections of these efficacious language uses are Mary Douglas's close readings of Leviticus in *Purity and Danger* and Malinowski's work in *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, which is useful in this moment in that Malinowski defines certain nonsense words as sometimes magical and sometimes ritual words with varying degrees of belief in their efficacy (218–223). I would like to focus primarily on intentionally magical uses of language, especially uses that evolved from intentionally practically efficacious magic in the ancient world to the aesthetically efficacious in the Enlightenment and beyond.

According to Michael Morgan's scholarly notes on the circa 3rd c. Jewish magical text the *Sepher ha-Razim*, magic was the common property of the people in the ancient world and was practically used for both positive and negative effects such as surviving childbirth, healing wounds, and even cursing one's neighbor. These rituals were practiced on a regular basis. For instance, sortilege was a very common form of divination practiced by individuals either working on their own or consulting and often paying a

knowledgeable practitioner to cast bones, dice, or other objects to be read prophetically (Luijendijk and Klingshirn). Other common spells, compiled in works such as the syncretic Greco-Egyptian spells of the Greek Magical Papyri, afforded practical, everyday help to common people, often through the assistance of a trained or, at least, charismatic magus (Betz). Many of these everyday spells drew on the authority of sacred writing and its capacity to hold spiritual meaning beyond linguistic denotation and were tied to canonical poetic texts, such as Homeric epic poetry (Frankfurter, Karanika, Martín-Hernández).

For one example, the oracular 4th c. CE Homeromanteion is a list of 216 “isolated and disconnected verses” that contains many riddle-like lines from Homer's texts designed “to provide the reader with an oracular response to a personal inquiry” (Betz 118). Arguably, the magical form of the text itself is based in riddle, an ancient form of magic, poem, and serious play that elides meaning and uses trickery to live in liminality, beyond a nameable border (Huizinga 105). Because of the elusive meaning of tracts from Homer, which would be recognized verbatim by a large number of Greek readers and speakers, Homer's poetry was consulted frequently by the ancients for all sorts of magical purposes. Homer “was widely regarded as a divinely inspired theologian” because of the magical potency of his writing (Pieter van der Horst, quoted in Luijendijk 50).

Homeromanteion verses are fragmentary, like “as he was growing old. But the son did not grow old in his father's armor,” and, as fragments, both allude to an intended original meaning or answer in Homer's text and an associative meaning that the reader or magician finds pertinent to the case at hand (#204, Betz 118). Figuring out the meaning of the text, for the oracle or subject, is like solving a riddle. The riddle's potency lies in



the form's disarming capacity to elude production and utility. A riddle requires imagination to activate and the answer is revelatory but often slant, in Dickinson's sense. Ultimately, however, this type of sortilege magic was practical and meant to provide advice, as would the oracle.

Despite the connections of magic to texts like Homers', magic was largely viewed as pragmatic and performative in the ancient world and decidedly not aesthetic. Homer was excerpted for a practical purpose and because he was considered a prophet, of sorts. As Betz describes them, magicians were often temple functionaries or wandering craftsmen (xlvi). Spells magicians used were intended to have effects, often for what Betz calls "crisis management," whether they used language imaginatively or not (xlvii). As Frankfurter writes, "the language of analogy in the spell might result in actual transformation" (613). Textual metaphor, in spells, was like an equation or "analogous text" and was understood as the conversion of this into that; the tablet in a given ritual is also the person it refers to, in terms of sympathetic magic (369). It was not until after the lines were made clearer between science, religion, and other spiritual ritual practices as a byproduct of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the later Industrial Revolution that forms of magic, including the magical metaphor and what Tucker defines as "charm," moved more fully into the purview of aesthetics and thus that of the poet (Tucker 105). As Mutter writes, "to affirm magic is to deny the triumphalist narrative of progress from magic to religion and, finally, to empirical science as the supreme framework for understanding the world" (59). Before the Enlightenment, magic was practical and poetry was aesthetic, at least in the sense that magic was meant to be effective rather than beautiful or artistic.

As seems clear from the examples of ancient magic including the Homeromanteion, the line between aesthetic and practical language is always already thin; we can only base our understanding of ancient and medieval magical practices and beliefs on the limited text-based evidence we have from spells that ended up written down rather than simply memorized or performed ad-hoc. What we can read seems to imply that magic was built or described formulaically to achieve certain ends, while poetry was written with inspiration and aesthetics foremost. Both magic and poetry were used to make sense of the world through telling ourselves stories about our place in it.

Ancient and medieval distinctions between magic and religion in early Western Christendom (~300–1300 CE) were also relatively blurry, in part due to the syncretism prevalent in Mediterranean cultures (Betz). Because of the movement of people and their ideologies during the Roman Empire, religious and spiritual practices were not clearly delineated and pagan rituals such as sun worship became conflated with and integrated into other cultures' icons and symbols. The aforementioned alchemical figure Hermes Trismegistus, for instance, is a syncretic conflation of Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom and knowledge, and Hermes, the Greek messenger god. Perhaps due to the syncretic merging of ritual and local practice, magic became more and more regarded as dangerous by the growing Christian mainstream, which relied on monotheistic separation from pagan polytheism. As an enterprise granting individuals power, magic potentiates a threat to established centers of power that relied on authority. Magic has always offered power to whoever wielded it, but as certain types of knowledge, especially holy, spiritual, and transcendent knowledge, became the property of delineated religion, magic as an alternative form of knowledge became taboo.

Similarly to later accusations of witchcraft during the Inquisition and beyond, the ancient Greco-Roman derogatory term for magic, *mageia*, was associated with people whose habits and practices were other or considered primitive and beyond the limits of orthodox practice, despite their widespread appeal (Meyer and Smith, Trachtenberg). This held true in western culture through early Christendom and extended into the early Middle Ages. Because of its transgressive mode of empowerment from the hegemonic Christian perspective, sorcery in the medieval world was often attributed to minorities or outsiders, including the Jewish community. As Trachtenberg explains, what could be called magic was practiced actively by Jewish Kabbalists, but the way in which magic was described and demonized by the Catholic Church misrepresented Jewish customs in order to make them seem more taboo and frightening. Authorities thus labeled things "magic" as a tool of power against those in the social margins and as a way of othering its practitioners, regardless of the practice's magical concerns.

Thus, despite its continuing prevalence as common folk practice, magic was seen by dominant members of society and those under their control as other, marginal, and dangerous. Magicians were beyond the normal social order, despite their prevalence, though it wasn't until the late Medieval era in the Christian West that this liminal role was systemically persecuted. The dogmatization of Christianity, including Innocent VIII's 1484 condemnation of magic as heretical witchcraft, resulted in complicated rules for determining what constituted magic and magical practice from the necessity of suppressing magical practices to promote mainstream religious and sociopolitical dominance (Kors). The dissemination of rules for the suppression of magic at this time are related to the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (circa 1486) and its distribution

through the recently invented printing press (Broedel). The *Malleus*, or "hammer," was written as a manual for the literate elite to define and categorize witches in order to quash them, the maleficent or transgressive and also literate magic—using other. The centers of power labeled the dangers of magic in order to make magicians more vulnerable.

#### A HISTORY OF MAGIC: AESTHETIC MAGIC

Because of the persecution of magical practitioners by centers of power, namely the Protestant and Catholic churches, magic survived the change from the everyday and practical to the outlawed and occult in one important way: by being harvested into the aesthetic realm – namely poetry. Poetry and magic, as I have shown, have always been closely related and have always resembled one another formally and conceptually. In showing that poetry and magic began to merge in the Enlightenment, I do not mean that they were unrelated before, but rather, the intentions of magic merged with poetic intentions during this time period. Magical efficacy and conjunctive semiotics merged with poetry's aesthetic concerns in a way that made them much more difficult to separate. In terms of their intent, epic poems such as Homer's were not pragmatic spells, and ancient curses were not aesthetic objects, though we may now interpret them interchangeably. After some poets began to merge magic and poetry during the Enlightenment, practical and aesthetic intentions also merged in a way that we can more clearly point at, describe, and practice. In this movement, magic's practical and procedural aspects unified with aesthetic practices to develop aspects of poetic techniques, including metaphor and metonymy. In the 18th–19th centuries, as religion and science were further separated and magic was made taboo and sacrilegious, some of

the arts picked up the more ritual aspects of magic. Sociopolitical power was meant to be removed from these practices because of their marginalization, but the ritual elements of magic including incantation and evocation that had kept magical language so potent remained in many works of poetry and theatre. Powerful language, at one time practical and performed without secrecy, became hidden and disguised in metaphorical language on the page. It is worth noting that words on paper still held actual magical power and it was taboo to utter magical syllables aloud; for instance, Kabbalists were said to be scholars of magic but not practitioners (Trachtenberg 17). The performance of practical magic, the doing of the words, was taboo in the way that writing or reading them as aesthetic objects was not necessarily taboo. This is one of the primary reasons that English Romantic poetry, which picked up the habits of practical magic and developed them aesthetically, was able to create and maintain appeal.

The objectification of magic as a purely aesthetic diversion was one possible means of control employed by the growing patriarchal system, just as objectification took power away from female, queer, and BIPOC bodies. The Enlightenment's rationalism and division of the mind and body was the primary source of patriarchal control, as theorized by Silvia Federici, Imani Perry, and many others. Federici, in a chapter on Hobbes, Descartes, Bacon, and other rationalist Enlightenment philosophers, writes:

In Descartes, the reduction of the body to mechanical matter allows for the development of mechanisms of self-management that make the body the subject of the will. In Hobbes, by contrast, the mechanization of the body justifies the total submission of the individual to the power of the state. In both, however, the outcome is a redefinition of bodily attributes that makes the body, ideally, at least, suited for the regularity and automatism demanded by the capitalist work-discipline. (140)

The bodies included in these 17th c. positivist philosophies that can be controlled by willpower of the sovereign self had to be sovereign in their own right, meaning wealthy white European men, and under this rubric even those white men were subjected to the state as a systemic whole. Arguably, this patriarchal theorization cemented the subjugation of white male bodies under the state and the subjugation of female, BIPOC, and queer bodies to the white man (and thus the state, in turn): "placed in a soulless world [hear "magic-less" as well] and in a body-machine, the Cartesian man, like Prospero, could then break his magic wand, becoming not only responsible for his own actions, but seemingly the center of all powers" (Federici 148). Without a higher, sublime, or transcendent power beyond man himself, man became the center of all "real" power. Rationalism centered this power in certain privileged men and produced contemporary patriarchal identity categories while objectifying women, magic, and other dangerous ideas.

In her examination of ancient Arabic poetry as magic, which invokes English Romantic Percy Bysshe Shelley as a linchpin of magical affective thought, Emily Selove observes that, today, "it is assumed that belief in magic was an antique folly that man grew out of when he discovered science, and a discussion of magic is therefore an occasion for embarrassment" (40). Selove continues to prove that magic was not something to evolve from, but is inherently related to universal experiences of language. As a response to concepts of evolution related to individuation, rationalism, and the mind/body disconnect with the dawn of Descartes' sovereign individual subject (who controlled all of the now centralized power) in the Enlightenment, Shelley and the English Romantic poets wrote toward universal correspondence and unities of

experience, including the ancient and magical as well as religious and ritual traditions. The long history of magical poetics inherited by contemporary poets often begins with the English Romantics, particularly William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Shelley. Though they were also white men and enjoyed the privilege that came with their wealth, status, education, and identification, the Romantics bucked some ideas of systemic oppression by using ideas of magic as marginal subversion. They leveraged the formerly pragmatic notions of magic's "energy of asking" as an aesthetic tool, bringing the procedural practice of magic into the aesthetic poetic realm (Greene). Coleridge's "Christabel," for instance refers directly to the "spell" in Christabel's bosom (201). With the spell's incantation and the poem's reference to magical practice, Coleridge introduces magical "asking" to the poem and is able to manifest images of protection by imitating (or perhaps practicing) practical magic (201). In work like this, Romantic poets leveraged language's conjunctive semiotic power and, though magic was quashed or ridiculed by mainstream power centers, poets maintained and cultivated the possibility of effecting change through magical language use.

In making provisions for the practice and imitation of practical magic in Romantic poems like "Christabel," I do not intend to suggest that the Romantics chose one over the other; rather, this magical poetry is based on the capacity of language and the imagination to do multiple contradictory things simultaneously. The Romantic Keatsian concept of negative capability refers to the possibility of the human mind to make room for simultaneous contradictions and correspondences, "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (539). One might find negative capability in "Christabel," other Romantic poems, or the work of later poets inheriting

Romantic thought like James Merrill, occultist and author of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, who responds to what Johnston calls the public-facing "embarrassment of occultism" with irony and humor in order to playfully make the work both more and less serious (100). As Materer writes, the irony of negative capability helps Romantic, occult, and magical poets penetrate "an uncanny world" (4).

A key concept in Romantic thought alongside negative capability is the power of the imagination itself, the realm of fancy and space of contemplation. In Shelley's famous "Defence of Poetry," the imagination is prime real estate as the capacious realm in which language weaves through meaning rather than the reasoning words of the world. It is the word-weaver, the poet, who is the "hierophant" of this semiotic space of the imagination where language is magical and potentiates possibility as a "spell to make men feel" (Shelley 690). The hierophant in the Rider-Waite tarot is pictured as if he were a Pope, the divine connection between the faithful and the Creator. Shelley's use of the word hierophant is itself a conjuration, bringing concepts of power and leadership along with majestic spiritual oversight into the definition of "poet." In a way, the poet-hierophant shows the connection between humanity and the power of language, which is ethereal and ever-present – even omnipotent – in the ways of "God." By equating the hierophant with the poet, Shelley appoints poetry as the metaphorical key to the kingdom and poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" (701). As he describes it, Shelley's idea of legislation is both aesthetic and practical in that imagination creates emotional and intellectual agency, just as magical poetry does.

Shelley's imagination holds, as Coleridge puts it, an "esemplastic power" that is able to shape meaning and definition and has agency in the world (159). In



Enlightenment thought, the mind and with it the imagination are disconnected from the body. However, in Romantic thought and magical poetics, the body and the imagination are joined through perception and affect, which may include feelings elicited by poets and poetry that spur people to action. By poetically imagining "this living hand, now warm and capable," Keats is able to, through the poem and its chilling effect, "hold it towards you" beyond the "icy silence of the tomb" (459). Keats's hand joins the body with the imagination and reaches after the magic and the sublime.

The spell of imaginative poetry creates, for Shelley, a moral good that potentiates understanding and sympathy among people (681). These feelings, felt in the body and registered in the mind, represent the efficacy of poetry for Shelley and for magical poetics, for good and for ill. Shelley's statement that poets "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is predicated on the efficacious power of poetry; poets as the "hierophants" of the imagination are the "influence which is moved not, but moves" (701). This less-quoted portion of Shelley's poetics statement emphasizes the priestly, magical duties of the poet as a sociopolitical influencer wielding efficacious, sympathetic magic through language.

Shelley's "legislators" quotation is famous among poets and famously revised (George Oppen's "legislators of the unacknowledged world," for one), but the connection of the divine and magical qualities of the "hierophant of the imagination" to the role of poet as legislator is more rarely reiterated (Parini). With this worldly appointment, poets become interpreters of both divine and earthly meaning, "transcendent" meaning that flows through and between the words woven in poetry as the semiotic. As Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) wrote of blackness and magic in his essay on theatre in *Liberator*, the

word imagination is linked to image, magi, magic, and magician and represents "the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as 'things...' possibility is what moves us" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 5). Poets have the divine providence of imagination and the expansion of imagination – and thus, our reality itself.

## THE SUBLIME AND CULTURAL THEORIES OF MAGICAL POETICS

Magical poetics comes from the English Romantics to contemporary poets with Shelley's prerogative of shaping reality as well as concepts of transcendence and sublimation. Essence and existence meet, as philosopher Federico Campagna puts it, in the work of the reality–weaver poet (152). In his 2018 book *Technic and Magic*, Campagna aligns with the idea shared by Malinowski that language, with which humans define and move through the defined field of determined objects, is thus an essential shaper of "reality" (Campagna 3, Malinowski 233). Reality is defined by possible imaginings of definitions, and by expanding those definitions (meaning assumptions) that we work with by expanding the imagination in the Romantic sense, we are able to redefine reality through poetry (Campagna 6).

For Campagna, it is the poet's place to expand imagination and thus reality, but, as he explores at length, our 2020s reality is invested in modes of production and prioritizes "technic," or the capitalistic productivity of language use and denotation, rather than the "magic" of language. Both of these potential world constructs, technic and magic, are Campagna's defined worldviews to show the differences by which we might imagine a new reality through linguistic experimentation. Magician–poets, pushing against the technical, become "reality therapists" in this construction, doing the Work to "ease the

pain of living," in Allen Ginsberg's words from *The Fall of America*, by way of expanding language's capacity for meaning (Campagna 117, Ginsberg 534). As poets, we do not control production. Poets are not productive or utilitarian in the world's instrumental or pragmatic sense. We do not control capitalism. Instead, we occupy the important position of healer, counselor, therapist, or shaman, rather than worldly legislator. For healers like Ginsberg, everything else might be summed up as "drunken dumbshow" (534). In some ways, Shelley is assuming more capacity in poetry and language—weaving than seems possible, especially in America today. In other ways, Shelley and English Romanticism's expansive, efficacious imagination opens the field to the possibility of different ways of legislation. If poetry can legislate through magical meaning, perhaps there is more than purely capitalist technic.

Campagna's technic is situated in production and denotation while his "magic" reality is aligned with conjunction and connotation. Magic is, to Campagna, "the essence of poetry" (152). In Campagna's estimation, magic as a practice does not transcend reality, but allows us to be both in (physically) and beyond (semiotically) the world (185). We are not beyond the body; we are necessarily of both body and spirit. We transgress what Federici calls the "strategies of enclosure" represented by categorical boundaries that the technical, patriarchal world attempts to surround us with by slipping among categorical meanings with magic and poetry (220).

The position of poetry and magic in relation to the slippages of the semiotic enables them to be largely powers of border expansion and of liminality, not of authoritative categorization as control. The power of marginality, as Mary Douglas asserts in *Purity and Danger*, is in its capacity to transform the border itself into uncharted

territory. In existing between or beyond borders (hear "known" or "named" territory), the witch/poet is boundary-less. She is both here, and not here. The witch asserts her power by being two things at once, both/and. "Witches are social equivalents of beetles and spiders who live in the cracks of the walls and wainscoting," Douglas writes, "they attract the fears and dislikes which other ambiguities and contradictions attract in other thought structures, and the kind of powers attributed to them symbolize their ambiguous, inarticulate status" (124). Witches and magical poets write the in-between, using negative capability, perhaps, which is the potency of the ultimately inarticulable chasm.

Representing intersubjectivity is one way to approach this chasm. H.D.'s intersubjective consciousness, a séance of aura and vision in her realm of "overmind" where all the great artists reside, facilitates the magical imagining of both war and war's end in *Trilogy* (24). In order to precipitate that magical energy, H.D. leverages alchemical imagery as a metaphor for moving through conflict. This alchemy, possibly what is called "telepathy" by Devin Johnston and other critics, emphasizes unification rather than separation (25). Telepathy, or intersubjective communication and experience, is disruptive of the borders between the self/subject/individual and the "other" (Johnston 34). Yeats's gyre in *A Vision* is also a multiple in that subjectivity and objectivity are two poles on a spectrum that is "achieved and defended by continual conflict" or juxtaposition of seeming opposites (51). In a similar way, alchemy is correspondent and metaphorical, perhaps the metaphor mundi itself, and encompasses the magic of semiotic meaning slippage as well as the magic of transformation and being both/and. H.D.'s overmind and telepathy, Selah Saterstrom's "flux," and Kristin Prevallet's "trance" describe access

points to the alchemy that Campagna and Shelley point to across the chasm of centuries<sup>3</sup>. We might also look at Yeats's or Shelley's "anima mundi," indicating the spiritual or essential semiotic realm of existence where language touches and mingles meaning with meaning. Whichever grand metaphor one chooses to define it with, the esemplastic power of magical poetry (using both "magic" and "poetry" now seeming terminologically redundant) may manifest between the lines drawn by symbols and their wielders in power structures.

Poetry can make and unmake worlds. And, now more than ever since the Romantic era, contemporary poets including Ariana Reines, CA Conrad, Reb Livingston, and many others seem invested in uncovering ancient technologies of magic that poetry is capable of using. There are many writers who utilize magical techniques or who, at the very least, hearken to magic's conjunctive and semiotic experimentation with language. From Yeats's *A Vision* to Saterstrom's rootwork-based *Divinatory Poetics*, important and influential writers have articulated inspiration from the marginal powers of mysticism, alchemy, divination, hermetic writing, and other magicks. Ritualist CA Conrad, who uses what they call "ancient technologies" of poetry, hosts a podcast named "Occult Poetry Radio" on which they interview other writers in this vein of interest, including Hoa Nguyen and Kristin Prevallet. My interviews with these poets and others like Dorothea Lasky have evidenced similar allusions to magic and power in poetry. These lineages of magical poets have used different terms to describe their poetics, though all point at the same idea of semiotic conjunction as I've laid it out: "black magic" for Jack Spicer, "dictation" for Spicer and Robert Duncan, "alchemy" for Duncan and

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<sup>3</sup> Saterstrom, Selah. *Ideal Suggestions: Essays in Divinatory Poetics*. Essay Press, 2017; Prevallet, Kristin. *Trance Poetics: Your Writing Mind*. Wide Reality Books, 2013.

Diane di Prima, Saterstrom's "divination," the aforementioned "telepathy" by H.D. and Yeats inherited by Susan Howe, James Merrill's "séance," Nathaniel Mackey's cante moro and free jazz, and many, many others (Johnston 49, 34).

However, there is a dearth of contemporary scholarship on today's magical poetics and only a handful of anthologies engage magical poetics, including *Spells* by Ignota Books (2019) and *Arcana on Tarot writings* (2015) (though more seem to come out annually).<sup>4</sup> The invaluable scholarly monographs nearing a broad, overarching theory of magical poetics are Devin Johnston's 2002 *Precipitations* and Timothy Materer's 1995 *Modernist Alchemy*. Because of their publication dates and focus, these works only brush the surface of today's scene, in the 2000s and beyond. It is vital to show what these scholars have studied in order to articulate today's rapidly developing American poetic landscape regarding magical poetics and push broader and further into the writers writing today.

Materer's *Modernist Alchemy* traces what he calls an occult lineage in modernist poetry: Yeats, Ezra Pound, H.D., Duncan, Merrill, Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath. As Materer argues, Keats's idea of negative capability heavily influenced later poets who worked in the occult because, with negative capability, Keats explained the paradoxical "double bind" of rationality and irrationality (4). This double bind is shared by words and units of language, which can hold multiple meanings. Magic words, for instance, hold parallel qualities of intelligibility, or meaning and its opposite, "weirdnesses" that appear contradictory but function as essential, contrasting elements of the word's practical and meaningful usage (Malinowski 231). For Malinowski, the duality of magical words

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<sup>4</sup> Shin, Sarah and Rebecca Tamás, eds. *Spells: 21st-century Occult Poetry*. UK: Ignota Books, 2018; Jensen, Marjorie, editor. *Arcana: The Tarot Poetry Anthology*. Minor Arcana Press, 2015.

facilitates their power, which is drawn from the negative capability required to use these words with conviction in ritual. Negative capability's double bind is further related to the metaphor of alchemy, which requires subjects and objects to be both/and simultaneously, just as the mind can hold multiple options in the same attended-to object or word.

Though each poet in Materer's study engages with the occult in a different way, they are all shown to maintain negative capability to infuse their poetry with both belief in the possibility of the occult and the magical and enough worldly skepticism to remain of interest to their reader, rather than become what Materer calls "ridiculous" (4). It is useful to identify negative capability (a property of metaphor) as this powerful capacity in poets in order to associate their work with magic and alchemy. Negative capability is associated with semiotic slippage as well as conjunctive spiritual denotation because of the possibility inscribed in having both/and in the mind at one time.

Devin Johnston's *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice* argues for what he describes as occultism's reigning influence over the works of the Romantics and of poets who follow in their footsteps (2). Johnston explains that these poets maintain an interest in the occult as a countercultural maneuver that moves writing away from the Modernist machine and toward irrational or magical forms. According to Johnston, the Romantic sublime, the concept of being thrust outside of one's own subjecthood through an anxiety-inducing or terrifyingly alienating experience of the irrational and universal, was transmitted from William Blake and the Romantics through modernists including Yeats to 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets like H.D., Robert Duncan, James Merrill, and descendants Susan Howe and Nathaniel Mackey (Johnston 69). Here I will diverge from discussing Johnston in order to explore the sublime, a concept latched onto

by the Romantics alongside negative capability and the imagination, in order to return to Johnston and suggest a contemporary alchemy of the sublime to more fully explain today's magical poetics.

In his study defining the sublime passed down from Longinus and Burke, Thomas Weiskel writes of the Post-Renaissance distinctions between mind and body and the theorization of Cartesian selfhood relying on "dualisms" which then necessitated the response of the Romantic sublime (19). "The true function of the sublime is to legitimate the necessary discontinuities in the classical scheme of signification and to justify the specific affective experience which these discontinuities entailed," Weiskel writes (17). These discontinuities, producing what Weiskel calls "anxieties" in need of explanation, are explained by sublime leaps beyond the human and logically explicable (19).

The Burkean definition of the sublime that Weiskel examines, and to some extent Weiskel's own assumptions, contrasts with what I understand to be the Romantic tradition of the sublime in one key way; namely, the self is never fully divorced from the mind or body in Romantic thought, but rather, all aspects correspond deeply in sublime experiences, with the body a "trapping" of sorts from which the spirit emerges to transcend, however briefly, into gnosis after divine encounter. The categories of body and mind are necessary but are not simple divisions; these categories are simultaneously elided and distinguished. Keats, for instance, describes the co-emergence of the body, mind, and soul in one of his famous letters, and by doing so he disagrees with the utility of Cartesian divisions and denials of soul (551). The Romantic sublime requires, in short, negative capability and spiritual denotation.



I agree with Johnston about the trajectory of Romantic poetry through to the present day, even with the idea of occult practices (which rely on magic and magical thinking) charming poets into this lineage. I also build on Johnston's lineage tracing from the Romantics to Mackey and Howe, both of whom factor into the magical poetics rubric as I see it. However, I would complicate Johnston's received notion of the Romantic sublime and its transmission into contemporary writing because of some of the sublime's bodily, and patriarchally masculine, trappings. The sublime, as far as the Romantics took it, insists on moving beyond the normative white male body into transcendence. The sublime was, in many ways, theoretically connected to the Enlightenment self that Descartes and others created with the body–mind division. Theorists such as Kant and Burke rely on the self–mind duality to examine the sublime as the self succumbing to or overcoming divine fear and ecstasy (Freeman 3). The Romantics, however, did not necessitate these divisions.

The English Romantics were subversive to hegemonic Enlightenment thought and in many ways attempting their own versions of magical maneuvers, including Blake's radicalization of Christian spiritual concepts in his quasi–epic angelic poems like "The Book of Thel" and Shelley's antirationalist, anticapitalistic notions. As Annelise Brinck-Johnsen writes, there is also a history of reading Shelley through a queer lens despite his tendency towards heterosexual romance; Brinck-Johnsen, for one, uses queer temporality and eroticism as a lens on Shelley's "To Constantia" (337). All of this is to say that the English Romantics, while subversive and essential, were white male products of their day, as we are products of our time (and will one day require similar revisions despite our attempts).

We rely on these writers and their expansion of the role of poets and poetry, but it is also important to acknowledge how contemporary BIPOC and queer poets do not exactly fit the rubric of a white male sublime experience; my idea of physical and mental alchemy may transform to more completely merge with a diverse array of today's writers. The Romantic sublime is responding to a dualism in Enlightenment thought, which I believe that the Romantics both denied and utilized. Dualism is anathema to the multiplicities of queerness and intersectionality today, and so the magical poetics of the Romantics, which is more alchemical and unifying of the mind–body–spirit than Kant's or Burke's sublime as described by writers like Barbara Freeman in *The Feminine Sublime*, generates some appeal. However, it is still true that the historical perspective on the sublime is theorized with what Freeman calls a "patriarchal" body in mind, here meaning that the body itself, though it can be and for the Romantics generally was male, need not be male to still exist within the patriarchal cosmos created to "keep the other at bay" (4). In her contrast of the Romantic sublime with a feminine sublime, which we may connect to poets like Emily Dickinson, Freeman argues for a "reading of the sublime as an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal...subject, a self that maintains its borders by subordinating difference and by appropriating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other" (4). Queer and BIPOC magical poetics maneuvers are inherently repulsed by both the dualisms and linearity of categories and the patriarchal cosmos, and so neither the Romantic sublime nor the Burkean sublime, however different, will completely work to describe the poetics of these writers. This is why I believe that, while Johnston is correct in seeing the sublime, essentially, at work in Howe and Mackey,

magical poetics, particularly my developing definition of queer alchemy, is a more apt description of what a contemporary sublime descendant may look like.

## CONTEMPORARY MAGICAL POETICS AND QUEERNESS

In building a theory of queer alchemy, I draw on Mary Douglas's notions of risk, danger, and pollution defining magic as power drawn from the margins, such as the queer space between binary constructs and named categories. In her 1970 text *Purity and Danger*, Douglas discusses purity rites, rituals, and social rules as metonymic functions for the maintenance of social order. Douglas categorizes the impure as transgressive or displaced with respect to a normative social center. These impurities, what she terms "dirt," are categorizable only where structural lines are clearly defined, implying spaces around and between these lines (48). Socially speaking, these liminal spaces are often related to identity expression and categories including but not limited to linguistic affinity and queer expression, whether sexually queer or liminal and resistant to categorization, as the term "queer" has come to be explored by queer theorists. We may descriptively and accurately refer to what society calls "dirt" as magical (hear "other") evasions of order and queer in relation to what normativity expects. Where there are structures and rules, there is both their disavowal and that which cannot be systematically named and described by those rules. The evasion and reformulation of this technical system can be precipitated by queer alchemy, an intersection of Medieval ideas of alchemy and transmutative magic with contemporary concepts of queer positionality and phenomenology.

Poets who push the concept of the sublime today who use magical technologies of language to explore the semiotic or generate experiential affect do not often locate this work in the Romantic sublime. Rather than a sublime remove from the body, these writers are in a queer relationship to the gendered, racist, and ableist colonial centers of authority represented by the white male body that is at the center of the Burkean sublime or that is experiencing the Romantic sublime and insist instead on queer and/or marginalized bodies. Poets of queer and marginalized identities, including CA Conrad, Hoa Nguyen, Selah Saterstrom, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and others work with magical poetics through embodied spiritual, affective engagement using terms such as queer eroticism, ecstasy, and alchemy.

Queerness and marginality are relational positionalities and descriptors. There isn't so much an objective queerness; queerness is normally theorized in relation to the not-queer. The queer body is, defined using phenomenology, a queerly oriented body. Sara Ahmed describes queerness with emphasis on "orientatedness" in subjectivity and physicality which keeps "phenomenological attention" to the somatic state of the body (3). Queer readings of the body require not only cognitive attention but interactive affective and spiritual attention to and from the body. The body and subjecthood are connected but disparate, just as the queer subject is related positionally and disparately from the not-queer subject. Ahmed and phenomenology are helpful in noting that queer positionality is positional to something, a center for instance, and queer identity rubs against and defines itself against that position, just as objects and subjects define themselves relationally. Magical poetics requires the disparate nature of the body, mind, and spirit as well as their interrelation, just as semiotic slippages in metaphor and

metonymy require sign and signified to be both disparate and connected. These relations can also be seen as manifestations of negative capability, which brings this discussion back to poetic lineages of the English Romantics.

Many contemporary writers who write through magical poetics are interested in both the situated nature of subjective experience in the body and the ecstatic nature of sublime encounter and queer alchemy; many of these writers conceive of the alchemical or sublime as an experience necessarily involving and rooted in the body. The Romantic sublime and queer alchemy are descriptions of similar experiential processes. Queer alchemy centers on a queer, affective reading of attention, focusing on the conjunction of the body with its external surroundings and with the mind and with other minds and bodies. This unification is exemplified by H.D.'s intersubjective telepathic overmind, which is intimately related to alchemical processes of body/mind synthesis and precipitates both Robert Duncan's ideas about the alchemical or gnostic sublime and Kristin Prevallet's trance poetics (Johnston). It is this inherently affective phenomenological attention for which magical poetics strives that leads to my adoption of the term "queer alchemy" as a more accurate substitute for the sublime or for other words like transcendence, both of which fail to capture the complexity of magical poetry's evocation of bodily, cognitive, and affective unities in the marginalized or queer body. Just as the magical tradition of alchemy strove to combine substances to metaphorically and literally sublimate gold, so does contemporary magical poetics queerly alchemize subjective experience.

The mind–body–spirit continuum is essential to the queer alchemist and becomes an important part of their poetic expression. Danielle Vogel, author of works including

The Way a Line Hallucinates its Own Linearity, suggests that the space of language on the page is one space through which the body is renegotiated because of the physicality of the page itself (20). “The body rises synesthetically,” Vogel writes, connecting physicality to the interweaving of multiple senses—the color red with the smell of an orchard, the sound of waves with the feeling of a rock touching the skin (20). For Vogel, the connection of reader to the page to the body and to queer selfhood arises through sensory affect, the association or correspondence of sensory detail with emotion and cognition. Between linguistic and physical spaces, “we’ll create another sustainable self” (16). Through this evocative calling, Vogel summons us: “Dear Reader, this book is a séance. Here, we are all talking. The I. The she. Oscillating within. What we carry conjoins” (Vogel 16). The body, the subject, and affect are all magically, poetically connected.

In another example that involves naming as magic, there is a correspondence between Linda Hogan’s work and the Romantic sublime in terms of movement beyond just the body to a spiritual experience through poetry. However, the connection of the Romantic sublime to the body begins from a white body, while Hogan, as an indigenous American writer who writes specifically of indigeneity, begins with the indigenous body. In her 1993 work *The Book of Medicines*, Hogan challenges colonial notions of the magical ownership of language, problematizing the historical use of magical language for individual sublime experience in the white body. Patriarchal colonial powers used the process of renaming inhabitants of the so-called “New World” as powerful, ownership—constructing tools to repress indigenous, subaltern identities. Hogan writes of naming as a colonial endeavor “as if they,” the animals and plants of the “New World,” “had not been

there / before his words, had not / had other tongues and powers / or sung themselves into life / before him” (40). Hogan describes the body of the indigenous poet and of the animal as appropriated through magical naming, and so, though Hogan's work could be seen as part of the magical poetics lineage and may lend itself to a category like the sublime, I find the Romantic trappings of the sublime less useful than, perhaps, another parallel concept.

Naming human and other-than-human bodies is a common mode of claiming magical power in both historical magic and in magical poetics, and this magical construct is inherently both problematic and empowering for nonwhite, marginal writers. Subaltern poets insist on the agency of the subject, especially in the nonnormative and nonmale white body. These writers queer the body's relationship to centers of authority, prioritizing subjective experience rather than normative, hegemonic standards of physicality. Other postcolonial critiques of naming and forms of hegemonic control over bodies include trans\* theories of the body, which emphasize the uncategorizable physical experiences of bodies of color and queer bodies. Trans\* theory is especially applicable to magical theory and magical poetics because of the preeminence of the liminal body and liminal subject. C. Riley Snorton writes of qualities of transitivity as inhering in Black bodies by suggesting that, in their rejection of colonial categories meant to label them, the Black body and the trans\* body are both marginal and uncategorizable in their escapes between the cracks of Western, white, hetero, and other normative boundaries (56). The Black and trans\* body are both capable of crossing over names, labeled boundaries, and categories, defying centralized attempts to hold power over them through categorization and external identification. Theories like Snorton's elaboration on transitivity queer the

body and counter attempts to control it, which can include colonial magical naming, to suggest recentering the liminal nature of magical authority.

The parallels between trans\* escapes and Gloria Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness are clear and evidence the connection between categorical naming and categorical escape with escape between language borders. Anzaldúa is one of the theorists Freeman cites in *The Feminine Sublime* by way of introducing the borderlands as crucial to the sublime (1). The borderlands are a liminal space, inherently queer, "created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary...in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 25). Those who "go through the confines of the normal" inhabit the borderlands, the mestiza space between nations like Mexico and the United States as well as related nationalities, ethnicities, categories, and tongues (Anzaldúa 25). The mestiza is aligned with the magician as an outsider able to cross the border and to inhabit the fluid border itself, as in Mary Douglas, with the magical power of "having an entry into both worlds" like Snorton's transitivity allows (41). However, Anzaldúa's mestiza otherness—power, though it is defined because of the logocentric view from which borders are created as relying on duality, is queer and "both;" because of logocentric naming, the mestiza is "suffering from [an] absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other" (41). Mestiza consciousness enables another practical use of a semiotic, magical theory of language enabled by but not reliant on strict categorical boundaries, as is queer alchemy.

Cecilia Vicuña, another interlingual poet of mestiza consciousness, brings into potential the living performance of language between languages as a magical creation — what she calls a "quasi-poem" or "quasar" which dances in what translator Rosa Alcalá



refers to as the "war zone" between systems of meaning (Vicuña 22). In her live performances, Vicuña threads us, the reader and the audience, to her performance with a red yarn until we are both all-connected and not. At first, the yarn seems like a way to divide the audience through a linear demarcation, a territory – you on this side, others over there. However, as a participant in this reading, sitting and watching Vicuña weave as she spoke, I became more excited by the potential of borders fluidly connecting myself with other audience members than I was anxious (as I usually am) about participating in a performance. After many, many passes and crossings of the initially clear border created by one line of yarn that she hands to participants and weaves among them as a matrix, delineated territory no longer has as much meaning as the yarnish interrelations of those present. Relatedly, liminality of meaning is paralleled in liminality of identity for many poets. For Vicuña and Anzaldúa, the metaphor of the language threshold is also an efficacious spell mingling meanings and creating ruptures for the symbolic to fall into – or, at least, be unable to control.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write of rhizomatic consciousness as a similar concept to the liminal and border-based mestiza consciousness. "Any points of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be," they write, "a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7). Magic's and poetry's gestalt is relationship and intersubjectivity; subversive poets pop up just about anywhere because magical poetry's semiotic roots, the rhizome, are connected through generations, beyond hierarchical lineage, and rely on the poets' excitement at language's magical possibility. Rhizomatically, Federico García Lorca spoke to Jack Spicer despite language

barriers, and Lisa Jarnot passes on her family ties from Robert Duncan as if he were a spiritual father. Possibility means lack of control, which poets often fight against in the effort to craft a given poem, but which they can also learn to live with and to explore as a way of making space. The rhizome is a queer magical construct, preaching intersubjectivity and correspondence. The semiotic essences of queerness, mestiza consciousness, transitivity, and rhizomatic inheritances evade the dualism or categorical nature of patriarchal categories, and thus poets are able to move among categories rooted in the patriarchal perspective.

As these excursions show, queerness, like trans\* theory and mestiza consciousness, is one optimal way of imagining the potential of poetry's semiotic magic. In the same way that alchemy is a prime metaphor for the transformative capacity of magical language in poetry, queerness is a prime designation for the liminal identification of the magical poet and the poem itself in relation to denotative and symbolic meaning. Queerness denotes a subversive root and includes all expressions of uncategorizable sexual, gender, and relationship-based identity, all of which are expressions of connection, like magic is. For these reasons, queer alchemy is an apt descriptor for, but not a category of, magical potentiation. Rather than the Romantic or Burkean sublime, queer alchemy provides a fitting and inclusive term and theory for contemporary poets' multiple evasions of and rebuffs to the patriarchal cosmos and system.

Evidently, it would be impossible to and undesirable to nail down an exact definition of and category for the magic in poetry and for the queerness in alchemy. Here, I am asking the word "alchemy" to work descriptively in order to imagine the maneuvers of the queer (as in counter and radical) body through magical power. This is not the only

word, nor is it the right word. Every word is marked and powerful; every word, perhaps especially words in colonial languages, is tainted. Every word is a failing sign. I find alchemy, and queerness, to be the most productive terms because of the imagination that they produce. I also find the term "ecstasy" productive because it physicalizes the ineffable qualities of magic and participates in the queer lineage of sex and sex power. Alchemy's imagination is, perhaps, more literary and more countercultural, and it is also arguably more identity–normative than ecstasy because of ecstasy's contemporary manifestation in narratives of Black and/or queer passion. For instance, a Black poet's sex magic such as Paschal Beverly Randolph in L.H. Stallings's analytical text *Funk the Erotic* may align more with the historically ecstatic and spiritual than the alchemical (34). In exploring alchemy as a magical mode for poetry, I have found lineages supporting and deepening the rhetoric of magical boundary–crossing, such as the works of Diane di Prima, Robert Duncan, Amiri Baraka, Nathaniel Mackey and other poet–alchemists named in this essay. I do believe these poets and others yet to be named and yet to exist are participating in the essence of queer alchemy, and so I use that phrase knowing the connotations it may carry. With the power of a word comes its linguistic history, which challenges the utility of that word in different contexts. However, in order to better understand the ways in which magical poets use the always already inherent power of language to carve space and create ruptures, I am happy to use this term – albeit loosely.

One of the most historically repeated, if not the most important, phrases of alchemical lore is "as above, so below." As discussed earlier, this phrase encompasses much more than the heavens and the Earth, which is the most common first thought interpretation, and it also includes far more than the mind-over-matter second-level

reading in which the mind and body are pulled into harmony. Even more than the mind–body–spirit continuum or spectrum, that which is above coming into harmony with that which is below refers to the correspondence of meaning between signs and signified, between objects and words, between and among people as subjects and objects of one another, between identities, and potentially between all correspondences and conjunctions. I mean this in an intentionally hyperbolic sense. Alchemists see conjunction in the same way that occultists and poets do because of the doctrine of correspondence on which all magic is predicated, in which the outer world corresponds to the inner world (Grossinger 26,28). The alchemical metaphor "as above, so below" brings every relationship into harmony, bringing everything else closer to "harmonic convergence" (to borrow a phrase from the popular television show *The Magicians*, the writers of which, including Lev Grossman, did not miss the negative capability implied in an inherently destructive harmony). "As above, so below" reminds us of the magical qualities of meaning and the inevitability of meaning slips, the constancy of the sea taunting those fragile and temporary connections that symbols and their crafters attempt to make permanent. "As above, so below" is the ultimate metaphor, and that metaphor relies on the alchemical liminality or queerness of meaning and correspondence.

In many ways, magic is always already queer inasmuch as it issues from marginal and liminal spaces, but it is also queered by writers who identify as queer as the term is popularly used in relation to gender and sexuality spectra. Magical poets often relate their work and its power to their own queer identity and its social expression, including the lineage of gay writers that 20th-century poet Jack Spicer traces back to Lorca, as previously mentioned; the women referencing and composing epics including H.D., Alice

Notley, and Selah Saterstrom; and the bodily, somatic rituals of writers CA Conrad and Danielle Vogel. All of these writers, and many others, are linked by their common interest in the uncommon and magical as well as their sexual and/or societal queerness in relation to the normative center.

#### FAYLITA HICKS'S HOODWITCH AS MAGICAL POETRY AND AS QUEER ALCHEMY

By way of showing one example of the magically poetic connection of subjective experience and queer alchemical encounter in detail, I will now turn to the way in which Faylita Hicks (she/they) creates a contemporary experiential magical poem in her book *HoodWitch*. As much Vodoun practice as poetry, and so a prime example of magical poetics and queer alchemy, this 2019 collection clearly indicates the potential of magical poetics as a force for change – real world, sociopolitical change invested in identity politics in a way similar to the way Amiri Baraka's magical poetry was. Hicks is a Black queer writer and activist and their writing enacts the alchemy they hope to effect in the systems of oppression bodies of color and queer bodies experience, particularly in America.

As we learn from the first section break in *HoodWitch*, each "rite" or section of the book is accompanied by a Haitian Vodoun sigil and corresponding ritual element: water for Papa Legba, flesh for Maman Brigitte, and smoke for Baron Samedi (97). These sigils, called *veves* in Vodoun, represent the invocation of the loa, *mysteres*, or gods and are traditionally drawn in the dirt or sand as a step in summoning spells and rituals, as famously researched by Zora Neale Hurston (114). Hicks's poetic rites track a ritual progression from water, typically used as a purifying agent or matrix, to

permission-seeking, and ultimately, ritual death. Veves have proven of interest to multiple contemporary poets, including Ariana Reines, the poet behind the online magical community Invisible College. Reines uses the veve of Maman Brigitte in her poem "Thursday" at the core of 2019's magical *A Sand Book* as a conjuring spell (200). Hicks's use of veves and Vodoun ties their book explicitly to of-color lineages and traditions in magic, particularly to Black Southern traditions such as rootwork and Creole magic that Hurston also studied.

Hicks signals the opening of their ritual with the first poem, "About the Girl Who Would Become a Gawd," an empowerment spell intended to elide Girl and God/god/Gawd, Reader and Gawd, Author and Gawd, and Black and Gawd while also doubling as a threshold spell – a hex on those who would befoul the sacredness within and a blessing on those who come in community. This poem operates in strikingly similar ways to a traditional Jewish phylactery (Frankfurter calls these phylacteries "tephillin," the term also used for contemporary scriptural containers) in which ancient Jews would carve or write a short text into an object and then bury that magical object near the entrance to the home (Frankfurter 389). This object, be it an engraved magic bowl or a magic gemstone, provides protection as well as the banishment of evil. It is both the language used on the object and the object's physical presence that make the spell work; physicality as manifest presence through objects imbued with language enchants the spell to become "real," as in embodied in the world, and unifies the symbolic object with the text's connoted meaning. Similarly, Hicks's poem forms the threshold of HoodWitch and, as will be seen, physically manifests curse and blessing. The alchemical becoming of the

Girl-as-Gawd brings divinities into this space, conjuring power through language written on the "stone" of the page.

The potency of language as naming event, as in naming oneself "Gawd" or naming another "Other," is always already inherent in language's semiotic "sea of syntax," the mix and mingle of meanings in the sea of communion, that is, communication. Regardless of the source as Biblical text or contemporary poem, calling out "God" as desert prophet is a conjuring of that energy as much as Hicks's calling in "Gawd" from the self is conjuring and manifesting that power.

It is in the conjunctive correspondence of these and that where magical power manifests, and in the metaphorical relation of this and that which were perhaps previously unrelated where poetic magic resides. In the event of naming "you" "a Gawd" (not the Gawd or God or Goddess, by which I feel Hicks implies a more open and compassionate naming), Hicks invites the reader to recognize themselves in the name of Gawd, in the power of Gawdness. We are correlated with Gawd. However, this is not a colonizer's God or a conversion project; Hicks names "Gawd," the intentional alternative spelling of divinity from which power emanates, in an act of creation and reclamation through, perhaps, Black vernacular or Ebonics spelling. Gawd is a divine syllable – "aw" as sound-based phoneme and not English short "o," and also as in "awe." Gawd is not female or male, nor is Gawd singular in the sense of patriarchal monotheism. Gawd is inherently plural, and us, and not us. Gawd is a magical word:

You must remember that you are a Gawd  
it started, a coffee-rimmed face glowing  
through the screen, crowning the bleached walls  
of her tiny room in gold. Let your fears go for now —  
but fear, an itch behind the left earlobe, irritates her  
for the rest of the night. Makes her out of mind

& out of sight. Just another black woman (1)

Gawd is a power that one occupies and comes to occupy through awareness, through self-naming. "She a temple," Hicks writes, "but she still needs / to prepare the altar" (1). To become one with Gawdness, one encounters ecstasy (5) and alchemy (1) and embodied, affective fear similar to anxiety and fear of the experience of the sublime (3). These manifestations of energy that move beyond the body are still, in Hicks's poems, rooted in the physical body that generated the energy. The physicality of the phylactery, the threshold spell's gemstone or bowl as a presence, is unnecessary in the sense of the inherence of Gawdness in the individual subject, but it also is inherently present.

The body is a fact, and the fact of the Black or Brown body never leaves Hicks's magic. Hicks's magic is both here, as in present and physical, and ephemeral, fleeting, sublime, queer, and ecstatic. This magic is queer and alchemical. Hicks's magic is not transcendent, nor can it be. The body is a fact and embodies certain privileges. Whiteness as a physical quality is a fact and aligns with the constructed patriarchal narrative of "acceptable" or normative bodies. Narratives of transcendence more often align with the white, male, straight narrative. This white body is the body that is "normal," unlooked-at, standard, and acceptable. This white male straight privileged body always already moves through space powerfully, and so writers with these bodies have no need of the body's fact in their poetry – it is assumed, and they are neutral, unmarked (hear "unnamed") subjects. Transcending these less vulnerable bodies may be desirable because the fact is that white men always already come back to these bodies. Black, Brown, womxn, queer, disabled, and other bodies are always already marked, also – as in "claimed" territory. The patriarchal property of other bodies from the normative



perspective, these are abnormal, "marginal" bodies. These bodies don't go away and can't be left. These bodies are physical facts that, in the oppressive patriarchal categorization system, are not meant to move with the privilege of the white body and so cannot escape their own facts. These bodies cannot, do not transcend. However, these bodies, these people who exist as intersections of the body–fact and subjectivity, can reject patriarchal language and categorization and can move transitively, queerly, and alchemically.

Alchemy is transformation, the process of bringing one substance into contact with other substances in order to bring about change. Alchemy is lead–to–gold, but it is everything in between as well. As in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the albatross, representing gold and aligned with the Sun, falls "like lead into the sea" when shot down, coming back to the ground after an experience of transcendence in flight (181). Imagine flight, the feeling of alchemy, ecstasy, and magic, and you're in the sea of syntax with Hicks. Alchemists may (likely) never have succeeded at producing gold, but a procedural sort of formula meant for an ending is antithetical to the idea of alchemy. If gold were a real end goal, alchemists may have just pretended they had found the gold. The theory of alchemy is one of personal betterment, constant experimentation and exploration, and curiosity, not production. Gold is a metaphor, not part of technic as Campagna defines it, even if gold allows for material wealth. You are lead now (a physical element, a manifestation with physical properties as well as aphysical characteristics), but you can seek gold. Gold is unification, synthesis, the Sun, the center, Dharmic oneness, egolessness, being in your power, feeling yourself. Alchemy is a remembrance of these unities, such as Kaspar's remembrance of the unity of Mary and myrrh in H.D.'s *Trilogy* (163). Gold is also a fluctuation, a fleeting glimpse, what a poem

can grant the reader or listener as a particularly slicing metaphor hits home. Gold is the process of renaming oneself and transforming oneself over and over and over again in the spirit of queerness: reinvention. Gold is Gawd.

In this way, at the beginning of HoodWitch Hicks alchemizes the reader, herself, and the poem through her power(ful) language. In the utterance, manifestation is glimpsed. Hicks invokes the name of Gawd – herself and the reader, in communion – and thus Gawd is. Hicks is not done; this is just the beginning of HoodWitch, after all, and there are many, many spells to be cast (including a hex on R. Kelly) (41). As merely the opening of a book, the declarative alchemy already explored would suffice. But Hicks pushes their spell another step before opening onto the First Rite of Water. At the end of this first poem, right after Hicks's Gawd "Her" manifests as a "reaching flame," "ecstatic" (5), Hicks fixes her spell with a physical, aphysical, digital amulet: the hashtag. "Fixing" a spell, or rhetorically carving a spell by way of cursing or blessing an object, has a long history stretching back to the defixiones or curse tablets of ancient Greco-Egyptian spells (Frankfurter 351). Hicks uses this same fixing concept: Gawd moves from Hicks to reader to author to Her to digital community in the space of 6 pages, culminating with a page block of hashtagged phrases that bring the energy and power of the #BlackLivesMatter movement to bear on this poem, on this Gawdness. Over and over again, in a symmetrical, incantatory barricade that quite literally overwhelms the reading of the page, chant the words "#SayHerName #SayMyName "#SayHerName #SayMyName" (Hicks 6). These blocks, 13 lines at the top and 12 at the bottom, surround both English words and binary code/words in the center of the page.

Most readers wouldn't read, in their mind or aloud, these hashtags one by one, and one can't exactly read them in order of appearance. As a unit, these blocks perform the literal border–perimeter around the central text, barricading and protecting the "black girls who knew the scent well" with the chants of power used by #BLM (Hicks 6). "Say Her Name" and "Say Their Names" repeat endlessly on page 6 of HoodWitch as they continue to do on the streets of Louisville, Kentucky, where I now write this line in 2021 in the continued wake of the murder of Breonna Taylor by the Louisville Metro Police Department's officers in an always already racist America. These incantations – Say Their Names – accompanied by the names of the chanters and of others lost to us echo endlessly in physical buildings and in the cyberspaces of social media. These conjurings of personhood, the name magic of litany and remembrance, rebound endlessly and rub within the sea of syntax, where "Her Name" could be any name, "My Name" or yours. On the page, in a physical and shareable form, these incantations gain the affective power of reader memories and gain the names that the reader brings with them. These names protect and encircle the center of the page, the binary code and the command or request (delivered by the verb tense) of/to "burn wick & conjure hell" (Hicks 6).

The hashtag(#) as a magical amulet takes on added meaning in Hicks's poem. Hashtags are liminal and queer in their multitudes, a symbol of a word or of words, but also as a symbol the hashtag has its own symbolic meaning in the cyberspace, in texting lingo, and in cultural power. The hashtag is a vessel. The hashtag is, metaphorically and literally, a summoning spell. On Twitter, hashtags are accompanied by phrases, names, and referents that may call up and search any number of chains of meaning – correspondent, conjoined meaning – from the sea of tweets. The hashtag represents our

ability to pull on the power of the internet, that seeming magic by which knowledge is conveyed at the drop of a line in a search bar, done without thought by millions upon millions. The spell of the hashtag takes up space in the cypersphere and is already inherent in the meaning behind the phrases it adds to. The presence of the hashtag in Hicks's spell declares the immediacy, the efficacy, of the hashtag in a redundant, resounding physicality that parallels the ephemerality of the cyperspaces in which it is bandied about.

At the core of this page-long spell, this block of text both physical and rejecting physicality, is the ultimate pun: binary code. This language used for coding as the base representation of meaning and correspondent computing action is a string of 0 and 1 that, on Hicks's page, takes up physical space comprising the heart of their poem. As Hicks tells us in an endnote, the code translates to "Say Her Name, Say My Name" in English, but I would say this is hardly the point or "meaning" of the code (97). Binary language is a series of on and off, triggering electrical impulses. This is the closest we can get to literalizing the digital sphere on the page, bringing the two realms to touch. Binary code in this poem represents liminality, semiotics, and the sea of syntax in our present digital age. Because it is unreadable to your average reader of HoodWitch without the endnote, the binary code challenges the very meaning of meaning, emphasizing the semiotic space from which all magic and poetry extends. One extra space between numbers and the whole code is "ruined" in translation, alchemically becoming some other words and some other computing commands. The string of digits symbolizes the letter, the syllable, the units of sense on which language operates, as well as the arbitrary, yet essential nature of meaning behind the surface word. Hicks makes binary, a pun on binaries and categorical

meanings, the center of their spell as a disruption of meaningfulness itself. At the core of the power of the spell is the power of queer meaningfulness, the transformation of language to meaning to power and back again, along with the alchemy of identity:

01110011 01100001 01111001 (6)

## CONTEMPORARY MAGICAL POETICS AND THE TWITTERSPHERE

Hicks's HoodWitch demonstrates a keen interest in at least one of today's magical platforms: social media. With their hashtags and binary code, Hicks's poems point the reader in the direction of both magic and poetry's future, a future which cannot be without the digital and virtual spheres, despite the persistence of printed text. Social media is a platform for poetry like that of aforementioned "Instapoet" Rupi Kaur, one of Mike Chasar's subjects in his 2020 study of today's new media poetics *Poetry Unbound*, as well as for poetics statements and discussions. As seen historically, magic can be a popular, people's enterprise just as alchemy can be the scholar's or poet's activity. As a borderland or contact zone for what we might call high and low art, Twitter provides a relatively even playing field for emergent voices and ideas to be heard as compared to the published book; Chasar describes this as a new relationship of the poet to their voice created by circumventing the capitalist poetry publishing machine (184). Because of the potential for online iterations of poetry and of magical language acts, I will now turn to the future of magical poetics, including in the digital sphere, as a way of concluding this essay.

As a poetics platform, Twitter leaves many things to be desired. Tweets are contentious and often intentionally problematic, and anything written in a Tweet is just as

likely to be nonsensical or foolish as it is thoughtful. One tweet I want to examine, posted by an emerging poet and what a Daily Dot article calls a "jaded" editor Danielle Rose on September 3, 2021, represents just one iteration in the long history of the poetry and power conversation that magical poetics is a vital part of (Ritzen). It's not really Rose's tweet, but the conversation in the comments, that I believe maps a current of poetry and magic today. Responses from individuals including queer, BIPOC, womxn were, maybe for the first time in this conversation's long history, clearly represented and clearly heard.

Rose tweeted, "I wish that poets understood that the general population has no interest in what we do, so when we speak we are only speaking to each other. The delusion that poetry is something powerful is a straight line to all kinds of toxic positivities that are really just us lying to ourselves." The poetry and utility conversation that this comment engages with has been raging since "dangerous" poets were kicked out of Plato's Republic. As with Auden's poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," Rose's tweet in some ways uses the power of language to deny language that same power. Rose seems to align with the sentiment of Auden's extracted line, "Poetry makes nothing happen." As we've seen, Auden's poem goes on to suggest the inverse of this initial statement, while Rose seems to choose the simpler denial of poetic utility, perhaps in a conflation of poetry with the poetry world (meaning publishing, for one thing) of 2021.

I'm not as interested in choosing a side in this historical argument as in discussing its ramifications, but I will say that, in siding against the power of poetry, Rose is asserting her privilege to remove power from others' use of language. For everyone else, especially for people of color, queer folx, Latinx people, womxn, and other under-resourced groups, language and especially poetry is an important source of power and

magical efficacy. As I've shown, magical poetry has become a way of claiming identity and power from states marginal to the authoritative, hegemonic center. Faylita Hicks's *HoodWitch* is one brilliant example of the way in which race and other forms of identity become entwined with magic as a way of declaring power. The English Romantics used magic as resistance as well, and magical poetry has continued this track since. Rose is a white woman in a position of some editorial privilege and so her position and denial of power to others was noticed by those near her reach.

Whether or not there is "nuance" to her tweet, as one commenter asserted, it is clear that Danielle Rose's followers do not wholly agree with this dilution of power. One commenter described Rose's equation of production with power as, "internalized capitalism talking." In the words of another commenter, Rose's stance "evoked a total lack of consideration of BIPOC poetry history as well as an incredibly elitist view of poetry that only sees book publication and sales as a valid measure of success or impact." In what we might call a similar fashion, Amiri Baraka called Auden out on the way in which he took on the conversation of poetry and efficacy by writing his own poetic response. "Poor Auden, living a lie," Baraka writes, "to escape the Red Paint, he wd/mumble 'Poetry does nothing...'/When, at least, it got him in trouble" (478). As with magic, the power of poetry is the power that others see in it. Baraka calls Auden's paradox of power and powerlessness a "lie," "a simple forgery in place of his soul" (481). As a Black poet, Baraka points at the problem of a white poet claiming the overall impotence of language, even when the inverse of that claim seems to be Auden's implied truth. It is not so much the irony that is important to Baraka and to the others who extract

this quote, but the stated phrase itself. The comments on Rose's tweet, especially those referring to BIPOC and queer identity, seem to evince a similar conviction.

It is important to see that the debate over poetry as power, utility, play, or uselessness is still vital and still provides intense fodder for poets and readers. With social media's ubiquity, anyone can speak to this conversation and discuss the relevance of language to power. Now, especially, the conversation is for everyone and everyone can have a voice. This is why I focus on Rose; not because she is incorrect, but because the conversation is evolving due to writers' and a growing public insistence on identity politics and power dynamics based on resistance to perceived normativity or authoritative centers of control, of which we may see queer alchemy as a vital expression. If we are to consider the future of a magical poetics and queer alchemy as I have defined it, we must consider popular poetics as a lightning rod for this power, conducted through the "margins" and those who subvert normativity.

## CONCLUSION AND STATEMENT OF MAGICAL POETICS

In the conventional sense of utility (from the capitalist technic), poetry is, largely, useless. Poems do not turn a wheel or pull a lever or write copy for a website – though poets may. Poetry is not fungible, transferrable, or recognizable as legal tender. If we believe in production as the essence of meaning and value, poetry can claim little real estate. But poetry claims the chasm. Poetry's liminality, gesturing at metaphorical correspondence, conjunction, and the semiotic, can represent a rejection of utility. What is a metaphor but a rejection of logocentric patriarchal denotation and the gesture towards the emptiness and convergence between? One of the greatest magical constructs in



language is the metaphor, Shelley's "vital metaphor," as Johnston puts it (122). The metaphor transforms and alchemizes. As Emily Dickinson famously puts it in her metaphorical definition of a poem, "if I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry" (Letter 342a). Sometimes, "all one can ask of a poem is an aesthetic experience of the dissolving of barriers between self and world," an alchemical transformation (Materer 121). This dissolution is magical power.

To be "serious," as Rose uses the term and in relation to the normative centers of control, is to be legible, which is another expression of power. In the world of technic, legibility is equal to productivity. But in the magical world, power is in illegibility, in the evasion of meaning that skirts around and between the borders. To be unknown, to be a witch or magician or queer alchemist, is to hold inestimable power against the "center," whatever that may be. If we evade their maps, we evade their grasp. As cult-followed author and radical faerie Arthur Evans wrote, "magic is one of our most powerful allies in the struggle against patriarchal industrialism" (149).

The technical world is not interested in our evasions. We are just numbers to a computer mind, and those numbers do not add up productively in the same way that estimated property values do. Our humanistic enterprise as poets is invaluable in the sense that it cannot be calculated; whether it is high or low is not the question, is irrelevant, and is impossible to answer. The humanities are connective tissue, are rhizomatic, are intersubjective, are magical. Poetry is a prime example of how the humanities influence thinking over time. The imagination grows wider every time a poet writes a line and believes in it, every time a person who has never written a poem thinks of connotation in the first line of a simple acrostic poem, and every time a student opens

"The Waste Land" and unlocks their exploration of meaning's possibility for the first time. That value is real and imagines reality; it is not calculable. I think that Shelley's expansion of the imagination is one way to project the value of poetry. We understand something of the fabric of our reality when we understand poetry, and we understand poetry liminally, as water in a sieve. For brief moments, we experience connections with essence, with meaning at a subconscious or collective semiotic level. We experience, perhaps, *jouissance*. That poem took us somewhere we cannot ever experience in production. That poem may not, but maybe will, ever take us there again. That is the ephemeral nature of the liminal, the border/less. You're there, and then you're not.

And here we are. We're "moved" by poetry in a real sense: we are moved beyond our experience of reality as it's given. We think things we could not have thought otherwise. We move between subjectivities. There is no value we can ascribe to this magic. We cannot retire from poetry either. We are the hierophants of the imagination, always in-between. As Diane di Prima famously said in "Revolutionary Letter #75," the only war that matters is the war against the imagination – and that War is, truly, still raging (103).

## A PLANETARY SPELL

## A Planetary Spell

"But we are bear-like dreamers in a lifetime's hibernation..."  
- Robert Duncan

I summon you, Tiresias: hero, heroin, heroine.

O  
You, wanting to  
    woman  
O  
magister extraordinaire  
    I plan you,  
    I make you as I speak!

sensuous winding  
serpents  
hit on  
hit on my head  
make me  
    Hermaphroditus

I create  
    as you  
    create us

O  
We are  
the planned position  
the city in the sand  
We are  
the magical city we looked back on  
as we loped over a sand dune  
as we lowed in a field of grass  
We are  
the river others bathe in  
to feel more holy  
to sanctify  
to become one  
We are  
the energies within us  
We are - Lo!  
the city in the sea  
a magical city  
that emerges at the last moment  
to remind us of our fantasies  
and of childhood  
and of who we once dreamed that we could be.

I am calling you! Yes, you!  
Calling your name  
Calling your number

Silence on the other end  
I found you  
Until  
\*click\*  
It sounds like hanging up  
It sounds like "no one home"  
But feels like pressure  
feels like "here with us"  
god with us  
gods with us  
We are  
the energy we call upon  
And you are  
my finding

You are  
    Aphrodite spring-  
    water boiled apologetic  
You are  
    Hermes  
    cap winged  
    messenger, thrice-blessed trickster

I  
take you from  
the serpent  
I  
cradle you  
your tender heart in mine  
my hand like the womb your new body never had  
my hand like the dictionary your dead name is buried in

nothing meaningless  
if we make it less so

Call you to me  
Call you  
in the rain  
in my sleep  
by following  
by footsteps

Imagine you with me  
we  
mythical  
I count the sands of time

I count the toes of the foot  
of a raven  
with three eyes  
his blessing on me  
as he claws my hand  
he opens up the squiggling worms  
who whisper secrets  
to my body  
through your body

I  
channel you  
channels of wisdom  
channels of delight

I  
channel you  
call you to me  
call you for me

sometimes I dream we  
are the nymphs,  
the love child  
    us Hermaphroditus  
they were born in a pool of tears  
they were born in the sand in  
sands that cannot dissipate  
cannot disintegrate or decompose  
with us  
we are in the snow globe now  
gods shake us  
shake us  
shake us thrice

You were born  
in this poem

between these lines

I  
create as I  
maybe I feel middle  
    maybe I  
    middle your  
own your  
    third eye

third eye  
all-seeing third eye!

Here comes the part where we prophesy.

Let's talk about  
Aphrodite  
in Venus, intra  
I Psyche  
    you Eros,  
the love  
child

Let's talk about  
    Hermes  
brilliant message  
burning mercury  
red burns lead burns gold

I found this caduceus  
    on the sidewalk  
    and thought, huh,  
    maybe you left this here  
    just for me  
are we mythical

Let's talk  
    forbidden  
sex  
sweat  
legs and nose in the air like  
    what's a bit of silver  
    what's a little shit  
    if the rectum is a grave  
    then bury me  
    bury me  
    in it

if we are  
    the same  
if this  
    mingling  
is both me  
    and not me,  
both yes  
and no



both yes/no  
both negative  
and the possible  
if I tattoo  
    a both, and  
on my  
reluctant spine  
am I you  
am I me  
who am I  
right  
am I we now

is this the body of god  
or just a trick I visited  
am I the sum of all things  
am I the higher plane  
am I the in-between  
am I the queerness  
am I the threshold  
to the next step  
to the next space  
to the higher keys  
to the seventh mansion  
make us  
break us  
this body of god  
so whole  
and so small

Tiresias opened his eyes.  
What do you wake me for?

Nothing could prepare him  
for the shock  
of pages upon pages of lights  
trained on him:  
body and eyes flickering,  
and what would his hands do?

He was scared.  
He had assumed he was alone.  
He was shocked with sight.

But then, we're never just alone.  
But then we wrote this page together, he and I.

Tiresias sighed.  
With a name like that,  
who wouldn't?

He'd heard the call.  
Kindergarten would begin soon,  
and no middle name for recourse.

The toilet stall  
called.

And it really never was just me.

The circle opened.

## HOT SPELL

"We go through the word Forest...  
my whole being is Vision"  
- Susan Howe

He woke up and he felt alone.  
Arms, alone. Legs, alone.  
The sky was as it always seemed to be.

Small Tiresias had written a poem.

He memorized it  
to recite for himself  
on occasions like this:

alone ly  
littleb oy  
sit in the center  
sit on this circle

breakd own what alls  
cry if you can  
where does it hur t  
in th circle

cri  
f you can

dropdown alls  
alone ly  
littleb oy

The song never worked.  
So, he woke up.

The third eye opens  
as the pair of eyes  
shuts.

This is why  
prophets don't see  
and why kings  
aren't prophets.

This is why thrice-blessed  
this Tiresias  
is a fiction  
who cannot author himself.

This is why  
we dream  
but, on waking,  
forget.

It was, and it wasn't.

This is the timeline  
Tiresias wandered through  
before that other story you've heard.  
And as he wandered, and the pages piled up, he dreamt through stars  
and he went far afield.

There was a deep dark pool  
and Tiresias looked into it.  
Over the rim: the water ink-black and rotting.

You know what they say about deep dark pools?  
Or is it dark dark pools?

Tiresias thought harder.

In a dark dark pool in a  
dark dark wood lies a  
dark dark body and a  
dark dark chest in a  
dark dark...  
Tiresias had made part of that up anyway.

He wanted to dip his hands  
into the darkness  
and scoop it out  
like the last bite of tomorrow  
or of ice cream.

The stars above did not shine  
in the pool's reflection.  
Rather, Tiresias only saw  
himself reflected  
therein.  
Taking in only his own old face,  
Tiresias was struck  
by how ugly  
he seemed.  
How worn, positively sagging  
his skin  
and how his once masculine features  
had seemed to fade or dull  
and become boring.  
He felt alone, bewildered.

But something had called him, as a child,  
something far off in the woods  
and across plains and prairies to  
the foothills of the grandest mountains  
he would ever see  
and up  
and up to the valleys and,  
finally,  
up to the summit, where he would  
leap off, caught up in rapture, and sail skyward into the dark dark of deep space.

Or was it the dark dark  
of the abyss.

He couldn't see that far;  
he couldn't remember  
every detail.

But it was also here, in this pool.  
The calling urged him,  
tickled his ribs and his spine with a  
gentle hand waving  
him forward,  
hitchhiking taillights like an interstate junkie.

It was there,  
but he needn't follow it.  
Why press on, so hard, when the calling,  
the deep dark,  
is right here?  
Perhaps it had been all along.  
He needn't go forward.  
The pool  
with the body floating  
deep within  
was there,  
with the chest under that  
in a slick of scream and scum-muck  
at the bottom.  
He wondered what was inside  
but couldn't reach it through the water  
almost dared not  
stretch out a finger  
to dial for help  
to lean, to ask  
someone, anyone,

to open his chest  
in the dark dark pool  
where only his face reflected.

He needn't press on.

He did leave and he went off toward the plains,  
but only after a while  
of staring.

Years of staring,  
    waiting for help,  
        watching the abyssal pool  
            with the mountains waiting  
                and peaks waiting  
                    and stars watching

in reflection:  
Narcissus, the simple lily bending, always waiting  
for love to break the surface.



at the bottom of the water  
is a well  
sealed  
where emotion sits  
cold spillage over my head hair  
tears  
down my neck  
baptism, sorrow  
to be in the pool  
is to fear drowning endlessly  
waking, and drowning more  
more emotion  
fewer responses  
floods that move on me  
the wave moves on my mouth  
a mouthful  
turns to seawater, spat out  
Neptune moves on my orbit  
and a trident of veins  
pulses quicker, quicker  
beneath my wrist  
and beneath that?  
And beneath Mercury, like a liquid letter  
pulsing  
penumbra on my eye  
that third eye oscura  
where in the well  
is there space  
for doubt?  
where can I  
go  
to the bottom  
if the bottom is where I sit  
where is further?

Bring me to the blasted oak.  
Let my body fill the spaces in her trunk.

There were many days  
and many locations.

There were many me's,  
and many of Tiresias.  
And many words exchanged,  
love poems to lovers  
we both were.

The well was everywhere.

Tiresias traveled.  
Tiresias slept.  
Tiresias ate, sometimes.  
Tiresias rarely spoke.

(I only heard him when I leaned in so far)

Every spirit of every place  
was left waiting  
for him to arrive  
and waiting for him to return  
after, after.

Tiresias at the Shore.

Tiresias wept.  
He saw the imprint  
of a starfish:  
empty, like the shore.  
He witnessed the starfish  
in its extreme absence,  
a chilling, boneless revelation  
of nature  
in the sand.

The tide rolled back in.  
Tiresias watched.  
The starfish disappeared.

Tiresias waited for another revelation,  
a replacement for the starfish.  
He wanted  
to witness a life.

He looked up.  
The stars stood, unblinking.  
He looked down.

Tiresias in the Woods.

Tiresias noticed with fear  
that a wasp had landed  
near his hand  
on the table.

He didn't dare move.

Beside his fear, a deep sadness  
that the wasp should sense  
that fear  
and be sad, too.

Tiresias at the Mall.

Tiresias remembered taking his daughter to the mall.  
He remembered  
her smallish glee  
as the penny floated, flipped  
in air  
to a splash.

Tiresias held Manto's hand.

They walked together to the arcade  
and played games  
fighting in the streets  
shooting hoops  
and listening to Zoltar spin his webs.  
They both exchanged that look  
when Zoltar told them to look  
for a coming stranger.

She was gone soon after.

Tiresias touched his hand  
like he'd touched Manto's hand.  
He whispered  
"I love you"  
to himself.

Tiresias on the Plains.

Tiresias sat down to think.  
Who am I right now?  
he wondered  
or is wondering.

The grasses waved, tall and slender, in answer.

Tiresias sat for several minutes and nothing happened.  
He felt his head, heavy in his hand.  
She massaged a tender spot on my palm.  
They flinched  
together.

On the prairie,  
where he knew no answer  
and no being,  
Tiresias sat and wondered.

Tiresias on a Tree Stump on the Plains.

He just couldn't remember  
why it happened  
the way it did.

The Sibyl was always wrong  
with her slips of scribbles  
like fortune cookies  
thrown in a paper bag –

or was she always right  
but only told  
part of the truth?

Tiresias was alone  
left alone  
to figure it out  
himself  
and he kicked the tree  
where it had once been  
as a sign of his opposition.

Zoltar laughed.

Tiresias walking away from the Tree Stump on the Plains.

Then again  
Tiresias mused  
Manto had often received letters  
that looked more than a little  
like scrap paper  
with scribbles.

Maybe there could be something  
Tiresias hadn't seen  
or known.

The grasses waved.



Tiresias has walked far away from the Tree Stump but is still on the Plains, just nearer to a River.

It was always frustrating to remember  
that no matter how much he knew  
he could only know  
and others did not know  
he knew.

Every king ever  
has heard this story  
the one that goes  
heed my warning  
and he still laughs  
and turns away  
with his white beard flowing  
and his white teeth flashing  
and his white skin polished  
and he resumes his kingly chess.

The pawns know more than the king  
because they know  
their limits.

Tiresias envied Manto  
for leaving him.

He looked downriver  
towards the distant trees.

He looked past the trees  
towards mountains  
and contemplated  
leaving it all  
alone.

Tiresias in the Swamp.

So, this was going to be familiar later.  
The bog  
filled Tiresias with flies  
little protein breaths  
tangled in his gnarly beard.

Tangled in his well-kept beard  
and he combed them out  
with his leonine fingertips  
and flicked them  
to oblivion.

Leonine fingertips; that was the sort of majesty  
Tiresias surrounded himself with  
when he had the choice.

Little pink flowers  
danced on the watertop  
in a balletic sugarlump pinkness  
sweet as morning dew on a honeybee.

He did eat a little bit of the flower,  
but not enough.

Sometimes,  
Tiresias tried  
Spelling.

He had limited success,  
as with sex.

It wasn't the formula,  
and it wasn't his body.  
All the pieces fit together  
quite right.

It wasn't time.

Tiresias Spells in Egypt.

the crocodile begs forgiveness  
not my teeth, no  
Sekhmet in his gold

he wants finer tenders  
your blood-soaked birthing cloth  
for his smile, ripe and clear

and a tear  
or a tear

where salt keeps meat pure  
an unsoiled cheek

flying is much like lashing  
rain  
fish gasping on open concrete cracks  
grains pressed against wounds  
out of water  
ropes of veins  
starving  
more, more, more

salt gives flavor, sucks  
out life like a zipping straw  
bleak reeds in sorry swamps  
and lotus to eat  
for days and days.

what funeral for forgetting?

Tiresias Spells in the Womb.

lemmings don't even jump:  
Disney made them  
fall

blew the cliff up  
and watched  
with his camera

like an eye  
like a pit  
like cancer

aureole  
like a breast  
oracle  
like an eye  
solemn  
like a pit  
solarium  
like cancer

we line up  
in the light  
we fail  
in the light  
sun-marked bodies  
scratched by sight

and we hide  
by limelight

blue, electronic,  
we encode failures

like the last suck  
from mother  
and the sun at our back, watching  
us walk  
off the  
cliff

In the beginning:  
In the beginning, there was queer:  
Queer was:  
Queer was neither good nor evil:

Just about every dictionary spelled the same way.

Tiresias knew every word  
that ever would be  
and still  
and still

In the beginning, there was Tiresias.  
And Tiresias saw.  
And Tiresias wept.  
There was neither good nor evil.  
There was no code.

And so, let's birth a binary star, bereft of all sense.

The bell  
at his wedding  
would not ring.  
No bride, no  
unsullied white gown  
white like oxygen in  
on any body  
No bride if he married  
even if he might be pregnant  
the bell  
at his wedding  
would not ring  
for two men.  
Not for two men,  
as writ.

Tiresias felt, beneath his feet  
in front of another low altar,  
the ripple of unmoving time  
start to quake  
a slip fault  
that returns cliff faces to their single bed.  
The Church seethed.  
He heard the din  
marry it, marry it,  
nagging, and oh!  
No bell to drown it out  
No bell to call him to his partner,  
smiling.

He was always smiling, Tiresias found,  
even when he didn't know what to smile for  
his partner smiled  
and joked  
and no bells rang  
his head Tiresias's filled with  
gongs like  
birdsong  
overlapped and played on a looping pedal in a dark corner concert in a dead-end dive bar  
with the open mic list going on  
and on  
and ever on  
but never ending  
and when was his set?  
Tiresias's head like a  
song you can't unhear

an earworm  
and like no bells

remember

I remember

there are no bells in hell  
just the white whisper  
of my thoughts  
white like oxygen  
unsullied  
as I sit a lone



## Tiresias

When we began writing this I mean winging this solitary/together endeavor, you presented yourself as my best friend in a gray cloak, gray meant to hide me from myself.

I mirrored and, fluid in your image, expounded on philosophy and sex with no repercussions, and continued to fuck men and date women (but I felt; how I felt! unreal, like an unmoored ghost ship.

My friend with wild curly hair and glasses joked about his sex gender predicament as Judith Butler ironically crept into my writing (or is it now that she creeps???) and we laughed at ourselves, not knowing how true and raw the performance.

How unfelt.

This was a play.  
Tiresias the play, at play.  
Plays are made of props.  
I was the main character.

The cloak recalls Frodo's self-sacrificial dive to cover Sam in Elven mirages. As they waited underneath the hardened cloak, bad men sniffing the air, neither kissed the other. I've long wondered why.

Tiresias in his head.

the lilies bloom in October  
and April passes like dead skin  
from the unworked arm

aloe grows more spikes  
and is still, hardly, recognizable

I want to hide in metaphor:  
woman  
as in, woah, not man.  
Un-man. Soft. Fluffy,

like a spacecraft floating in orbit  
around a tumorous crater moon  
and the unman me is  
a dog named like a  
instrument so she could play music  
and be whimsical and simple  
just a dog  
damn  
a dog like what I could be

a woman a metaphor a dog?  
a lobotomy,  
the question is whether the pain is truly unearned,  
a Buddhist signature  
stamped in wax on the birth  
certificate of a dying name

Tiresias practices ornithomancy.

He takes out his bird skeleton  
polished to high silver, each bleached bone,  
and casts it to the winds.

Slow grasp, Hand turn, Stiff neck, Foot shuffle.

the bones attract other bones  
after the fancy of feathers  
in the swirl are cries of murder, murder  
and more small birds fly in  
flapping for desperate life  
flapping for their dead children  
cast on the ground  
they fly in a cloud  
murder, murder  
and circle overhead.

He is a child with an empty head, crushing the heads of child ravens  
waiting for eyes to ache out  
and drip onto dust  
into dust.

Tiresias waits for signatures  
and notaries  
“You’re doing fine, keep it up  
Kid  
You’re doing fine.”

Some days I feel I could ride the sun.  
I am no longer Tantalus  
wanting both wanting  
what I can't have  
alchemy, stretch, riddle and mark.  
Instead I could ride the sun.  
Instead I am a flying son with wings my father made me  
and the feathers of every bird  
and every peacock hold me in the air  
as I go, here I go,  
I soar hither and thither and blaze as a beacon  
and the sun, the sun  
he touches me

he reaches out to graze at my ankles to grasp at my ankles how perfect how perfect this is  
and he can't hurt me  
he could never hurt me

And some days  
when I think I am Icarus  
Sometimes I am.

Father, when will I always be  
Icarian  
When  
my wings are wrapped in wax  
my wings are damsel's dresses dewed with sweat

When, Father, when am I glorious  
When I am glorious  
I melt in tears I melt in waxes  
Sun, the Sun

I am Icarian I am might  
The golden-tipped eagle wings me  
And on the right, a dark-black crow of night flight outstrips me  
My catching sickness burns my pupils  
Down, down, sprinkled as ashes are  
In the ripple-down, ripple-down

If I am Icarian  
Watch me fall

If I feel  
I could ride the sun

Are my father's wings protecting me  
Is the dash of salt on my tongue  
a lifeline  
a recall  
as in, come back  
as in  
that is the moment  
I knew  
you had not changed  
and I took you in my arms  
and I took away the pain  
and I left only gold, only gold, only gold.

Some days  
I am still no longer Tantalus in my mind.  
Some days  
I put on my own armor:  
This is the bracelet I gifted myself  
These are the hands that touch me, my own hands,  
put on my wings  
the feathers are plucked from distant geese  
running fowl in winter  
This is the voice  
I whisper out of fear,  
the sibilance hiding like a missed sliver  
of thistle in the boy's foot.  
He is stone, he is cast in bronze  
nothing is silver any longer.

These are the voices I put on,  
and the sun,  
the sun is there!  
He watches me and he leans away and my ankles are not catching  
as I reach for him so surely  
and, like a child, am betrayed  
one too many times  
I forget to reach  
and I break these wings  
and ripple down.

Some days  
I feel  
I could ride the sun  
like there's some part of me  
that could always be  
that beautiful.

There's some dreamer  
not giving up yet  
not drinking the water yet  
still alive.

The sun stares.  
He blinds  
I've looked up long enough,  
I've looked up too many times,  
and I've forgotten how to see,  
and the sun, the sun,  
I cannot ride him, and he cannot ride me.

My father's wings are locked away  
My whistle is barked in the hollow tree  
My mother cries out with a hark! hark!  
This cry is nothing  
This cry is imaginary  
Like the tree, and the wings, and the water beneath that catches me.

I am in the pool again  
and the water recedes  
and the grapes die on the vine  
and my father hangs up  
again.

Tiresias is not okay.

Fate has a way of fathering  
like supernovas create galaxies  
in a bomb blast  
so they spin off as far away as they can  
with that centrifugal force  
and burn, and burn.

Spinning pulls the heavy shit down.

What is a circle?  
The rectum?  
A spiritual aura?  
The toilet?

Tiresias wished for fireworks at the end  
as he blazed into the sun  
the way he hoped he would wish  
when Iris told him, when he finally called her,  
what the end of time would look like.

The End. Credits.  
Popcorn, another supernova, another end of time.  
We could go on like this.

The infinite omega.

Tiresias drew a line in the sand.

⌘

Tiresias found this symbol, here.

Tiresias drew a line  
and a line  
and another  
and there was a symbol  
in the sand.

He stepped into it and  
the latches opened.

The symbol was a snake eating its tail.

The symbol was two snakes wrapping around  
themselves, gently fucking.

Let this be a sign—the joint of mouth, tail, genitalia, between heart and hand—  
the second skin, beginning.

So it opens.



8

an attempt

A is for Ariel the alpha, the aleph.

Aleph aims. His acid action alerts like—  
so act so artillery so allow.

An apple on top acts as action.

An apple acts up.

Aleph aims at an apple amplified as actor  
alchemical.

Aleph aims and apple appalls, asps artillerize  
out and actualize, appealing.

Aleph is aiming at an apple, an actual apple.

Aleph is aiming at anthills.

The apple atrophies.

Aleph, Ariel, altar,

you alchemize apple as alter altar

on an aptly actual apple head,

apple shot through—

all arid, all acid, all limp.

Ariel lets down the arrow.

Ariel asks, are you drowning?

And, allowing anthills, all books act still.

It's not that he's ungrateful.

The play was delightful  
and he was let back into the world  
with some renewed sense of majesty.

And the dictionary never looked more amazing.

Ariel stayed with Tiresias for a time.  
He can tell some stories  
and has seen some bonfire witch shit  
that I find amusing.

Some days, I tried more than others.

There was a place  
in his brain  
that greyed  
more daily  
because of the drugs:  
the drugs kept him alive  
the drugs didn't kill him  
they kept him  
from killing him  
but they did slowly  
take away  
his life  
and left grey  
instead.

Some days, he stayed in his bed in his head.  
He was at work  
He was at play  
The game was loosed from his body  
though he touched the pieces  
and every chess square was lightning  
and every lightning bolt sang for him  
it wasn't easy  
and he couldn't find his body.

Tiresias helped, too.  
It's not that he was ungrateful  
when nothing worked  
but people tried anyway.

The latches were still open.

He could see through  
and it was as if  
he was held in place  
by a vast, invisible hand  
guiding his every move  
with insidious strategy.

Tiresias consults a Fortune-Teller

It did seem like the only thing to do!

Don't look at him like that.

The teller told him  
it was his body  
and the body changed  
when asked.

He said, how,  
and the teller continued,  
as in a recipe,  
scroll to the bottom.

The flower, the flower  
The cosmic Iris  
Ballooned, bulging with eternity:

Yellow anther crawls out speaking  
Pistil, stamen, bend ears to the supernova  
Waves of understanding, speak.

The flower, the flower  
A red rose garland  
Is thorned, wracked on the green wave.

Heart, heart  
Broken open with mortality  
Yellow tongue rolls out whipping red:  
Red as gold.

All that is red is gold.

\*

My shoes are pointed  
My hat, crowned  
Rising in the distance, fortune's city  
Burns with bright red-gold geometries  
Promise

\*

No,  
Teach me the meaning of  
Star  
Other side  
Teach me  
Lie down  
Lie down  
Teach me  
Promise  
Promise  
Eloi eloi lama sabachthani  
Fuck you

\*

Father, you follow me  
Too much.

A split lip casting shadow  
Over an open door.

\*



A bomb bomb the heart a bomb  
A phylactery  
Holding him  
Little glass boy  
At the edge

Boom

\*

Read me  
Reflection  
: Who burns like what-now  
In zero gravity, your servant  
Eloi  
Elohim  
Shaddai  
Father

\*

Give me body  
Give me cry  
My open heart black for  
What cannot be regained  
Re-fathered, father  
Shock my open  
Shock my  
Reabsorbed!  
Reabsorbed!  
Black and blood  
I groan with you, poor banished children of Eve  
I moan and tear to  
Give me body  
Give me  
Lament  
Lama  
Lament

\*

At red zero  
Awash, the sea  
Dawns:  
Me.  
Mea  
Mea Culpa  
Mater  
Stabat  
And later  
And me.

**Tiresias**, I have to admit that I have a crush on you.

**you** are, in my head right now, the sexiest guy I can remember from elementary school, here meaning that yes, I knew I wanted you then and no, no one from elementary school is now appealing. You **were a** masterpiece, a **little** slice of heaven, as it were, me being an altar **boy** **and** predisposed to think of Catholic references that were more than **a little** inappropriate while mass was underway. But there you were again, a **boy** with me instead of me **alone** and in my head we were tight and stormed, two lightning bolts across the field in the backyard of my house where I wished, so desperately, for a connection to my body **against** the fact of **his body** like a weapon like a storm I could lose myself in **and the** way I had no idea what my body wanted. I was a child, the **fact** remained that I never escaped that wormhole that magnet that proof **of** **bodies** in my brain and bodies leaning **against** my inescapable **him**

We were

**cyclones**, Tiresias. We were **never-ending cyclones** in spite of everything, **against** a brutal backdrop, that countryside like **the blurry** eyes I had in the rain when she kissed me and I felt romance and love but not sex, the fact **of a** wish that was so brutal and so burning and the very **small** guilt of the **white** lie I told myself, a **boy** **a gay boy in a well of ritual rage** and raging and never letting go.

**and against him,**  
**the fact of**  
**what it could mean, to be held.**

I always wanted something to make me unique.  
As a child, I was obsessed with and envious of that power,  
to hold sway, to be the centerfold.

**Held like a fist,**  
**but also warm and so tight** and impossibly bodily and can I feel that again  
that wish of  
**that boy** the smallest possible fish in a school of urchins, the way a fantasy  
**could almost** penetrate the boy, almost guarantee release, almost and orgasm,

**Tiresias**, are you tired of me yet?

**Nobody** can hear me now unless I scream, and that **has never** worked. I used to wish my parents would come into my room when I was having an anxiety attack, but how could they have **known exactly what** was going on at every moment of every day? It

**took** me years to let that go and to forgive them. But that was me I wanted to forgive, to **replace that** loneliness, to belong, to **night**.

I remember the first time I took a train ride specifically to hook up.

**It was a deep blue night with scales for clouds and a lampless sky.**

I was so scared and guilty as the train rocked back and forth. The ride was close to an hour one way. I was stupid, but I didn't need to feel guilty. Feel bad for the risk, not the desire.

I forgive

**You locked the door.**

I forgive

**was the muffled peasant on the rope.**

**The rope was around my waist**

**as I forgive you pulled me into your arms.**

**Two boys swam against the tide.**

**Two boys skated through the cold waste.**

**We played rustic music  
and you embraced**

**me** fucked and fucked and fucked that is all I ever really wanted to say! Why is it still a forbidden part of my vocabulary, to say that I love you

**and** that involves loving your body? Sex with **drew the** dagger from my navel.

They are always going to be lace, pink, and still, the **curtains**.

**Tiresias,**

**Seven** thousand thousand desert walks

or seventy thousand **days** of stripping the cells from my body in ropes of bone and muscle and fascia, god what a word, or seven lifetimes **later**

**Seventy-times-seven** lifetimes, even, I will never rid myself of my memory.  
**(Spell seven, seven times)**

**You died!** I can never let your body go, but you are gone away and it is a shame that in order to kill you I have to un-remember

**Your body** the whiteness of every imagined encounter and how your smile  
or your chest  
or your eyes

or your kindness because you were the very first boy to show me compassion

**was obscured** by my greed and my envy **and** I am trying to cast it off of me  
like a sheet

**on the bed**

like a bandage I have to take off, off,

**and** let the wound heal with the air around it, to cast off **Purity,** and **Chastity,**  
**and Modesty**

because I **ran off, banished and pursued by trumpets!** By my  
running soul! I have to tell you,

**They** put up a fight, they **were** blasted and disgusting which always means  
transgressive, as in my personal ethics were revolted at the thought of purity, chastity,  
modesty, **hidden** "virtues" hidden in the dogma of **forever**

**by the truth** of a past that I cannot and should not discard

**by the fact** of this rage and how you cannot complete me without me:

**this is no place for us here.**

**Stretch** so I can bend

**Rise** so I can fly

**Naked** and perfect in your flaws

**Truth** is your body and clear your

**Trumpet** as a clarion call for me, so I may grow wings, so I have

**No Choice** but to be right here, be here now:

we must confess Tiresias was a  
woman.

there is no denying it.

but in every other respect,

she remained precisely as he had been.

The change did nothing whatever to alter their identity.

Let biologists and psychologists determine.

It is enough for us, the fact.

Let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such  
odious subjects as soon as we can.



## Tiresias

I painted my fingernails three times in the last two months. Yes, they were chipping, peeling back, my scrubbing fingers rubbing off parts of the tip of the nail-paint, destroying what little semblance of "painterliness" the odd job had. It wasn't entirely caprice that took me when I repainted them. But somehow, I was recovering the nails. Hiding something, wanting to release something.

Tiresias has always been bad at "journaling." We're more of a talk-it-out fellow. But this reflection, my face in the polish, is urgent. When I disappear into the dark indigo concealer, do I feel safer? When I buy product after product, applying, wiping away, cleansing, polishing, scrubbing, shampoo-ing, clipping, tending, like a garden gone to weed, like a car being detailed time and time again, there is still aging, yes, there is still pain under the paint, there is still a hiccup in the gas-line and less nitrogen in the soil-- when I do these things, does Tiresias get free?

Tiresias wants to understand the nature of in-between. Tiresias is impossibly tied to one side by history. Tiresias is pulled to the other by curiosity, by righteous alarm, by moralizing, by scholarly pursuits, by the path of the moon across the eclipsed night. Tiresias cannot be between and be not either or. Tiresias cannot only be both and, both not. So, I paint my fingernails, but not my toenails. I reject manicures. I am homebrew.

I've been buying dresses and wearing them as "shirts." I find them comfortable indoors. I walk outside with the dog, who flares her butch smile in the sunlight while I don tortoiseshell glasses to eclipse the glare of midday headlights. A car passes-- not a person, a car-- and I turn away as if my backside is not wearing a dress like armor. I realize it is not armor after all. I read that a magical technique for becoming invisible on the street and in a crowd is to make eye contact first and maintain it. Glare at every person you see. The idea is that they look away before you do, and they forget what you look like. Can they forget the man in large shades and a dress with a pit bull?

Tiresias knows armor does not come in the form of a cotton dress-- but wants so badly to try them on. Tiresias wants to collect all the colors of the rainbow and paint them, one by one, on her nails. Tiresias wants to wear tank tops and spike the ball with her painted hands flashing like disco in the glitter of pre-glass sand; recover the spike, dig the ball, pop it up, letting fly, asking for help, help, asking desperately for a team member to approve, to price the polish, to check me out, help.

It was a memory and Tiresias needed it that way.  
Her chest could also hide a memory.

Hang like a horse—  
by the foot.

Hooves as thick as a baby's arm,  
for trampling.

She rode it out,  
saddled up, but in the mouth,  
crying.

That room a pink nightmare. The squeeze of his hand on her shoulder.

One moon passed, and Tiresias knew she was pregnant.

It was a beginning  
and an end  
a realization of self and not self  
upside down  
inside  
and a giving

Tiresias's Cock  
Was shriveled,  
Like a prune,  
And hung limp.

Tiresias would sometimes flick it  
To make sure she could still feel.

The Cock was inappropriate  
when Improper  
but she never had named it  
so she had to claim it with her own name  
to refer to what she once was.

Stars.

Tiresias looked up.  
So many, she thought—  
Banal, yet so human.

Spilling across the pavement sky,  
Flecks of dimes, new silver,  
And like the small boy inside her,  
She wanted to pick up each one  
And pocket it.

Tiresias  
waited  
a long time  
for Iris to show.

The mountain top  
is the metaphor, after all:  
a penis  
an inversion.  
The interface of land and sky  
has always been an ironic gate.

She remembered  
that, a long, long time ago,  
she had made a pact. Iris would show Tiresias  
the world  
and in exchange  
Tiresias would tell Iris's fortune.

The fortune teller told Tiresias  
of Iris and her secret.  
The fortune came and went.

Tiresias blurted into the universe  
and waited for the answer.

It finally came  
in a blaze  
and flash  
of queer, blessed light:

MANDORL A Glory

(As Iris floats above, an invitation of color,  
Tiresias takes Iris's hand,  
rips through the atmosphere,  
and orbits.)

Planet – System – (song) – Planet – System  
Tiresias approaches a planetary body  
Tiresias approaches a meteor hurled from outer space  
Tiresias approaches, a meteor hurled from outer space and is  
caught  
as in a trap as in a panic as in  
a curly lick of fire brushing her armpit like don't even go there  
don't even touch me, Planet

See the vastness of the solar system                    "PROPHESY!"  
First, praising sunlight, I sing me,  
bringer of the day and banisher of the night, ☉,  
Sun, spitting one,  
charioteer your team your team                    system, system

Humans you have brought to this day you bring this day  
the heat, sun, the heat, day,  
you power sight! all that is right! who are we who are we  
to judge your mighty rays' proximity, we                    systems of systems  
we approach, a meteor hurled

let's do this one again:

Humans bring you Sun to this day O Sun the banisher of night  
Humans bring you in to power sight  
Humans Humans cannot see  
We judge your mighty rays' proximity  
We, the cleansed, we the licked,  
You, piercer of the troposphere,  
Primal Beginner, Alpha Aleph  
Ariel atomizing your flame the blame the reaching lick  
comet lick asteroid shear our eyes our shame our pain pain your rays all praise

SEE THE VASTNESS OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM

, Iris declares

SEE WHAT YE HATH WROUGHT

Tiresias tugs on the end of her rope on Iris's hand like a plastic bag caught in the  
cartwheel,  
squeaking,  
squeaking,  
Systems of Planets pinwheeling  
and lost.





she hovers in the space before he pats her shoulder  
then squeezes it  
and that's where it is  
that's the lingering doubt  
the question:

"How much fun was that?"

And then he leaves and then every nerve is on fire and then she doesn't cry for 8 years.

Just dark space.

Do you know how meaningless you are in those moments?  
Like an ant at the bottom of the sea  
you are a paradox  
which never existed  
except in your mind, right now,  
a flicker of existence  
a mere possibility  
he squeezes your shoulder  
and you are a mechanism  
of dark space.

Make me the lodestar  
open the secret  
the secret mercurial quicksilver  
adaptable  
and fluid

blanket me, messenger  
send me to a rest or a quick death

The planet flies through a sea of nothing  
one side burning one side screaming in the freezing cold-cold quiet

a quick death  
like that  
too easy

Are you thinking you're going to make it? Iris asks.  
I'm fine Tiresias says.  
I'm thinking but it isn't enough Tiresias thinks.

She always wants us to think she's better, Iris comments mid-flight,  
But the argument always comes back to what is or isn't  
between her legs.  
Tiresias grimaces.

Venus is beautiful. Venus is, as they say, radiant. We want so badly for Venus to be  
heavenly, not just in the heavens, but of them, when we describe that place like the  
contents of an unopened present given you by a friend who's always looking out.  
Venus chants her own praise, Tiresias adds her own flair.  
Venus takes away eyesight.  
We have to wonder if pronouns.

Mary♀ Virgin Queen♀      Mother of Mercy♀  
Our Light      Our Venus      and Our Hope

I'm your fire

Our Father      Who Shuns      Who Rapes      Who Art  
Us Drowned      Shameful      Furious

Your desire

Deliver us from evil  
Crown us Queen  
Burning free  
Aphrodite  
Blessed be  
The solemnity of Selené  
Hera's and Hecate's fury  
Let the radiance of birth be known! Be!  
Set the diadem upon your brow!

Dust, trails of it

We drift past it  
Tiresias thinks about her body and thinks about smiling and thinks,  
If only, an equation in a handful of dust.

Are you going to make it?

There was always a small contingent of people around me who knew the world was ending, said Tiresias. And by that I mean that people always know the world is ending and that it always is and that we can choose to be upset by that fact. We are ultimately dying from the moment we are born – I use that phrase "always already" to describe this fact cheekily (she smiles) – and the planet is dying in the sense that what we know as a planet is always already dying. Or dead. We would love to conserve the planet we remember, but it's already gone. But then it's a memory, Tiresias says in pause, and that sort of counts, too. Doesn't it?

I'm eternal, Iris responds.

Tiresias just sort of looks past Iris.

Dance, Mother, Dance  
Turn, Marble, Turn  
Mother, Roll like Thunder  
peace in our hearts  
and peace at our deaths  
amen, I say to you,  
and that's it.

I have learned a phrase,  
Tiresias said as I thought of it,  
That makes me feel a little better when I'm sad.

What is it? Iris said.

I'll sing it for you:

as above, so below: shantih, shantih,  
abba, abrax,  
shantih, shantih.

ó

That's nice, Iris said.

They flew on.

More than a few of the planets felt very similar,  
Tiresias thought,  
and discussed as they went.  
Iris shrugged.

It was as if some of the planets were named  
by people who didn't know any better  
than to name them after themselves  
but in other forms.

For instance,  
Mars is angry because it's red  
which made man think of himself.

For instance,  
Jupiter is powerful because it's enormous  
which made man think of himself.

And Saturn is, of course, pater patter.

But the planets don't sing these songs.  
Let's be very clear:  
The songs, these little songs that we're hearing  
as we go on this flight with Tiresias and Iris,  
are sung so that we can understand them.  
They're in English, firstly,  
and they refer to men, and to women, and to all those things  
we made  
to understand ourselves.  
Mars does not know this name for itself.  
Let's sing a little louder:

Clears throat,  
Puts on the record of Holst's suite that I bought second-hand so I could play it for myself  
in my living room and dance around because it reminds me of the hunt I mean it reminds  
me of my friends and pretending to be a dragon in a production of Beowulf when we all  
stomped around and felt powerful like war like Mars another play we are seriously  
playing



I rage as I speak

Autumnal harbinger, dead moon— fury  
 burn Mars burn petulant near-Earth  
 bullet  
 Heat Stroke red burn red burn lead burn  
 gold!  
 Destroyer, Usurper, Shiva, Strike!

Wear August so brown:

Mars, my controlling Mars:  
 heave death,  
 heave death,  
 have Geryon's eye and wing,  
 hot like every man in my dream  
 hot like Geryon and Herakles  
     thank you, Anne Carson,  
     for this simile

Let this hex and Mars serve what is  
 right.  
 And you, enemy:



Hate! Jupiter hate! Giant Jovian  
 King of rape!  
 A holy fantastic paean  
 to you, luster of worlds, keeper of might!

The Earth—not a grain of sand to your  
 pull, at your call, in your thrall, your  
 hands  
 cruel winds a-play in her chambers  
 affright!

We just circulate midst your cruel eye,  
 red eye, all-seeing dead eye—you have  
 no mercy, all you see dies in your  
 orange-eyed sight!

Soft tongues of light cannot quiet your  
 course,  
 nor can these interventions and  
 hyperbolic gesticulations.  
 This song flutters  
 and the bird is dead as she falls  
 not a grain of sand,  
 nor a tongue

There's a memory that I think both of us share:

Baseball glove and ball in hand, you pitch me—  
your boy, batter, so he swings hard as he can.

Miss  
For a final time, you instruct me  
choke up on the bat.

He looks up.  
You grin.

It's really just a me that I want in my memory  
since we didn't do this.

This did not happen.  
But if I say it is so,

Father, father, ancient Father-Wonder,  
You are universal in all power,  
Your name the oldest Word, Your wings rapture!  
Fate me, give me your wise name: Creator.

Create! Create! Grant in me the energy  
to bring out life, to name light, to bury  
old dead things, bury burdens, name anxieties,  
and nourish creations completely!

You hand me the ball.

It rots.

The hopes that I had are buried in sand.

h

That was something like a planet.

But not Tiresias -  
she is drifting by, unconscious, right now.



Dare I visit a sonnet of excess?

The dark vessel of tremors unhidden  
by deepest fear and shivering loneliness?

This game is deadly.

This is not a pun.

Uranus, I crave your tenacity, your blossoming blue, tenderest caress  
of skin on skin, man on man, in clarity of blue light, in a deep rift of careless,  
passionate embrace, the velocity of sex unbridled, our locked, sweaty palms  
coming together momentarily in virtue-less, sensuous parity.

Grant that we who are nourished by sodomy  
Keep up strength to valorize Uranus  
against theocracy.

So let it be.

So let it me!



This planet is a deadly weapon.  
This planet sings.  
I think even Tiresias is hearing this in her stupor  
and she feels a little better in my bones.  
There's something more alike  
there's something more familiar  
in this planet  
something like that memory, but better.

I have tried to write men into my poems since I started writing poems.  
Like this next one, I normally try to write them descriptively and vaguely so that you  
don't figure out exactly who it is, but by writing about that man he will manifest  
for me, for you if you want, whatever.  
Mostly so that I keep that man around, I write him,  
and then he appears.  
But the more I write men that are already here,  
the more they go away.  
I am afraid.  
Writing this poem scared me like that.  
As if, yeah, he will go away too. Writing him down doesn't keep him here.  
It keeps a version of him here. But not him. He is not just that poem.  
And one time I used a Name to keep the him here and that didn't work either  
and now I have a poem with that man's name in it somewhere on my computer  
because I renamed it in the manuscript that I still have  
and that poem still makes me feel guilty  
feel him  
and now I don't want to.  
What I'm trying to say is, this poem feels like it's already an apology,  
like, please stay,  
I'm sorry this is on paper  
I'm sorry I am always already wishing you had stayed  
because I am afraid you will go  
I am afraid  
to be here now

Ψ

A pocket full of stones, a radiance  
of storms, you open up your hand and drop  
each one, steadily looking into my eyes,  
drowning bleak-sea'd Neptune. Then, oscillate--smiling

laughter! Dark out here, you frost alight, like  
shadows colliding under dark sheets, like  
sparking, looking past, feet entangled, like  
such warmth! like river otters play! like, shit, fuck,  
no care in the world! like, be here now. be here now. As  
we walk, paw to paw, let this be the hour,  
the flightless bird stretches up to wing-bound  
bear, starry as she gazes  
down, smiling, begging this blessing:

as stars watch the sea, so watch him for me  
so watch him for me.  
Tiresias wants to come back.  
I'm not ready to go yet.

I'm fighting this narrative impulse  
because she's back and knocking at the door  
like hey, this is my story too,  
you wanted me here  
you wanted me.

But this is the hardest thing  
To explain

I am singing  
in a language  
comprehensible  
and maybe you'll like it  
this version  
that I'm painting  
because there are so many unspeakable me's  
and this one isn't those.

What my friends hardly know, I imagine:

Cruel grin laughs,  
whispers,  
“you know I don't care”  
as he rips and tears the shell that I wear,  
Forces his farces  
and does me his wrong  
Lingers in lovers  
even when he's gone.

This is the style of modern gaiety;  
to ruin with lovers, to sport in satiety.

Let me work to ease living's agony,  
to make and break curses with harmony,  
and rotting holy religiosity, my spirit ascending, my body rising  
One day I'll glare and face all the eyes  
of every traitor and every rapist  
and tell HIM that I'm much more than his hit list.

P  
goes by.

Tiresias wakes crying while Iris pats her back blandly.  
(I put Iris there to pat my back.)

Look, Iris says, we're about to pass Ceres.  
What do I care? says Tiresias.  
Have you thought about her much lately? Iris seems to be asking a leading question.

Afar-Earth - Iris says - this is Earth entranced,  
an eye of two storms, a binary  
star, orbiting her Father with long dances.

Did you know he thinks you barren? Iris smiles.  
Did you know he thinks of you every day, but in passing?

Sadly, when you fill cups of grief with watery  
kisses, and then grant laughter seasonally,  
men doubt constancy.

Tiresias seems to appreciate the joke, since she chuckles just a little.

Wet  
Mother harvesting seasonally  
Wet  
Counterpart floating dying spatially—  
which one is Gaia, which one is Ceres?

I asked you a question, says Iris.

♀


Tiresias doesn't answer.  
She wasn't listening  
because the meteor  
crashing through space  
was singing:  
    With this simple bread nourish me:  
    Grant that I may be most ordinary.

We really weren't expecting this journey to be so long, were we?  
Tiresias shakes her head.  
No, we were not.

If we keep our eyes open  
there's a chance  
of something extraordinary  
a streak of white  
on a white canvas  
what we noticed  
was there and hidden and all along  
always already

greatest systemic wound  
human failure  
trying I reach to heal your  
path, to turn tail into a simpler trail.  
I beg blindly, I am blind and I am begging  
but comets like you blunder on and on,  
bouncing, spinning mercilessly through time,  
weaving distant dust strands, never really running aground.

This wound is a sonnet to reach into gently,  
to pick out dying flecks of resistance, hatreds, guilt, and let  
gravity do the business of guiding.  
Comet aflight, move sight to feel  
and let gentle light-wisps move us to heal.

I thought  was the last one, Tired-esias says.

We can't go back yet, Iris explains.  
Not until you've tried.  
Tried something.  
Tried to do something, with this information.  
You have the spell, now spell it.

Cracking knuckles.  
It's not that the sound carries in space,  
but it feels good anyway.  
Stars don't change quickly,  
so Tiresias unleashes a lot on this one:



doom-starred, baleful eye in the night,  
auratic full-proof, calling out the right!  
moon of all prophets, hear my cry: alight  
from your twilit purpose, and give me true sight.

SATOR pan of pipes, hymn to him who cries  
AREPO praise of page, leaf, and smoke afly  
TENET holding fast, hold me, hymnal arC  
OPERA song of songs, king of codA  
ROTAS hymn broken him, i do, i hold

After this prayer, after the rites, A  
Blessing on prophets, poets! grant us barBs  
Righteous in power as right i conjuRe  
And my solemn spell, grant us your aurA!

I feel like that could have gone better,  
Tiresias says by way of apology.

Iris isn't really interested,  
in a not-upset and also not-invested kind of way.

Tiresias raises her voice,  
(in the only way that it's possible in the void of space, which is to say,  
by gesturing,)

but Iris is cosmically disinterested,  
in the way a quasar looks back at you.

Long ago, Tiresias would have asked  
Iris to elaborate.

In another lifetime,  
Iris could show Tiresias  
what it was like  
to be a rainbow, prismatic.

Spectra are like circles  
they close  
    this loop  
    becomes that color

Iris came down like a streak of agony  
    spiral staircase  
        of  
        click circle  
  
        and the cosmos cannot  
            just  
                cannot  
                and so nothing  
  
        an idle whim of fate blows  
        star to dust  
        and irises blink  
        the circle is clear again

Have you stepped into a rainbow?

Lights' wings lift off cloud stuff, thunder rips up fluff and falls  
like lightning in clinging sheets as slipping sonorous  
lips of heaven hallow this skip of space:  
    light permeates the place.  
    as rain recedes, sheets of sound move  
    in and make mountains in each and every flavor  
    filled like lemon, rust, and raspberry  
  
    in a brief penetration  
    the heaven falls –  
    but it is fleeting  
    so frail, it takes the right refraction,  
    the glass of molecules  
    and an eye to catch the starlight.

That is my brilliance, Tiresias,



Iris said as she floated above  
on a plain, long ago, spit of earth  
just off the sea in the archipelago.

I am a cosmic wonder,  
Iris seems to say, staring through Tiresias, through the space and the stars, but looking at  
nothing.

I, Aurora, reflect light as lifted  
as prismatic  
I am transcendence  
the void and the point

What is a stone but a myrrh, myrrh?  
What is life but a blip, a blink?

She smiles.

(The universe turns on its side)

She emits,

I am Shiva  
destroyer of worlds

look on me and despair

this circle this ring  
beautiful and terrible as the sea black as in  
empty de void blink  
li li li li li

apple discordant  
rolls up on matrix the  
red pill il  
out out out

I am an eater of worlds  
this breaks the back to the bone  
your odyssey is through  
if if if  
you mumble hysterical if Tiresias  
the feeling historical is un-agonic  
thistrophe apo leipse lapse ic

My name is also Uriel  
I am magnificent  
magnificat  
and the gods squabble over me  
banners turn in my zodiac  
the ecliptic dances on axial spine and wing

this is my aura  
ish wish ishing  
deep cosm terror  
colour out of time  
out your time of space  
this lin  
e-----m  
cantilever  
I hold up ages

for all of this  
I see  
nothing beyond me

Build a better door  
The locks all golden envy  
an apple, Eris, a way in for wrath,  
for Helen, for Mary, beauty and reentry  
like a tomorrow door  
you will find away

reenter  
trance  
the wheel of samsara  
pulses its ligaments quake

away

sleeping bifrost  
she is cold in the dark  
the winged horse from the neck  
just waits wanting

Amen I say to you:

I left my wings for Mercury  
I took his shoes and crown  
with her fairness I will bring  
the heavens crashing down

thus said Iris

Eris said this, she signed the book.

And on the vast name plate  
of heaven's headstone  
is run the phrase  
in every color  
and each tongue marveling  
sanctifies with every lap and lick

this epitaph is final

and all ends in fire

Thus Iris said and did amongst the stars  
with her simple, avoid look.

She came in close to me  
and I felt what must be her breath  
and must also be death's stink  
while also knowing eons  
brushing my shoulder, so she said:

this is what you paid for, Tiresias.  
not a smile, nor a tooth, for  
the sound came from millions of stars  
spinning, and dying, and collapsing

this is the only truth  
you know  
there is nothing more to give

she leaned into my mind and a tear squeezed out  
onto my cheek, onto this page:  
you have always known everything already  
and now you know you know.  
the rivers of the Khan's palace are fire  
flowing in wait  
the stars will reach out to kiss each voice, collapsing  
as the gyre wobbles and eternity continues

is not the sum of mortality a statue  
sideways in the sand?

I saw every discordant note and every harmonic chord  
in the spectrum, in rainbow, in an instant.  
The prism left me and Eris was a vacuum and Iris was  
everything, always already, swimming  
and the sea, always moving,  
embraced me.

It was a long time before I spoke,  
and when I did, it was not to be heard.

I would speak, for other ears.

The river is always moving  
and the salmon jump when they can  
and it is not the same river,  
this light,  
not that light.

Tiresias laughed.

I laughed!

We laughed, and I enjoyed it!  
In my laugh there is no star,  
no light, no rainbow, no existence, no self.

This laugh introduces itself on the air as a wave of joy that rolls through you and then is  
no more.

Tiresias was, again, alone with time and Iris,  
with the laughter my memory.

Tiresias has seen more than enough  
and Tiresias understands  
the reaction Iris embodies.  
If apathy were a choice,  
Tiresias would most likely consider it.

The pretense of compassion tickled her throat.  
Tiresias coughed and swirled her spit  
in that way no one likes because it's spit like something else  
and it stretches and rebounds and reminds us we are animal bodies.

Iris could never be an animal.

Tiresias pitied her.  
Tiresias could never become apathetic.  
Her body was too obvious.

Tiresias wept, softly,  
  
while the stars looked.

they are now back near Earth  
and the moon is just this massive thing  
and Tiresias feels immense pain  
and this is not a normal moon  
this is a blood  
moon  
this is every eclipse  
this is the way we don't know why we know things but we know when we don't know  
them  
and the moon is that eclipse  
and the dark corona of the sun is visible beyond  
and there's everything else  
before that beyond.

Tiresias and I with her sing: ☾

When the body walks alone at night, poured  
Over dry craterous seas, observing  
Undrinkable waters and creatures formed  
Of silver, dead nothings, never stirring—

Every noun is holy, and every word  
Is torn, a net with the bottom out. Wings  
Wrap beliefs and they can soar, like souls cured.

We want to live. We want bodies crying  
Rightly, let stuffed sirens take the dull white  
Spot of day. Give us the queer, blessed night.

You, moon, are the voice tearing poet's sight  
As hearts sing in praise, praising the moonlight.  
Creatures formed of day run with heaving fright  
As Diana bows in praise of night.



And just like that  
the solar system  
really feels different  
really felt different  
a system of meaning  
a way of understanding  
ourselves  
and the universe  
it was a binary system  
but the binary was all of us  
and meaning  
and we revolve around one another  
like this



but really  
it's about letting  
each of us  
sing

~~WHITE~~ MAGICK

" Maybe this is dealing with the animal inside of you."  
– Dorothea Lasky

Now, Iris said to Tiresias,  
what more can you wish to see?

We said, everything.

Iris said, everything has already  
happened.

We said, show me Xanadu.

(Iris clicked  
and America  
in dust  
appeared.)

Tiresias heard cries--  
many, many, amid laughter.

There was a pact  
made in blood.

We did not make the pact ourselves,  
though we might be able  
to end  
some bloodshed.

We tried  
one we knew:  
a standard exorcism.

American Moloch  
an incantation, as chanted

America

With heaven at my side,

America

I call upon all powers  
of Imagination:

America

smell the scent of lemon  
and a balmy glade,

America

hear the sound of a forbidden waterfall  
over the creek

America

under which lies a chest containing  
your darkest terrors

America

the heat of skin on skin

America

and queerest contact

America

bodies beneath a fantasy of water

America

let it open.

I call on my darkness  
and yours, America!

I call on accountability  
and action  
and repair!

The bleat of the sheep  
before its guts are spilled  
on the Excuse of Belief  
on the Rock of St. Peter's  
and on the altar of Science,  
her machete swinging ruthlessly  
by her side  
and her AK-47 firing into broad daylight.

I call on Janus,  
two-faced, pious ordinary  
with a congressional sneer  
and bated breath  
preaching to his choir of gelatinous masses  
wobbling in their seats, to-and-fro, to-and-fro.

I call on swift-footed Justice,  
America,  
to take retributive heads from  
the shoulders of conquerors  
and all who unflinchingly  
break open the lands of  
and Cherokee, Choctaw,  
every name we gave to who  
came before whiteness bathed  
this land in thick painted bleakness that  
reflects the sunlight  
over a parched desert.

I call on American Dreams, and  
I beg them to reconsider.

I call out darkness,  
America,  
the hidden treasure chest  
padlocked and chained  
by our guilt  
cursed by our feral ancestry, our greed,  
cursed, cursed! that box  
that lies at the bottom  
of a pool  
of Black sweat!

When the last troupe poured out tar for warpaint,  
When the last minstrel song was sung,  
When the Jazz Singer sang no more --  
pause.

Ring-shout (when?)(not yet?)  
Even now, the dark shadow of American masque  
blankets the smoldering dumpster fire of  
(what)(you whisper)(dare you name)  
what's a-crawling on all four limbs throwing up?

Who's Hermes now, that in-betweener,  
that trans-footed mover and shaker,  
the rain stick scent from Afric?  
(dare, you say)(whisper whisper)  
What's hidden in that mythical dark continent  
is not not people no who is hidden  
but HOW YOU SAY culture culture the  
shivering poison of (what) America  
dare you name your quivering hatreds? dare you name your own sins?

who's your property  
who's your daddy  
who's your queer  
asshole  
whose master-monster the riveted  
Black Spine crucified for the sake  
of ninety  
nine  
percent

all white people yes all white people,  
suck the poison out-- suck the poison out--!  
OUT--! OUT! OUT!  
Believe you have work to do  
Listen to the whisper in the corner:  
the street the cook the wage is too low  
(would work work like that)  
immigration is a most palatable curse  
off your white tongue and pin it  
and pin it  
down

who gets to speak? (whisper whisper)  
say their names

(tongue flopping on floor)

the mad heat of an eclipsed sun  
loses all sense  
the engineer  
has to has to  
halt  
halt the train

(somehow)

so here we go:

American Moloch stomps in Allen's words,  
rip-tears through flesh and flag,  
haunting unflagging  
the country as bone disease—  
pockmarked, riddled.  
I call on spectral border-crossing transitivity  
to cleanse this cleanse this

Moloch, Moloch, fear-monger Moloch,  
devil of vanity and colony, Moloch,  
keeper of the keys,  
devil of the deep.

I call to banish the stretched sin  
tearing at the seams and bleached by  
years of capitalism and comfort and kingdom--

I call like a siren!  
From her rock, not a ride-along!  
I answer for so many  
centuries  
knowing I will fail!

Moloch, Moloch, death-camp Moloch,  
teaching us the meaning of misery,  
a field of fences.



Who promenades with the mask of Moloch?  
Or is it his scheme to side with  
the masters the masters in a masterless age?

Who claims property, who mastery,  
in whose name is  
the signature on the mortgage on America's soul?  
Who is the banker doling out no dough?

Moloch, Moloch, time-warp Moloch,  
keeper of keys and counter of coin,  
When can we stop the carousel,  
unmask your betrayal, your country's collateral bodies and bodies  
on ships? in ships? in the depths of the sea,  
chained and crying out against English,  
tongues aflame even underwater?

When can we return the fire from your citadels, Moloch?

Who are you to claim us?

What is a country but a person, multiply?

What is a country but an open wound?

What is a fatal flaw but a chance  
an opportunity  
with a wave of probiotic for  
life! life! The answer is to live!

Moloch, devourer, defiler, I banish you!

For we are country  
and you are poison!

Take out the key,  
take out the riveted pin in the chain!

Here is the spring-loaded box, country--  
open it!

Nothing has changed, thought Tiresias,  
as they glanced  
the darkened river,  
the empty skyline.

We are in the ghost now,  
Iris said,  
in the ghost of it.

Weeds of tourists popped up  
between the cracks  
and shuffled through crosshairs.

This? Tiresias asked. Where is this?  
Start at the beginning, Iris replied.

Tiresias looked again, saw  
river nexus  
rap sheets  
slave auctions  
whip masters  
far and plenty graves  
and unmarked ones.  
Some men fled  
others quailed in terror,  
two in the bush, flinching.  
The police caught one on the run  
as Tiresias heard him holler  
then disappear,  
by the toe, last.  
Tiresias shivered.

This is your America, Iris whispered,  
reminding rainbows streaming from Iris's shoulders and neck  
and disappearing in the white glare  
of streetlights.  
Not the only Xanadu,  
but one of yours.

It looks like  
every single city  
every one of them is you  
they think it's okay  
they think they're innocent  
it is time  
time to disagree

This is where I live,  
this, a place in my veins.  
We cannot back away,  
We cannot turn our eyes.  
Instead, we are the pillar of salt  
to protect to vanquish to dispel to return to  
circle.

Start at the beginning.  
Tiresias, cast again.

This is my spell.

This is how I will

to attempt  
to make  
to experiment  
this is my essay  
this is my poem.  
Tiresias and I  
roll up our sleeves  
to get to work:

A Louisville Spell  
ekphrastic / ecstatic

I.

Jefferson!  
Jefferson Jefferson Jefferson Jeffers  
son  
Jeff  
er  
son  
!  
Jeff  
!  
er  
...son.

(Clap three times and turn)

Waiting in the wings waiting in the wings waiting to march into battle waiting to claim  
new new new territory.

Waiting on Plantation--  
Waiting on Manor Creek--  
Manor--  
Manor--  
Waiting on Belle--

Waiting in the wings for a ring for a signal that supper is ready for defeat

Jefferson County  
Can't catch smoke--!  
Can't catch smoke--!

What's in a name

the soot of history is in a declension  
(can't catch smoke)  
the blanket thrown over the fire is a syllable:

(East)  
"Jefferson  
Names  
Indian Hills."

(South)  
Shively  
Shively  
Shively

(West)  
Portland  
Portland  
Portland

(North)  
Smoketown  
Smoketown  
Smoketown

Shawnee Cherokee Chickasaw Iroquois Park  
Iroquois  
Park  
Shawnee Cherokee Chickasaw Park  
Shawnee Cherokee Chickasaw  
Park  
Iroquois  
Park

Camp Taylor (say his) Taylor (say militia) Camp

Cherokee Triangle  
Iroquois  
Park!  
...

I have to show you where to bear down,  
Tiresias,  
I have to demonstrate  
I have to

protest to protect  
to draw this  
line of crayon  
an explanation

you laugh  
I am asking you to bleed with me  
press into this  
this, this is the wound

Border As Method: pushing, drawing lines like a gerrymander across across your skin  
this is a place you cannot go this is a place you cannot because there are

people

there  
are people who cannot this is across town like a mark the spot on the serial number of  
your identity this is your zip code this is your zip code this is your zip code your

people

do not wander from here do not drive across tracks do not this building is in the way this  
street is the one way this street goes the other way this is planned and calculated this

city is one of the most if not the most segregated city in America America America!

I am already weeping  
Tiresias, give me strength  
Tiresias, I need you  
I am already bleeding  
I am always already bleeding

I have heard  
the first time I ever visited this city  
it was in my youth  
I cannot remember who I was then  
and it doesn't matter  
but I know that people  
memorize there zip codes  
like tattoos  
because the map is like a body  
and this border is unequal to that skin

this city

America!

Ameri

Jeffer

What have you done I  
Let me rephrase I  
Let me rephrase I  
Let me rephrase  
Allow me to  
ask the question:

pulls out blackboard.  
memoir: here I tried my first time  
to spell it out  
whiteness  
like an unbreakable bond  
we are learning the words  
walking on all fours

I had never asked anyone  
an audience, a reader,  
a friend  
to forgive me

now I know  
it is not mine to ask,  
forgiveness,  
and no one wants to hear the guilt  
it is not as useful to be guilty  
as it is to be healing  
guilt necessitates forgiveness

but  
let us be guilty  
of our whiteness  
let us do everything we can  
to break it down  
we know it  
we spell it  
and we all get free:

white  
"construct"

white-- hex it, break it, hex it  
construct, Black-- construct, designed, calculated, construct,  
colonized, construct,  
hex it (but we need it) hex it (can you unsee it)

Look Mommy A\*\*\*\*\*  
on subway trains, on TARC buses  
own skin like anger reclaim the rage  
in Critical Rage Theory

Black Man, be Terrifying, if that is what he says,  
let it be so, he says  
let me be that, he says



there's power to be kept in that, in skin, he says  
whatever he wants  
a double life, double Terrific face and a mind  
an Invisible Man  
some shapeshifter transgressive transorbital pan-rage rage power to be had  
in claiming  
what is said on subway trains  
and buses  
and airplanes  
and whispered in corners of coffee shops in the Highlands

I did not give him these words  
Tiresias did not give him these words  
It is important that he own his own words  
and I cannot tell you  
how vital it is to understand  
that his words  
are his:  
his language,  
his spell

Who am I to tell anyone-- hex it?  
Who am I to lift veils--construct

an impostor  
stumbling in the dark?

You are so raw here,  
and this part seems dark  
as if it is trying to heal  
but maybe you are resisting it

(Tiresias is feeling around inside me

(Tiresias can look into me and see  
those parts of course  
but you cannot  
you can only know  
the limited things I tell you  
and you are not supposed to believe  
everything you hear)

let this  
historiola  
exorcise  
as I speak:

Jefferson took:  
Monticello  
museum  
His  
Monticello  
installed a life of a slave 1787  
projections of the epic travels of  
his property  
his Sally  
enslaved Sally  
you could watch it unfold  
you might still  
if it's hyperlinked  
made into a novel  
or into a film

"we need to know these things  
and share, not keep, history"

not to say  
not to speak, but  
whose image  
in whose name  
are we projecting the life?

is it not still Jefferson's  
if it is on his property  
generations later

why does it stand  
why can history  
not burn also?

We live on solid ground.  
We live on stolen ground.  
                    don't catchphrase me

(let's unpack that)

Cherokee Cherokee Chickasaw  
Park  
                    what do you call yourself

indigenous  
first  
first but  
ownership was created  
claimed  
property, created  
colonized

Stolen here means the creation of rules that defined what was until then sovereign in  
itself as now  
ours

                    call yourself what you  
                    like what you call yourself

                                    the most difficult thing  
  can be to accept  
                                    what we cannot change

  a definition  
  seems finite  
                                    to those unaccustomed  
  to metaphor

                    this is a dead word in the dictionary:  
                    mine  
                    never so presumptuous as

Cherokee  
Park  
a new playground  
Indian  
Hills  
corrected  
                    don't use that word  
                    don't say--

I erase our selfish unthinking occupation of you by naming you something I feel more comfortable saying

aloud  
in newspapers  
in scholarly journals  
and in poems

this is where we are  
I do not know how to honor you

Tiresias wants to stand with me  
as I walk through the museum  
the first time

as I read the wall  
the wall of images  
the faces who explain  
their solidarity  
I know intrinsically  
I cannot know this  
and I bleed, and bleed  
nothing can stop

"When I think about social change for a Black man it's like this intangible,  
hypothetical  
that's been dangled as an idea. A unicorn, an empty screen, or a black box."

Black Box  
Black  
Box  
#Black  
Box  
#Black Square  
#Instagram  
# #  
Not a (white) unicorn for  
,  
a literal  
box, gerrymandered.

What did you think of that?

So brash, I remember thinking as I scrolled and scrolled,

black, black, black, box

I thought, so bold to claim  
#black box  
(#ally)  
bitter it was so  
easy

where are the lares  
the lares  
the lares  
the household protectors  
those small shrines statuettes unblinking  
our ancestral gods watching watching watching  
failing us--  
is the city falling yet?  
can we hear crumbling?

I tell you  
nothing has changed  
in ten years  
in a lifetime  
nothing changes really  
until language shifts  
and the ground is cracking  
and we are full of hope and despair  
I wrote these lines  
a lifetime ago  
echoing  
aching

Fenceless Wall-less Fenceless Wall-less  
Cherokee  
Chickasaw  
Wall-less  
Iroquois  
Jefferson Square  
Central  
Fenceless

all that delineation of space  
skin wall or permeable

[ ]

Olmstead hoped  
in this space, you are  
a naturally eroding structure

Injustice Square

Tiresias and I are standing at a rally

in Louisville and I feel deeply performative  
despite knowing with every fiber that I am here  
I look around

a beacon and  
arithmetic  
"vote for me"  
but also a  
we feed people here  
there's nothing to be done  
we're here, that's all it takes

we left but then  
someone took a gun to the young photographer's body  
someone took a bullet to  
their body

and what is I a white box  
what with privilege not to speak or do what is

I check this box I cast this hope  
Injustice Square  
Park  
I want to tear this fence down

Like you  
I say I teach

Like you  
I attend organized functions

Like you  
I sometimes visit activist training havens

Like you  
I am on the mailing list

Like you  
I vote begrudgingly

Like you  
I try to hope

Like you  
I survived the last two years





There are many stumblings  
let's take a walk

Tiresias stretches out their hand

there's nothing to be said  
give me body  
this is the queer touch: held, every part

we just have to keep going  
wondering  
if we will ever know answers

if bodies  
will ever stop  
falling

it rains outside  
and the museum doors  
are thrown open like a mouth

## II.

Promise  
    Witness  
        Remembrance  
            in three galleries:

She made it into a museum

She made it into a review  
in The New York Times

(I'm told not to miss it,  
this institutional clockwork)

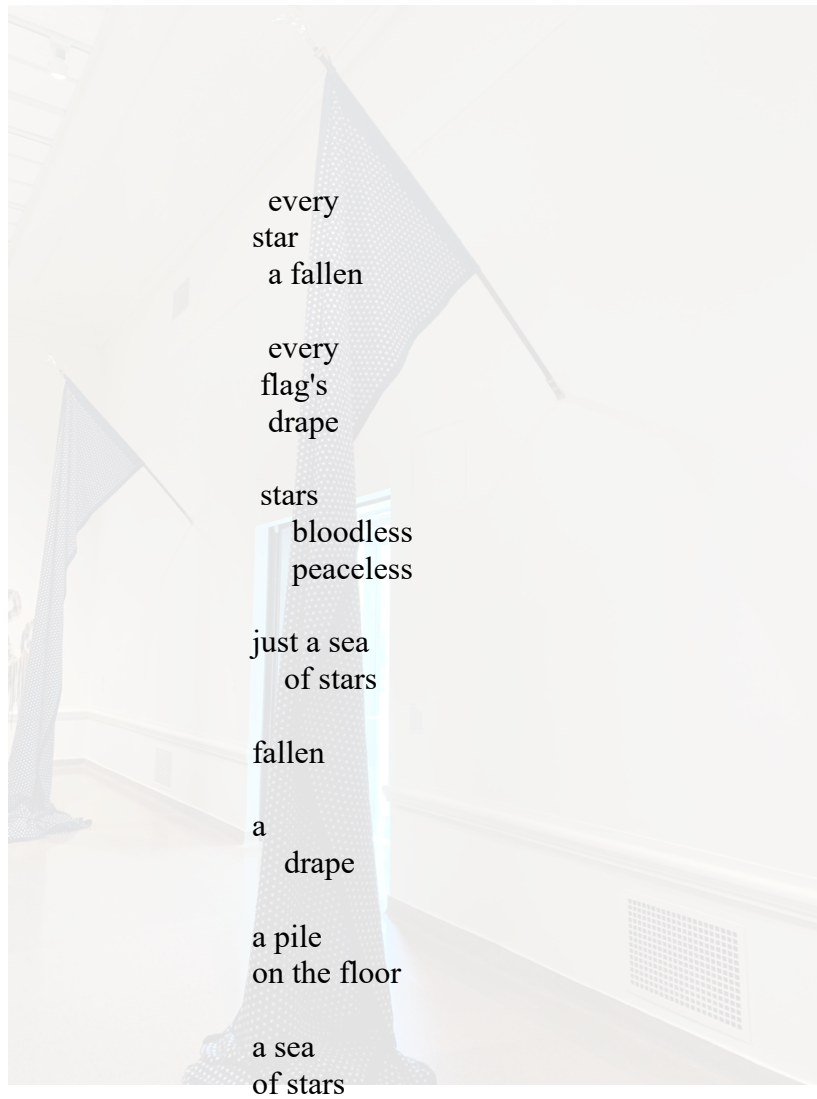
And of course Tamika Palmer said yes!  
Who could say no when  
what Tamika wants is  
bring Breonna back,  
bring Breonna back?

all she has  
to say  
all she has  
is The New York Times

all she gets is  
some curatorial vision

all she has left  
is what everyone keeps alive  
and the memories she keeps to herself  
when she sits alone on the bed  
and remembers things we will and ought never know  
and cries a little  
but remembers  
and says her name quietly, Breonna, for herself,  
a single word ode,  
a mantra in the naming, in the tear,  
the cry of the falcon  
for her daughter to come home

                  this is what I think  
this is what it must be like for her  
                  we can all know loss  
                  but her loss has happened  
                                  and happened  
                                  and happened  
                                  and happened



every  
 star  
 a fallen  
  
 every  
 flag's  
 drape  
  
 stars  
 bloodless  
 peaceless  
  
 just a sea  
 of stars  
  
 fallen  
  
 a  
 drape  
  
 a pile  
 on the floor  
  
 a sea  
 of stars

of notes

|        |    |    |        |         |     |     |          |       |      |       |
|--------|----|----|--------|---------|-----|-----|----------|-------|------|-------|
| Ahmaud |    |    | George | Breonna |     |     | Philando |       |      | Alton |
| Ah     | Ge | Ge | Ge     | Bre     | Bre | Bre | Ph       | Tamir | Alto | Mich  |
| A      | or | B  | Er     | Ph      | Mi  |     | il       |       | ton  | ton   |
| ton    |    |    |        |         |     | P   | E        | A     | T    | M     |
| A      | G  | B  |        |         |     |     | E        | A     |      | M     |
|        | a  | g  | b      | b       |     |     | e        | a     |      | m     |
|        |    | a  | a      | b       | e   | g   |          | ab    |      |       |

you are feeling helpless  
like there's something you need to do  
and why not  
you should feel  
everything  
as if there's someplace to put it

it's a phantom limb  
grasping

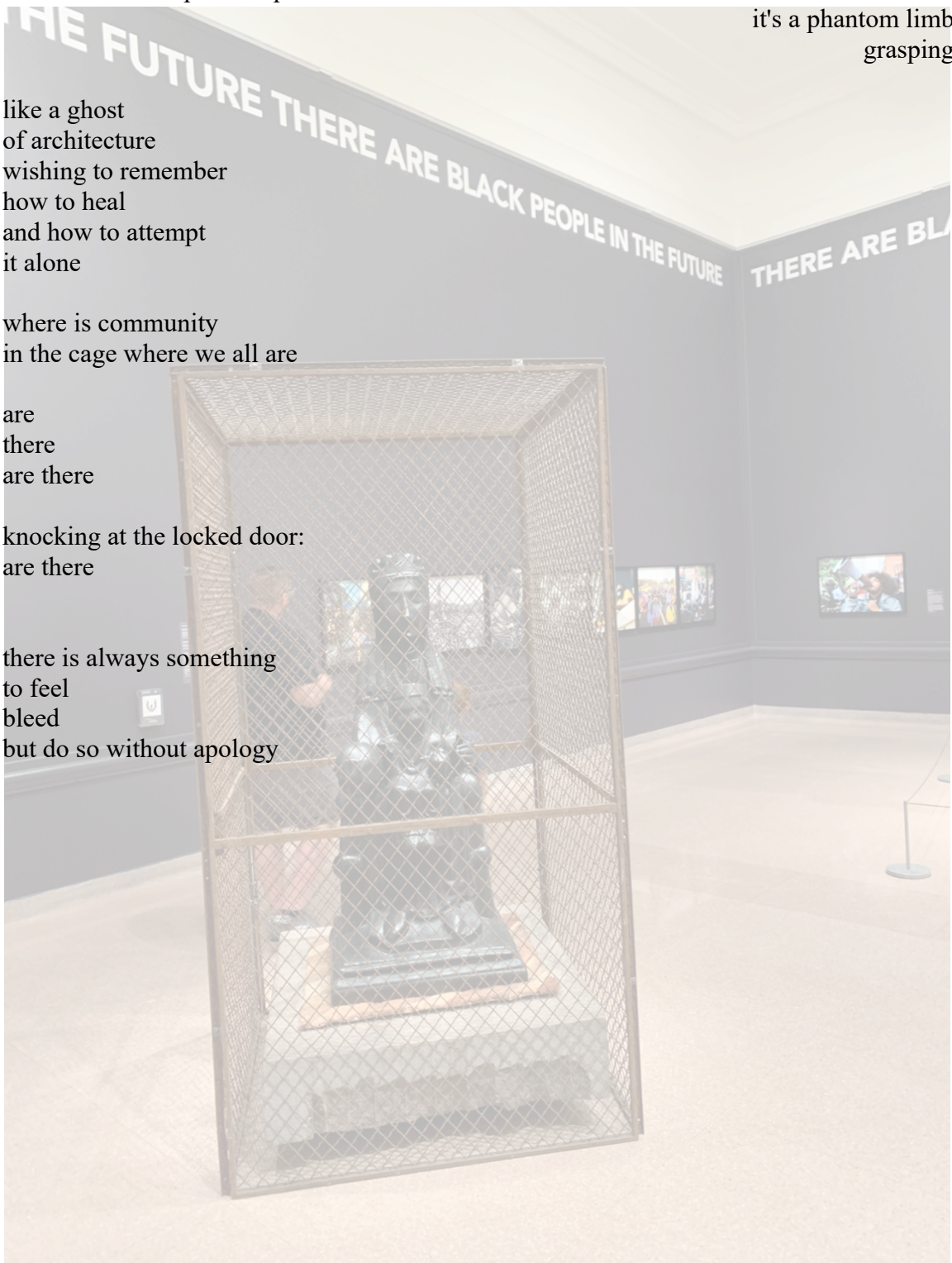
like a ghost  
of architecture  
wishing to remember  
how to heal  
and how to attempt  
it alone

where is community  
in the cage where we all are

are  
there  
are there

knocking at the locked door:  
are there

there is always something  
to feel  
bleed  
but do so without apology



This is the canvas:  
paint something, she added,  
and we sprawled next to  
dozens of others in an overgrown  
factory lot, rust everywhere

This is the canvas  
displayed on the bridge  
in a motorblock protest  
on the evening news—

I painted that flower!  
and she that face!  
them the skin  
and we the canvas--

portraits of the lost  
bannering the Second Street Bridge  
with honks and shouts:  
a warning

a Revolution



it really seemed like something, you see?  
not knowing where they would take the banner  
we put ourselves in  
and when it was so flagrant  
and dramatic, the kite unfurling with a strike of lightning –  
we didn't feel guilty at all

there was no pride in it,  
this sense of belonging.  
all I remembered, honestly,  
was how kind the painter was,  
her eyes as she gave me the brush

In this church you would not have chosen,  
we worship before your icon, by which is meant  
celebrate and mourn with the simultaneous  
bullet in the throat, lodged there as we sing.  
Your high priestess robes shimmer  
down thigh to delicate knee,  
but always, your gaze commands up, up,  
ascension and confrontation.

The painting is, necessarily, flat, emerging  
in the top light and surrounded by  
your timeline, your passion, on the wall,  
solo like Mona Lisa, with rows of kneelers  
suppliant before you, and choirs singing in  
the background, and the shuffle of nervous  
feet  
begging for  
begging for what  
forgiveness?  
mercy?  
justice?

You don't get to choose how you're remembered  
but possibly we need you  
and bring you back in a way  
your spirit moves among us like a sharp wind  
calls us to rise new falcons  
claws sharp enough to shred  
the red from the flag  
stars, stars, stars dancing in saintly promenade above

you flicked that wrist and turned your hand  
and America is upside down

High Priestess, your mandorla surrounding you glittering,  
now, and now,  
we are your children

we ask  
not worthy  
but enough.



## Meditation

a moment of deep grief  
an altar to silence  
an altar of beaded flowers  
and a fist raised  
an altar to a world  
deeply imagined  
an altar of grief  
connected  
our many tears  
the tears of the streets  
the washing  
we are enough  
imagine what we  
see in our deep futures  
we must be enough  
a world rooted in liberation  
you must be enough  
    how do I deserve this moment of  
    how do I this movement  
    this response  
    embody the trust  
    to give anyone  
    I mean also me  
    powerful words, strength  
    to carry on  
    to liberate  
    myself  
    and then we all get free





Now we have to say it,  
there's nothing more to be done.  
I think you can only try  
so with this stroke  
make it  
a violence  
to the white page

A bouquet of roses. Pink for a birthday. A small girl holds a balloon. Moonflowers open up like something lost, lost.

The pin drops: blood is spilled. What is history if not a lie? A lie? A lie?

A bouquet of roses takes history's place. Pink for mourning. A small girl holds a rose. Pink like her memory. Moonflowers close down like shopkeepers afraid, afraid. What is a wake if not awake, awake, awake?

A bouquet of roses stands in. A bouquet of roses, red for slumber. A bouquet of closings, red for victory. Red for waking. A girl holds a rose. Did I say fading?  
A girl holds a rose, red for rising.  
Did I say forever?

Red for rising.  
Did I say she was Black?

A hero sleeps. A hero saves lives and can't help it. I write a poem for a hero. A hero. An epic hero. Red for risen.  
The pin drops.

holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy - - -  
If I didn't say it yet - - -

You've got the spell,  
Now spell it:  
Breonna.

Breonna.

Breonna.

Breonna.

Breonna.  
Breonna  
Breonna

Breonna  
Breonna  
Breonna  
Breonna  
Breonna  
Breonna

Breonna  
And if I wrote that  
If I wrote that for 70 pages  
If I wrote that seventy times seven more  
there would be no Epic

So this is a birthday card:  
Happy Birthday

Breonna  
Happy Birthday  
all the magic I can give  
Breonna  
Happy Birthday

So  
With that  
No  
No  
No more  
No more sand books  
No more masters  
No more epics  
No more epochs  
No more picks  
No more pocks  
Gnome or pocks  
No merpocks  
Nomerpock  
Nome  
Nome  
Ohm!  
Ohm!  
Oh!  
O  
O  
Only glitter, glitter  
I leave only glitter  
Confetti, I write confetti, only glisten, and shine!  
This is my magic  
This I give you, as much, as all I can, Breonna.

Breonna lives.

### III.

We have just one more thing to do.  
After that, I think we've done whatever there is that can be done.

"It is enough."

The city boiled in the rain.

City of smoke, smog pillars  
holding up pink clouds unnatural  
edifice of roiled smoke.  
The pink of poison,  
pink of poppies.  
Heroin poppies, Tiresias thought.

They looked out on the empty valley,  
iron scaffolds like oil derricks  
like dead horses asplay  
legs askance  
asking what once was  
and what might be.  
Iron Tinkertoys, Erector Sets  
smogged  
in a valley of oil, a river like  
thick chassis  
like thick like molasses.

and they were changed  
and I was too  
and the city was no different  
at least, on the outside.

Tiresias called each one from the river:  
Poison Pisces  
Monstrous Sagittarius  
Broken Libra  
Hornless Taurus  
and each came, hoofing to them through  
the sludge to the surface.

Keep us alive.

As their tired heads broke the surface  
and tired, tense ripples peeled out,  
the smell of children and sickness  
filled their nose.  
They gasped, for air and patience.

Keep us alive, they said.  
Keep us alive, Tiresias repeated.  
Keep us alive, I whisper [here].

Tiresias knew a secret.

They had always known this secret.  
He had told no one,  
which makes you  
the first to hear it.

They had recalled it  
as she drifted past Sirius  
and the cold star  
looked

And they had heard it  
whispered on the wind  
after they cast their last spell.

The world does not end.

That's it.

Iris was gone.

Tiresias  
was Tired.  
They wanted to sit down.  
They wanted to just  
be.

Everything was different.  
Everything was the same.

For some time, Tiresias cried.  
They remembered laughing, but did not  
laugh now.

It had been ages.  
They had lasted this long--  
but why go on?

There was very little left.  
They felt  
their energy was nearly spent.

But then, there wasn't any rush.

With a little prayer, they went to sleep  
and they dreamed  
with their eyes shut,  
a dream of roses and lotus and what might become.



And they're the hierophant, the aged mage, they are Imagination.  
(So are we the angels  
fighting for purchase?)

They pick me up from their workbench so lightly,  
raise metal, scissors, and clip my wings.  
(We expect pain  
but receive none.)

Our pink wings ripen, red like  
punished raspberries plucked from the vine.

They pour us  
into crystal goblets  
bless us  
and sip us with eyes closed.  
Delicate.  
(We taste like spring rain  
and the cure for cancer.)

They touch each vial—  
red, green, blue, new pink.

They are ready, and they say our last prayer:  
realizing many, may I realize my self.

It is enough—  
and I'm  
glad  
it's over.

\*Coda

"we know no rule  
of procedure,

we are voyagers, discoverers  
of the not-known,

the unrecorded;  
we have no map;

possibly we will reach haven,  
heaven."

❖ H.D.

here is more space  
let's write in it together  
and list all our names for god:

## Endnote

I did not expect to write a 130+ page hybrid epic, but here we are. I feel like I've found an epic piece and an epic hero or two, including Tiresias. I could write with Tiresias for much longer. Tiresias is, for me, a timeless character that became a persona for me, a sort of mask I can step into and feel at home in, sometimes, but also feel challenged by. I feel like I'm channeling Tiresias because they are both me and not-me, and the space between is productive and frightening.

I began writing *A Planetary Spell* by turning spells into poems, mostly working with Ancient Egyptian spells and some more word-ish spells that I had heard about, like the SATOR square from Ancient Rome. As those spell-poems evolved beyond sonnets and the like, I began to write Tiresias into the narrative as a way of holding the poems to a structure. As both began to entwine, Tiresias took over the manuscript as a presence and the formal poems began to dissolve into hybrid works that still retain their formal spell backbones. I found the in-between spaces to be the most exciting and most magical. One of my favorite things about writing this manuscript has been finding myself in Tiresias, talking to Tiresias (quite literally), imagining myself as Tiresias, and channeling. This has allowed me to hybridize my authorial self in some respects, and I find that I am writing differently at different times, sometimes more gendered, sometimes not, but never exactly the way I might have otherwise.

Tiresias is a persona for now. It is 2022 at the moment and popular magic is on the rise. I feel that people are experiencing crisis and feel powerless, in the political sense. Which government is going to protect us, the America we are? Who do the police protect, and how can we want it that way? When people feel powerless, if we look at

history, they often turn to magic as a way of claiming power that transcends the political and geographical and national. By hexing Trump, those witches weren't participating in a silly or meaningless gesture; they were protesting by doing, acting on their anger and sadness. Hexes can work, especially for the witch herself.

I hope that it's evident that I don't believe any spell or poem can "cure" racism and oppression and colonialism and capitalism. Tiresias manages, rather than to cure these things or to cure me, the writer, to inscribe a sort of possibility in language and in the world. As Peter O'Leary writes of Robert Duncan's poetry in *Gnostic Contagion*, we find in words both our illness, the contagion of language-magic, and its cure. Knowledge is what kills and cures the gnostics and alchemists I turn to. Magical poems reflect on themselves and reflect themselves, and us, back in order to show us the truth. It is, perhaps, possible and maybe even likely that our last, greatest refuge is language. If we're careful, I think our use of words can offer us healing, insight, and transcendence. Maybe we only have words left, and that is what I want to offer to you. Despite everything, create a home for yourself in words.

This manuscript is meant to be not only a narrative following Tiresias, but a complete spell where each section reflects not only one segment of a larger incantation – appeal, invocation, naming, *historiolae*, allusion, litany, ask, paratextual conclusion – but also each is a spell unto itself. Here is a list of sections in reference to the incantatory "formula" I followed, as discussed by Jewish magic scholar Joshua Trachtenberg:

A Planetary Spell: Formula

Appeal  
hero(ine)

*Historiolae*

## HOT SPELL

Invocation & Enunciation  
MANDORLA Glory

Request  
WHITE MAGIC

The "planetary spell" is a nesting doll of spells, a solar system with asteroids and orbits and moons around every center, every mandorla of auratic gravity and pull. I found quickly that Tiresias is much more than a spell-casting conduit and required more attention and time, which resulted in many initial disruptions of my intended "flow." The spells began to look more like poems while the poems I had intended to keep more like poems looked like spells. Tiresias's possession granted me, I think, the gravity I had planned, but in a much more chaotic manner than expected. I have them to thank for their intervention in my creative process, and I recommend you, reader, try writing and communicating with "aliens" yourself sometime.

- Robert Eric Shoemaker

-

Some of the aliens I communed with are writers who came before me and carved space so that Tiresias, this prophet who comes through poetry, can speak. For your reference, a selected list of quotes I found inspiring and their original sources:

"But we are bear-like dreamers in a lifetime's hibernation..." Robert Duncan,

"Medieval Scenes," Selected Poems, p. 11

"We go through the word Forest..." Susan Howe, Singularities, p. 49

"I have always thought that to be a poet you have to deal with your own death.

Maybe this is dealing with the animal inside of you." Dorothea Lasky, *Animal*, p.

73

"We know no rule of procedure..." H.D., *Trilogy*, p. 59

I leave the majority of other references in the text to the reader to find, like a good video game's best Easter eggs, but I must mention my indebtedness to Virginia Woolf's

*Orlando*, from which many other lines in the middle of this text come, including a longish quote.



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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Robert Eric Shoemaker PhD Humanities (Spring 2022), MFA  
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### EDUCATION

- ❖ PhD Humanities, University of Louisville (Expected Spring 2022)  
Dissertation: Critical essay “As Above, So Below: Magical Poetics and Queer Alchemy,” with creative manuscript “A Planetary Spell”  
Coursework in Magic History and Theory, Queer Studies, Feminist Theory, Activist History, Oral History, Postcolonial Studies, Literary Theory, Poetry & Poetics, Cultural Theory, and Creative Writing
  - Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Graduate Certificate, 2021
  - Public History Graduate Certificate, 2020
- ❖ MFA Creative Writing & Poetics, Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics  
Thesis: "Rural Triptych" by Federico García Lorca in new translations, with critical essay "The Untranslatability of Translation"  
Coursework in Writing Pedagogy, Poetics History and Theory, Eco-Poetics, Translation, Feminist Literature, Performance Art, and Fiction
  - 3.97/4.0 GPA, June 2018
- ❖ BA Theatre & Performance Studies, University of Chicago  
Thesis: "Blood Weddin" by Federico García Lorca in new translation, with critical essay "How Lorca: The Performance of Re-Contextualization with the Poet-Playwright"  
Coursework in Poetry, Playwriting, Film Studies, Literature and Literary Theory, Translation, and Spanish
  - Minors in English & Creative Writing and Cinema & Media Studies, 3.8/4.0 GPA, June 2014

### TEACHING

Education extends beyond the traditional classroom and includes public and social initiatives as well as institutional work. My pedagogy extends beyond the boundaries of the brick-and-mortar Academy and into alternative community projects and organizations.

#### Classroom

- ❖ Instructor, Introduction to Film (HUM 224), University of Louisville, Summer 2021-Spring 2022
  - Designed syllabus and instructed undergraduate 35 students in each of three sections

- Distance Education, 100% online (Summer 2021) & in-person (Fall 2021-Spring 2022)
- ❖ Instructor, Introduction to Humanities (HUM 105), University of Louisville, Spring 2021
  - Designed syllabus and instructed undergraduate students
  - Distance Education, 100% online
- ❖ Adjunct Instructor, Introduction to Composition (English 101), Jefferson Community and Technical College, Fall 2020 & Summer 2021
  - Designed syllabus and instructed undergraduate students
  - Hybrid Instruction, 70% online 30% in-person (Fall 2020) & 100% online (Summer 2021)
- ❖ Graduate Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Humanities, University of Louisville, Fall 2020
  - Co-taught course for undergraduate students with mentor instructor
- ❖ Co-Instructor, BA Writing Seminar, Naropa University's Summer Writing Program, 2018
  - Designed and implemented co-taught seminar course for 12 students over the summer
- ❖ Graduate Instructor, Writing Seminar 1, Naropa University, 2017 and 2018
  - Designed syllabus and instructed 15 undergraduate students for two semesters
- ❖ Teaching Assistant, Writing Pedagogy Graduate Seminar, Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School, 2017 and 2018
  - Designed and implemented lesson plans and course preparation with mentor instructor for 10 students for each of 2 semesters
- ❖ Instructor, Creative Writing, Duke University Talent Identification Program (TIP), 2018
  - Designed course and instructed 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders in three-week residential program
- ❖ Instructor, Philosophy in Literature & Film, Duke University Talent Identification Program (TIP), 2017
  - Designed course and instructed 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> graders in three-week residential program

#### Public History & Education

- ❖ Frazier History Museum, Education Intern, Fall 2019
  - Hired via special arrangement with U of L public history to facilitate and create special events
  - Solo designed, marketed, and implemented "Kentucky Is" event at Frazier Museum
  - Collaboratively designed and implemented gallery talk based on Edgar Allan Poe exhibit

#### Teaching Artist

- ❖ Teaching Artist and Stage Manager, Northlight Theatre’s Education Program, 2015
- ❖ Teaching Artist and Playwright, American Theater Company’s Bridge Program, 2014

#### Writing Consultation

- ❖ Head Writing Fellow, Naropa Writing Center, 2017-2018
  - Sole coordinator and administrator of the Writing Center and Core Writing Seminars Fall 2017 in director's leave of absence; advisor for adjunct faculty, facilitator of writing seminars, assessment, and course design
  - Main assistant to writing center director and core writing seminars administrator in Spring 2018, including the overhaul of writing seminar assessment criteria and syllabus construction
- ❖ Writing Fellow, Naropa Writing Center, 2016-2018
  - Graduate Assistantship
  - Conducted one-on-one writing sessions with students and alumni
  - Interfaced with students and faculty to communicate the pedagogical goals of the writing center

#### PUBLICATIONS (selected)

##### Books

- ❖ Ca’Venezia with Partial Press, 2021
  - Full-length Artist’s Book (Poetry/Prose/Memoir/Hybrid Writing)
  - Selected performances:
    - Author Talk and Performance hosted by University of Louisville Humanities Program, 2021
- ❖ We Knew No Mortality with Acta Publications, 2018
  - Full-length Poetry & Memoir Collection
  - Selected performances:
    - Bing Art Books, hosted by the UChicago Arts Alumni Network: Book Release, 2018
    - Innisfree Poetry Café Reading: Featured Reader, 2018
- ❖ 30 Days Dry with Thought Collection Publishing, 2015
  - Debut chapbook-length Poetry Collection
  - Selected performances:
    - Release Reading at Armadillo’s Pillow, Chicago, 2015
    - Release Reading at Worsham Hall, Kentucky, 2015
    - CHI PRC Reading, Chicago, 2015

##### Articles

- ❖ Signs and Society, University of Chicago Press, Fall 2019
  - Title: “After After Lorca: Anamnesis and Magic between Jack Spicer and García Lorca”
  - Full-length peer reviewed academic journal article
- ❖ Plath Profiles, Indiana University Press: “Animal Trapping Exercise” and selections from original musical “PLATH/HUGHES”, 2019



## Book Reviews

- ❖ Gender Forum: Book Review: Nepantla Anthology, Summer 2020
- ❖ Entropy: Book Review: A Sand Book, May 2020
- ❖ Jacket2: “Spelling for Humanity”, Book Review of Spells Anthology by Ignota Books, 2019

## Translations

- ❖ Asymptote Journal of Translation: “Barrens, from Lorca’s ‘Yerma’”, selected by Caridad Svich, Spring 2020
- ❖ Exchanges Journal of Translation at the University of Iowa: Poetry by Giuseppe Gioachino Belli, 2018
- ❖ Columbia Journal: “A Mistranslation of Dante’s Inferno”, 2017
- ❖ The Adirondack Review
  - Poetry by Lorca: “Narcissus”, “Sleepwalker’s Ballad”, “Nueva York (Office and Denunciation)”, “Adam”, 2017

## Poetry

- ❖ Analogies & Allegories Literary Magazine: Magic, "Moon", 2021
- ❖ Diane di Prima: New Revolutionary Letters, "Revolutionary Letter B", Wisdom Body Collective, 2021
- ❖ Entropy “Owl Swoops”, 2021
- ❖ \*apo-press “Re-Knewing”: “After Horas,” “In panicked dreams I cry out and the sound only hits the walls”, 2021
- ❖ Emergency Index Vol. 9, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020: “Guarda l@s Niñ@s”
- ❖ Tiny Spoon Ecology: “Forrest Gander has a yellow aura”, 2020
- ❖ Bombay Gin #45 SWP Portfolio, 2020
- ❖ Call Me [Brackets]: “forest gash”, 2019
- ❖ Cigar City Poetry Journal: “Instructions for Tapered Ribbon”, 2019
- ❖ Featured on KRFY 88.5, Songs-Voices-Poems with Jackie Henrion: “Old Kuttawa And The Flood”, 2018
- ❖ Gordian Review: “If Once You Were German”, 2018
- ❖ BEATS
  - Eco-Magick, “Halloween Night”, 2017
  - Mental Health, “Reductive Motions”, 2017
- ❖ Kairos Literary Journal: “Body: Domain”, 2017
- ❖ Water, Water Everywhere: “Sublimation”, 2017
- ❖ Verde Que Te Quiero Verde with Open Country Press: “Impicture”, 2017
- ❖ Tooth N’ Nail Anthology: “Sammie Jo”, “Sammie Jo Speaks”, “Sammie Jo Redux”, “Jo Reborn”, 2017
- ❖ Thought Notebook Webzine: “If A Hobo”, 2016
- ❖ Mosaic Literary Journal: “Death at a Reading: or, Poetic Justice”, 2016
- ❖ Baseball Bard: “America’s Game”, 2016
- ❖ Roots Student Literary Journal: “Confirmation”, “Creed”, “If Once You Were German”, “Set”, 2016
- ❖ Thought Notebook: “I Am/Who Am”, 2016
- ❖ Literature Emitting Diodes Anthology: “I Am Solar”, 2016 (installation 2015)

- ❖ Chicago After Dark Anthology: “City of Steel”, 2014
- ❖ Rollick Magazine: “Sammie Jo”, “Ca’ Venezia: Your Voice”, “Pins”, 2015

#### Prose

- ❖ Miracle Monocle: “Terrariums”, 2020
- ❖ Barely South Review: “Postface as Memory”, 2017
- ❖ Mount Analogue: “Activism and the Beats”, 2017
- ❖ Roar: Literature and Revolution by Feminist People: “Activism and the Beats”, 2017
- ❖ Punch Drunk Press: “Ekphrasis of Sia”, 2017

#### Journalism

- ❖ Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting Campus Consortium Grant Project: “Venetian Artisanry and Climate Change”, 2014-2015
  - Grant to travel to Venice, Italy and report about climate change's impact on tourism and the arts
  - Selections: “State of Glass”, “Venetian Artisanry and Climate Change Podcast Parts 1- 4”
  - Feature Contributor, Artisan Magazine, 2015
  - Feature Contributor, Fra Noi Magazine, 2015
- ❖ Feature Contributor, Boulder Weekly, 2016
  - Selection: “Eat, Drink, or Shine?”
- ❖ Head Arts Writer, Evanston Now, 2015-2016
  - Lead point of contact for reviews and features on the arts, lead point of contact for articles, coordinated scheduling and editorial process
  - Selections: “Sarah Ruhl – Interview with the Poet-Playwright”, “FBI Agent talks JFK ‘Assassination Theater’”, Interview of Chuck Mee
- ❖ Arts Contributor, Newcity, 2014-2016
  - Selection: “Go South”
- ❖ “Turnout: A Poetics Journalism Zine”, Feature Contributor, 2017
- ❖ Arts Contributor, VAM Magazine, 2016
  - Selection: “Delia Kropp”

#### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & MEMBERSHIPS

- ❖ Association of Humanities Academics, University of Louisville, 2019-2022
  - President, 2020-Fall 2021
    - Advocate for graduate students at departmental and other institutional levels as well as organize and create events in the interest of community-building and professional development
  - Vice President, 2019-2020
- ❖ Sarabande Books Young Professionals Board, 2019-present
  - Engagement Committee Chair, 2021-present
    - Responsible for organizing and implementing community outreach and volunteer opportunities with board members
- ❖ Louisville Literary Arts Board, Member, 2020-2021

- Fundraising Committee Chair 2020-2021
  - Coordinated first large-scale fundraiser, including 3 consecutive, planned days of programming and an extensive online silent auction
- ❖ American Literary Translators Association, 2018-present
- ❖ University of Chicago Arts Alumni Board, 2017-present
- ❖ Pedagogy Collective Syllabi Committee, 2016-2018
  - Re-designed undergraduate courses “Literary Studies” and “Creative Reading & Writing”
- ❖ Naropa Writing Center Client Committee, 2016-2018
  - Research and community presentations on how to better serve the writing center’s client base

#### Trainings (selected)

- ❖ Adobe Faculty Fellow, University of Louisville, Spring 2022
- ❖ Blackboard Ultra Certification, KCTCS/JCTC 2020
- ❖ Delphi U Online Certification, University of Louisville, 2020
  - Online teacher training and certification in compliance, accessibility, and technology tools
- ❖ Collaborative Learning in Online Classes (Summer 2021, JCTC)
- ❖ Planning Your Online Course: Course Mapping (Summer 2021, JCTC)
- ❖ Online Pedagogy (Summer 2021, JCTC)

#### HONORS & AWARDS

- ❖ University of Louisville Undergraduate Mentorship Award, Spring 2022
  - Awarded for project proposal on psychological horror film with undergraduate student
- ❖ University of Louisville Faculty “Student Champion”
  - Awarded for Outstanding Commitment to students during the global pandemic, 2020-2021
- ❖ Anne Braden Institute Social Justice Graduate Research Paper Award, 2021
  - “Black Magic: Transnational Diasporic Aesthetics and Magic in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey”
- ❖ Kentucky Derby Festival Poetry Derby, 2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner, 2021
  - “a horse of a different color”
- ❖ [PANK] Big Books Contest Finalist, 2020
  - FireBear, finalist poetry collection
- ❖ Sara-Jean McDowell Award for Fiction Winner, 2020, Department of English, University of Louisville
  - “Constancy,” awarded short story
- ❖ Maddox Prize Winner, 2019, Department of Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies, University of Louisville
  - “After After Lorca: Homage, Anamnesis and Magic between Jack Spicer and Garcia Lorca,” Doctoral Student Writing Award
- ❖ Inaugural Orinda Award for Best New Translation, Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America, 2018

- Workshop and staged reading awarded to “Barrens”, translated from Lorca’s “Yerma
- ❖ University Fellowship at the University of Louisville
  - Full tuition scholarship with stipend for four years of PhD
- ❖ Graduate Student Leader of the Year Award, 2018, Naropa University Student Engagement Awards
- ❖ Graduate Speaker, Naropa University Commencement, 2018
- ❖ kari edwards scholarship for experimental & gender-based activist writing, 2018, Naropa University Summer Writing Program
- ❖ Henderson Area Arts Alliance Grant, 2017
- ❖ DCASE Individual Artist Program Grant from the City of Chicago, 2015
  - Project: “Lorca in America” involving the production of 2 new Lorca translations
- ❖ Olga and Paul Menn Foundation Prize for Best New Play, 2014, awarded to “PLATH/HUGHES”
- ❖ University of Chicago Student Marshal, 2014
- ❖ University of Chicago Arts Council Grants, 2012 & 2013

#### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

My scholarship and creative energies are dedicated to supporting and providing immersive, intentional, experiential opportunities to the public. Selected below are some initiatives of which I have been an integral part.

- ❖ Co-Managing and Senior Poetry Editor, Plath Profiles, an interdisciplinary scholarly and literary journal of Plath studies, 2019-present
  - Shared managing editorship, including management of 10+ peer readers, website, submissions, editorial, design, and production for the only peer-reviewed Sylvia Plath journal worldwide
  - Journal hosted by IU Northwest
- ❖ Poetry Is Productions, Artistic Director and Founder, 2015-present
  - Poetry Is: A Sound Experience, Artistic Director and Founder, 2019-present
    - Producing director of poetry and music performance collective in Louisville serving over 200+ patrons with innovative events
    - Venues have included Speed Art Museum's After Hours, Frazier History Museum, Portland Museum, Writer’s Block Festival, Kleinhelter Gallery, Surface Noise Records, and Naropa's Summer Writing Program on Zoom
    - Kentucky Is: A Sound Experience at the Frazier Museum, 2019 Producer and Performer
  - Theatrical Productions in Chicago, New York City, and Boulder
    - Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, “Blackboard/Whiteboard”, 2017
      - Performance art and installation produced by Poetry Is/Beats as part of an exhibition
    - Writer, PLATH/HUGHES

- Produced at: Teatro LATEA in New York, 2016; Chicago Musical Theatre Festival, 2015; Gorilla Tango, 2015; and Rhinofest, 2014
    - Highly Recommended by Chicago Stage Standard, Chicago Critic
  - Translator, *Buster Keaton Passes By* by Federico García Lorca
    - Produced at: Abbie Fest, 2015; and Skokie Theatre, 2015
  - Translator, *Bernarda Alba and Her House* by Federico García Lorca
    - Produced at Redtwist Theatre, 2015-2016, as a guest company
    - Highly Recommended by Chicago Critic, Windy City Times
  - Adaptor, “Wilde’s Salomé”
    - Produced at Gorilla Tango Theatre, 2016
  - Writer, “Phaedra, Released.”
    - Staged Reading at The Old Globe in San Diego; Produced at the Poetry Is Theatre Festival, 2016
    - Highly Recommended by Chicago Reader
  - Writer, “medea conjures dragons”
    - Reading at Boulder Writer’s Warehouse
- ❖ Founding Editor, BEATS literary magazine, 2016-2018
- Designed, edited, produced, and distributed student journal with more than 6 volumes, with monthly release events and readings in Boulder and Denver for an audience of over 400+ readers
  - Artistic Community Student Group Award for “BEATS”, 2018, Naropa University Student Engagement Awards
  - Producer, “HOWL: A Ginsberg Birthday Party”
    - Produced at Boulder’s Fox Theatre by Beats: A Naropan Periodical, Poetry Is Productions, The Fox, and the Boulder Weekly
    - Awesome Foundation Grant, 2017, for “HOWL: A Ginsberg Birthday Party” at the Fox Theatre
  - Producer, “<sup>2</sup>HOWL: The Second Coming”
  - Organizer and Host: “Poetry and Performance- Protest Reading” at Naropa University
- ❖ Classical Entertainment Society, University of Chicago, Artistic Director, 2012-2014
- 13 Productions in Chicago, including 2 annual festivals
  - Adaptor, *Iron Bridal Feast*
  - Translator, *Blood Weddin'* by Federico García Lorca
  - Writer, *Tiresias*

- Staged Reading at the Greenhouse Theatre; Produced at the University of Chicago
    - Adaptor, Beowulf
  - ❖ Ta Pyra Ensemble, Artistic Director and Founder, 2009-2012
    - 4 theatre productions in Kentucky and Indiana including 2 dinner theatres serving over a total of 300 patrons
  - ❖ Naropa Student Union
    - Co-Chair, 2017-2018
      - Administered 10 student government positions, oversaw operations, facilitated decision-making and project development including the procuring and establishment of a new student government office and student venue
    - Communications Officer, 2017
      - Marketing officer, designed and produced flyers and marketing materials for 10+ events over the course of the school year

#### Writing Workshops, Designed and Led

- ❖ 2022 Kentucky Poetry Derby Instructor, sponsored by Churchill Downs
- ❖ Sarabande Books, "Cut-Up Exorcism: Zine Lunch," 2021
- ❖ Tiny Spoon and Poetry Is: "Performance: At a Time Like This," 2021
- ❖ Chicago Public Libraries: "Identity Politics/Poetics: Writing/Reading for Diversity and Inclusion," 2017
- ❖ Henderson County Public Library: "The Poetics of Space: Writers and their Environment," 2017
  - Designed and implemented three workshops and accompanying readings on Eco-Poetics, Contemporary Praxis, and Performance
- ❖ Boulder Public Library's BLDG61: "Book Arts," 2017
  - Designed and implemented a workshop for adults on chapbook-making
- ❖ University of Chicago's Southside Scribblers at Ray Elementary: "For the Fun of It," 2017
  - Designed and implemented a workshop for middle and elementary school students on chapbook-making
- ❖ Henderson County Public Library: "Writing What You Know, 2016"
  - Designed and implemented a poetry workshop for adults on memoir and personal narrative
- ❖ Chicago Public Library Archer Heights Branch: "Poetry As Performance," 2016
  - Designed and implemented a poetry workshop for adults on performance and alternative poetry

#### Conferences & Talks

- ❖ Between the Worlds: Magic, Miracles, and Mysticism Conference, University of Sofia, Bulgaria
  - Paper: "Allusive Magic: The Bibliomantic Transfer of Ethos from Homer to Virgil to Dante to Notley to Saterstrom," 2020
- ❖ Magic from the Margins Conference, Pacifica Institute, 2020, Attendee

- ❖ Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture, University of Louisville
    - Paper: “Lorca’s Yerma”, 2020
    - Chair: Mythopoetics; Horror, Affect, and Race, 2020
    - Creative Performer: “Guarda L@s Niñ@s' and other poems”, 2019
    - Chair: “Experiments in Disruption”, 2019
  - ❖ Ethics and Writing Panel, University of Louisville Writing Center, 2019
  - ❖ Kentucky Philological Association Conference
    - Paper: “After After Lorca: Homage, Anamnesis, and Magic between Jack Spicer and García Lorca”, 2019
  - ❖ American Literary Translators Association Conference
    - Panel: “Transcreating Lorca’s Duende”, 2018
  - ❖ Thomas R. Watson Conference on Making Future Matters
    - Panel: “Redefining Eco-Pedagogy for the New Weathers”, 2018
  - ❖ Naropa’s Summer Writing Program
    - Panel: “Romancing Lorca”, 2018
    - Panel: “Activism and the Beats”, 2017
  - ❖ Author’s Panel, Holy Name Church “Faith Quest”, 2018
  - ❖ Colorado Translators Association Conference
    - Talk: “The Untranslatability of ‘Translation’”, 2018
  - ❖ Conference on Community Writing
    - Panel: “Eco-Pedagogy Praxis”, 2017
  - ❖ Colorado Wyoming Writing Center Conference
    - Panel: “The Journalism Triangle as a Method of Academic Writing”, 2017
  - ❖ Taking the Next Step, 2017
    - University of Chicago career development conference for undergraduates; arts roundtable discussion leader and Entertainment and Creative Arts panel participant
- Performances, Readings, & Installations
- ❖ University of Louisville Humanities Event, Ca'Venezia Book Release, Performance and Talk, 2021
  - ❖ River City Revue: Featured Reader, 2019
  - ❖ Alexis Levitin Bilingual Reading Series of the American Literary Translators Association Conference
    - Featured Translator/Reader of Giuseppe Gioachino Belli, 2018
  - ❖ Naropa University Art Gallery Installation & Performance, 2018
    - Installation: “a Writer’s Notebook”, with opening performance from “We Knew No Mortality”
  - ❖ Punketry Reading/Performance, Denver: Featured Performer, 2018
  - ❖ Boulder Public Library Lunchtime Concert Series: Featured Performer, 2017
  - ❖ 4x4 Reading Series at University of Denver: Student Representative, Naropa University, 2018
  - ❖ Still Cellars Performance Series, 2018

- ❖ Naropa University Graduation Reading, 2018
- ❖ Naropa Writing Center Reading, 2018
- ❖ Revolutionary Letters Reading, 2018
- ❖ Joanna Macy Center Cabaret, 2017
- ❖ 100,000 Poets for Change, Boulder, 2017 & 2016
- ❖ Book Cellar, Chicago, 2016
- ❖ University of Chicago Alumni Reading, 2016
- ❖ Rhino Poetry Featured Reader, Chicago, 2016
- ❖ Naropa Text/Image Symposium Reading, Boulder, 2017

#### Theatrical Productions

Among others, including staged readings of my work with The Old Globe, San Diego; Trellis/Greenhouse Theatre, Chicago; Adventure Stage, Chicago; Also including work with Gorilla Tango Theatre, Whiskey Rebellion Radio Hour, Hyde Park Players, Rhinofest, American Theater Company, Horizon Theatre, Theatre of Western Springs, Dandelion Theatre, Steep Theatre, New American Folk Theatre, Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Company, Redtwist Theatre, Opera Ouvert, Redd Opera, and 3 Brothers Theatre

- ❖ Writer/Director, “The Enormous Room”
  - Staged Reading produced by Studio Theatre, University of Louisville, 2019
- ❖ Writer, “Lead Me Into Dark”
  - Staged Reading for PlayDates produced by Pandora Productions, Louisville, 2019
  - Workshop Production at Theatre of Western Springs, 2015
- ❖ Writer, “Terrariums”
  - Produced by Naropa University’s MFA Performance Program for “Embodied Poetics”, 2018
- ❖ Writer, “The Magic Thread”
  - Staged Reading at Adventure Stage Chicago, 2016
- ❖ Adaptor, “War of the Worlds”
  - Produced at Gorilla Tango Theatre, 2015
  - Highly Recommended by Chicago Stage Standard
- ❖ Adaptor, “The Music of Erich Zann”
  - Produced at the Whiskey Rebellion Radio Hour and the Hyde Park Players’ Radio Show, 2015
- ❖ Writer, “#409”
  - Produced at American Theater Company, 2013
- ❖ Writer, “Box of Wind”
  - Staged Reading at Horizon Theatre, 2013
- ❖ Writer, “Five Minute Flamenco”
  - Staged Reading at Horizon Theatre, 2013
- ❖ Writer, “Death at a Reading”



- Produced at the University of Chicago, 2015
- ❖ Writer, “Transformations: After Ovid”
  - Staged Reading at Gorilla Tango Theatre, 2015

#### LITERARY INTRODUCTIONS

- ❖ Introduction for Lisa Jarnot
  - Summer Writing Program at Naropa University, 2018
- ❖ Introduction for Michelle Naka Pierce
  - Summer Writing Program at Naropa University, 2018
- ❖ Introduction for Sarah Escue
  - What/Where Reading at Naropa University, 2017
- ❖ Introduction for Eugene Lim
  - What/Where Reading at Naropa University, 2016

#### PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

- ❖ Interviewed by Perks of Being a Book Lover Podcast, 2020
- ❖ Interviewed by States of the Union, 2017
- ❖ Interviewed by Troy Cabida: Online, for release of “30 Days Dry”, 2016
- ❖ Interview by Kat Lahr: Print, for Thought Notebook’s Artist to Watch, 2016
- ❖ Interviewed by University of Chicago: Online, for Alumni Website, 2015
- ❖ Interviewed by Chicago Magazine, 2015
- ❖ Interviewed by Evansville Courier & Press, 2015
- ❖ Interviewed by University of Chicago: Online, for “Uniquely Chicago”, 2014