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Kate Fagan
20.xii.02
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"Constantly I Write This Happily" / Encountering Lyn Hejinian

by Kate Fagan

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at the University of Sydney December 2002
Abstract

This thesis responds to interplays between poetical, philosophical, epistolary and communitarian texts and discourses in Lyn Hejinian’s assembled writings of the past twenty-five years. Since the early 1980s, American poet Lyn Hejinian has matched her key poetical works with expository essays, many of them exploring links between writing “poetry” and developing “a poetics.” In addition, Hejinian has generated an extraordinary volume of materials that might be referred to as *submarginalia*: letters, unpublished drafts, sketches, journals, and taped readings.

Lyn Hejinian is placed frequently, in both critical and cultural discourses, within the “Language School” of experimentalism that cohered in several urban American poetical locales during the late 1970s and into the next decade. One of my key methodological intentions in this thesis is to disentangle Lyn Hejinian’s oeuvre from narratives that relegate and interpret her work according to predetermined and manifesto-like lists of formal techniques and historicised occurrences that often serve to delimit a particular “grouping” — Language poetry — within contemporary American poetics.

My thesis focuses, rather, on Lyn Hejinian’s poetic of encounters, affirmation and phenomenal appearances, in context of Hejinian’s ongoing collaborative practices. I examine different forms and compositional methods that guide Hejinian’s poetics of encounter, while contemplating ontological, epistemological and ethical implications of such a poetic. Chapter one argues that Lyn Hejinian has developed an epistemolexical poetry concerned principally with interactivity between knowing — a process of acknowledgement, rather than an arrival at “knowledge” — and matters of saying, or the language that is poetry’s treasured and difficult mechanism of inquiry. I propose similarities between philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s most recent model for community, a “being-in-common,” and Lyn Hejinian’s emphasis in her serial poems, especially *Happily* (2000), upon “being-in-context.” Chapter two considers one of Hejinian’s favourite tropes for her poetics of encounter: the guest/host relationship, whose vertical slash marks a dynamic moment of intersubjective facing in which the “preservation of otherness” (Hejinian) is paramount. Via philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s explorations of “neighbourhood,” I explore links between radical “objectivities” suggested by guest/host poetics, and work by Objectivist poet George Oppen, whose thinking significantly shapes Hejinian’s theories of context.

Chapter three gives a genealogical account of material community formations crucial to Hejinian’s poetic of encounters and with-ness, focussing on Hejinian’s particular writing and hosting of “Language writing.” Chapter four considers the status of epistles as “border texts,” and speculates upon kinds of friendships and communities that Hejinian’s letters provoke and sustain. I interpret Hejinian’s collaborative works as exteriorised and reciprocal instances of “being-with” and “being-in-common” (Nancy). My fifth and sixth chapters offer readings of two lengthy, serial works by Lyn Hejinian: *The Cell* (1992) and *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991). I examine formal methodologies and techniques that underwrite *The Cell* alongside Hejinian’s readings of Gertrude Stein’s poetics of description and perception. I then place Lyn Hejinian’s epistemolexical poetic into a material border between cultures, communities and cities, by examining Hejinian’s twenty year “trans-iterative” encounter with contemporary innovative Russian poetry, especially the work of Leningrad writer Arkadii Dragomoschenko.
"Constantly I Write This Happily" / Encountering Lyn Hejinian

CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ v
Prefatory Note ............................................................................................................... vi

Introduction
Encountering Lyn Hejinian: Extending Introductions ......................................................... 2

Bordering fields, fielding borders: community and difference ........................................... 5
Epistemolexical poetry and the spacing of appearances .................................................... 16
Compositions of the real .................................................................................................... 29
Living on record: a biographical portrait ....................................................................... 37

Chapter One
A Work of Acknowledgement, A Poetics of Happily .......................................................... 54

A poetics of encounter ...................................................................................................... 58
This is happening .............................................................................................................. 66
Along comes something — launched in context .............................................................. 77
Ethical forms: the shape of unknowing ........................................................................... 89

Chapter Two
The Face of a Neighbour: Objectivism and Guest/Host Relations .................................... 105

We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things .............................................. 108
Ambivalent seeing: George Oppen’s worldly sincerity .................................................... 119
The horizon, on which the guest will appear .................................................................... 136
Geophilosophies .............................................................................................................. 149

Chapter Three
Writing Language Writing: Hejinian’s “In”-Versions of Community ................................. 160

New noises in new American rhythms ............................................................................. 167
Language writing Language: some observations ............................................................ 175
Hejinian hosting communities: Tuumba Press and Poetics Journal ............................... 189
Chapter Four

Poetry as Co-appearance: Letters and Collaborations ........................................... 201
  A prepoetics of friendship .................................................................................. 204
  In co-respondence: reading Hejinian’s letter archives ..................................... 210
  Collaborations, or the quality of being “we” ..................................................... 222

Chapter Five

The Cell in Shifts, The Cell in Drifts ................................................................. 235
  Emerging from sentences: looking for The Cell .............................................. 235
  A compositional breakthrough .......................................................................... 250
  Assembling the relatives: “open” forms and bare devices .............................. 257
  Whole sequences of perception like / water sliding in the cold ..................... 275

Chapter Six

Strange Borders, Double Vision: Oxota as a Work of Trans-iteration ............. 285
  Beginnings and genres in motion ...................................................................... 289
  Phenomenal meetings: Lyn Hejinian and Arkadii Dragomoschenko ............... 298
  Images without corresponding objects .............................................................. 310
  Desiring strangeness ......................................................................................... 319

Conclusion

Lyn Hejinian’s Poetic of Encounters: Toward Commonality in Difference ....... 327

Coda

Thought’s Kilometre ......................................................................................... 334

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................... 340
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Prefatory Note

In 1986, American poet Lyn Hejinian sold her accumulated letters, drafts, journals and assorted private papers from the years 1975-1984 to the Mandeville Special Collections Library (Archive for New Poetry) at the University of California in San Diego. Over a decade later, Hejinian’s papers from 1985-1994 were added to the archive, along with publisher’s materials from Tuumba Press, the imprint that Hejinian established in 1976. Much of the primary material for this thesis was collated from the Lyn Hejinian Papers (MSS0074) at Mandeville during a visit to the archive that I made in July 1998. I use a referencing system that cites three locations: the collection number, a box number, and a folder number or title. The citation [74, 1, 8] thus represents the Lyn Hejinian Papers (MSS0074), Box 1, Folder 8. Specific dates are included where appropriate — in reference to correspondence, for example.

When I visited the Mandeville archives, Lyn Hejinian’s papers from the years 1985-1994 remained in an unprocessed state. They arrived at the library in February 1998 and have been catalogued subsequently. Papers from the formerly unprocessed collection are cited within my thesis according to the original folder titles that Lyn Hejinian used when arranging them for archival sale. For example, the citation [74, 11(U), “Drafts miscellaneous uncollected poems”] indicates an unprocessed, labelled folder of materials held in Box 11 of the Hejinian Papers. Where no “(U)” is present in a citation, materials belong to the processed collection. A distinction between “processed” and “unprocessed” Hejinian material is now redundant, but time and distance have prevented updates to my referencing system. Lyn Hejinian’s meticulous auto-archival practices prior to sale of her papers meant that the unprocessed Hejinian materials at Mandeville still were extremely well organised and easily navigable.

I looked briefly at the Susan Howe Papers (MSS0201), also held at Mandeville, to read correspondence between Lyn Hejinian and writer Susan Howe. I visited the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State University in August 1998 and watched many precious video taped readings, lectures, and performances dating from the years 1977 to 1994. Lyn Hejinian’s generosity at different stages of this project allowed me access to much valuable, unpublished material that is not included currently in the Mandeville Special Collections Library. During 1998 and 1999, Hejinian posted me drafts of several essays and poems that have been crucial to my research: “Reason,” “Forms in Alterity: On Translation,” “O’s Affirmation,” “Happily,” and “Some Notes toward a Poetics.” “O’s Affirmation” was later re-titled “The Numerous,” and remains unpublished, while the other texts have been published during the last two years. In August 1998 I spent an afternoon in discussion with Lyn Hejinian at her home in Berkeley, and refer often during my thesis to a transcript of that conversation.

I note these details partly to thank Lyn Hejinian for her kindness and encouragement, but also because they hover at a fascinating boundary. In December 2000 Lyn Hejinian published a major work entitled The Language of Inquiry that gathers together twenty important, poetic essays dating from the years 1976 to 1999.1 During my research I worked mostly from “original” versions of these Hejinian essays, collected from numerous journals, libraries, archives and independent publications.

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This required an element of detective work, as Hejinian puts it: "The detective turns a detail into a clue by heightening the particular."² For ease of location, however, I cite essays throughout as they appear in The Language of Inquiry, except where editorial changes have been made and are significant.

Publication of The Language of Inquiry by the University of California Press marks a considerable narrative juncture and bears witness to a transformation in Lyn Hejinian's poetic "status" that occurred during my research. Hejinian's poetical essays — excitingly and rightly — are now readily available, widely circulated, and endorsed by a substantial University Press. As a result, I feel curiously pleased to site this thesis on a transient border that looks forward to Lyn Hejinian's increasing international recognition as a serious thinker and poet of the twentieth century, and "back" to her relative obscurity during the 1980s and early 1990s as an innovative writer and artist.

I have preserved Lyn Hejinian's punctuation and typographic specificities when citing extracts from her letters and unpublished drafts. Although I maintain American spelling when citing from Hejinian's and other American texts, I use Australian-English spelling at all other times.

It's the beginning and end that are sorry messengers
And the bearer of writers' lies
About anything — the sun
An extraordinary body, hardly at rest before it pushes off
In the light keeping to its distant limits
Just here
In a tale very like a number ever to be divided, ever to be coming out
But never even
One day after another
Important things have occurred
Which immediately afterwards I forget
As if to alter their effects and write this differently
It causes me to wonder in a new way, from a new vantage point
That of forgetting
About memory and its function in the associative, interpretative linking
That constitutes what we consider making sense
Of experience ...

We find ourselves between

Encountering Lyn Hejinian: Extending Introductions

Introduction

Things being perceived produce my reasons. Obscure. A human too is a thing in itself, to itself. Hold this position for a part of a second then release the pressure quickly by removing the tongue from the gums deftly. As Gertrude Stein’s one-time mentor William James observed, this is where things happen. Reality, life experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows, surrounds it… It’s a space of appearance, a space of dilemma, parallelisms. One has to follow one’s parallelisms. There are an infinite number of sequences underway.

— Lyn Hejinian

“Making it new” was the modernist project
Contemporaneity has other concerns
Regarding the way time and things are bound

— Lyn Hejinian

“It’s the beginning and the end that are sorry messengers, and the bearer of writers’ lies about anything.” So begins the fifteenth book of Lyn Hejinian’s A Border Comedy, a long poem that contemplates issues of narrativity and knowledge, temporality and textual space, and the vexing notion of movable ethical borders. The poem, a kaleidoscopic series of sentences, scripted interludes, and thematic returns, was written between 7 June 1994 and 27 May 1997 and is arranged into fifteen discrete and numbered sections.

To begin we need a border. We need a momentary limit, a place or space from which to advance our navigations. In Hejinian’s syntactical terms we need a guard, or a point of contact, or a meeting of the x and y co-ordinates, that will provide momentary arrest to the disquieting runs of life slipping by. We need an area of intention that both

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2 Lyn Hejinian, A Border Comedy (New York: Granary, 2001) 35.
3 Hejinian, A Border Comedy 218.
precedes, and is affected by, our improvisations and inquiries; a reason for beginning, and a form in which to undertake our compositions. There are an infinite number of sequences underway at any given instant, exceeding our logic, surrounding and overflowing it, and these comprise our sense of reality. Reality, after all, is where things happen and all that is happening, in language and living.

Borders are points of encounter, sites of meeting and discovery and linkage. As each new text or idea or person or thing arrives within our field of perception, to be described and positioned by way of (critical) response, our borders will change. Each encounter will bring us face to face with different materials, shifting horizons of knowing, and a modified context. And for every contextual shift we will experience reciprocal changes in our sense of subjectivities and objectivities, and our ways of choosing how to be. Our understandings of our own ethical response-abilities consequently will be shaken, adjusted, and revivified.

A beginning is a “sorry messenger” if it bears a lie about finity and pretends to start from nothing or without history or out of sequence. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, that from which something begins. “Time and things are bound” in patterns of limitless occurrence, however, so that the most eventful beginnings occur as ends and middles, too. They simply offer a handshake and a swerve in the story — a threshold or border that already has been crossed before it has been named:

The sky is glossy, cupped  
And lemon-colored as the sea at night…
In my investigations  
The result of an intensification of the epistemological situation  
Which once drew adventure across borders  
And now draws borders across this

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7 Hejinian, A Border Comedy 199.
8 Hejinian, A Border Comedy 18.
9 Hejinian, A Border Comedy 35.
10 Hejinian, A Border Comedy 89.
Borders allow differentiation. In doing so, they guard against the stasis of sameness. Their working dynamic is relational and associative, rather than divisive. They are not sites of stillness, but moving links between things that happen. Borders are hyphens, traces of history, sure signs of connection and provisionality. They wanted each moment to stand on its own and yet to retain its affinities with all the rest.\(^{11}\)

Much of the vocabulary in the previous paragraphs is drawn directly from American poet Lyn Hejinian’s own poetical and philosophical syntax. During a period that nominally encompasses the years 1976 to 2002, Hejinian has produced a prolific array of written texts that develop an exquisitely detailed, highly methodical, inclusive, and materially sensate poetic. Hejinian’s poems and poetical essays calibrate poetry’s potential as an investigative and unequivocally philosophical medium. They inhabit a border zone between poetics and ethics, partly by exploring linkages between compositional choice and epistemological dilemma; between poetic forms, descriptive language, perceptual experience, and the reach of thought’s improvisation.

In beginning a thesis on the writings, thinking and life of Lyn Hejinian, it seems both inevitable and appropriate to follow Hejinian’s own methods and acknowledge the impossibility of such a beginning. Or perhaps we must admit the contingencies of beginning and embrace Hejinian’s assertions that “one has to follow one’s parallelisms,” and that “there are an infinite number of sequences underway,”\(^{12}\) and that “we find ourselves between.”\(^{13}\) The following text, of course, is a partial and wholly interested account of Lyn Hejinian’s life in writing. It plots one sequence of critical shifts through a countless series of borders, conscious of turns it might have taken. It occurs in dialogue with existing constellations of critical responses to Hejinian’s work, and admits its own investment in processes whereby “knowledges” are constructed, disciplinary borders established, and poetical “reputations” made. This is a tale very like a number ever to be divided, ever to be coming out, but never even — neither beginning nor ending.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{11}\) Hejinian, *A Border Comedy* 211.


\(^{13}\) Hejinian, *A Border Comedy* 199.

\(^{14}\) Hejinian, *A Border Comedy* 199.
Bordering fields, fielding borders: community and difference

This thesis responds to interplays between poetical, philosophical, epistolary, and communitarian texts and discourses in Lyn Hejinian’s assembled writings of the past twenty-five years. Tropes of “borders” and “boundaries” flourished in Hejinian’s writings during the 1990s, often to signal epistemological and linguistic engagement with spaces between: between genres, forms, locations, public and private discourses, languages, subjectivities, and modes of object-apprehension. Since the early 1980s, Hejinian has matched her major poetical works — often book-length serialised poems comprising numerous interlocking parts — with critical essays, many exploring links between writing poetry and developing a poetics. The two practices are mutually constitutive and reciprocally transformative, Hejinian argues, and address one another in cross-reflexive ways that imply specific philosophical interests:

I realize that I have tended to cast poetics into the role of articulating how and why a poet works, elaborating her reasoning and reasons. Poetics, in this respect, seems as much a philosophical realm as a literary one. But it is a pragmatic realm, nonetheless; the reasons and reasoning that motivate poet (and poem) are embedded in the world and in the language with which we bring it into view. The resulting praxis is addressed to phenomenological and epistemological concerns.  

These comments are made in the introduction to The Language of Inquiry, a collection of twenty critical essays written by Hejinian between March 1976 and February 1999 and published in December 2000. Hejinian’s observations imply a foundational locus for her creative work: an intriguing border-zone between poetry, poetics, and philosophy. More particularly, they suggest important links between description and perception, between poetic language and subjective worldly experience. “Poetry’s ability to contribute to the work of doing philosophy is intrinsic to its medium, language,” Hejinian observes. “Every phrase, every sentence, is an investigation of an idea.”

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16 Chapters three and four contain detailed discussion of The Language of Inquiry. The book of essays includes a long poem, “Happily,” as its final piece, emphasising Hejinian’s exploration of dialogues between poetry and poetics. Happily also has been published in chapbook form and unless otherwise stated, my citations are taken from that version. See Lyn Hejinian, Happily (Sausalito: Post Apollo Press, 2000).
What does Lyn Hejinian mean by "poetry’s ability to contribute to the work of doing philosophy?" How might language be an ever-present limit upon the condition of poetry's knowing, and a primary context in which epistemological and ontological discoveries occur? In making overt philosophical claims for her poetry, Hejinian is touching on dilemmas that seem timeless. Do language, thought, and materiality exist as independent or inter-dependent entities? What relations exist between phenomenal reality, our perceptions of phenomena, and our descriptions of perception? What makes poetry a fascinating medium for such inquiries, and how might a perceiving and describing subject help to constitute, in language, the "world" that she or he perceives? Hejinian's introduction to The Language of Inquiry includes these observations:

Poetry comes to know that things are. But this is not knowledge in the strictest sense; it is, rather, acknowledgment — and that constitutes a sort of unknowing. To know that things are is not to know what they are, and to know that without what is to know otherness (i.e., the unknown and perhaps unknowable). Poetry undertakes acknowledgment as a preservation of otherness — a notion that can be offered in a political, as well as an epistemological, context.

This acknowledging is a process, not a definitive act; it is an inquiry, a thinking on. And it is a process in and of language, whose most complex, swift, and subtle forms are to be found in poetry.¹⁸

My thesis investigates this crossroads of consciousness and poetic language. I explore Lyn Hejinian’s idea of poetry "as a sort of unknowing," and examine specific forms and compositional techniques that Hejinian has developed in order to "undertake acknowledgment as a preservation of otherness." I argue that Hejinian advances an epistemolexical poetry concerned, above all, with interactions between matters of knowing — a process of epistemic acknowledgement, rather than an arrival at "knowledge" — and matters of saying, or the language that is poetry’s treasured and difficult mechanism of inquiry. I focus on Hejinian’s poetic of encounters and phenomenal appearances, and discuss the significance of worldly "things" that provide an everyday context for her writing practice. Throughout my thesis I return to different formal and material expressions of the guest/host relationship, Hejinian's most recent and favoured trope for her poetics of encounter.¹⁹ Its vertical slash marks a dynamic

¹⁹ Discussion of the phrase "a poetics of encounter" to follow. On guest/host relationships see Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 235.
and mutually constitutive border, a moment of intersubjective facing and reciprocal ethical responsibility in which the "preservation of otherness" is paramount.

My thesis also re-imagines the leading significance of community within Lyn Hejinian's writing experiences and methods. I study philosophies of community and modes of epistemic and ontological reasoning that have developed within Hejinian's writings of the past two decades, and show how their primary context is a dialectics between singularity and plurality: between discrete (writerly) subjectivities and methods of thinking, and wider material communities that anchor Hejinian's literary adventures. I propose that Hejinian's poetry is understood best through a philosophical framework of commonality in difference, or an experience of with-ness in otherness. Such a state of community depends, in Hejinian's words, upon "an initial, essential recognition of difference — of strangeness."20 Hejinian writes: "Differences are essential. They are what we all have in common, namely that we never have everything in common with anyone else.... They keep things susceptible to events, they allow them to participate in what happens. Differences are evidence of incompleteness."21

Alongside her poetry and critical essays, Lyn Hejinian has generated an extraordinary volume of materials that writer Susan Howe might describe as submarginalia: letters, unpublished drafts, sketchings, journals, and taped readings — the "literary remains" or "threaded filaments" that are "too disorderly to qualify as poetry."22 Many of these are now archived in the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California in San Diego.23 What is formally fascinating about disorderly texts that fall outside the scope of poetry or poetics, or even philosophy, while occupying a "public" position within an accessible archive? Why has Hejinian written letters in the thousands, and to whom, and what have they provoked and sustained? Unpublished, publicly-private works that defy completion and generic classification have been essential to my research methods. Such texts enhance and extend Lyn Hejinian's

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23 "The Lyn Hejinian Papers," (MS0074), Mandeville Special Collections Library (Archive for New Poetry), University of California, San Diego.
concept of a poetics — an elaboration of “how and why a poet works, her reasons and reasoning” that is “embedded in the world and in the language with which we bring it into view.” Sub-marginal texts are provisional scripts that ask readers to scrutinise the boundaries of literary genre and the politics of category making. They are useful genealogical and cultural-historical indicators, due to their “insistence on recognizing and/or producing social contexts in and for poetry” — a description given by Hejinian of her primary poetical intentions.

Before outlining several major tendencies and methods that characterise Lyn Hejinian’s poetical project, I want to follow Hejinian’s directives by “recognising and/or producing social contexts” in and for this thesis. Critical work is always site-specific and provisional, kept afloat by twin buoys of accidental crossing and considered choice. I first encountered Hejinian’s poetry in 1995 when Hejinian made a brief reading tour of Australia. From an entirely green perspective — aware of very little of Hejinian’s poetic, cultural, or communitarian history — I listened to Hejinian read in a badly ventilated upstairs room of a small Sydney bookshop and was captivated by two things: the philosophical and linguistic density of her poetry, and the singular phrase “an inappropriate blue.” Hejinian’s torque of links between ideation and language, and the epically romantic qualities of “knowledge” that her poems embodied, were instantly compelling and immediately daunting. Several years later while imagining doctoral research topics and moving between houses, I uncovered a flyer from Hejinian’s earlier poetry reading and found myself returning to her work, still with equal measures of impulse and trepidation. I knew no more about American experimentalism or “Language poetry” than I had previously, but felt the excitement of working on a living subject; a poet whose methods, forms, and textual undertakings were evolving continually, and whose project was “incomplete” by definition.

These parameters exerted fascinating pressure upon my research methodologies while contributing to a sense of contemporaneity and urgency. I imagined “the subject” on a border between critical poetics and cultural geographies, and enjoyed notions of literature as a social “science.” I felt intellectually challenged by ideas of currency and

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innovation, and literary-critical distance that might be troubled by the ongoing nature of Hejinian’s *oeuvre*. Closure was impossible, intrinsically. The subject would change at least as swiftly as my critical comprehensions — which suggested a useful allegory for research methods in general. How did literary histories position and construct living authors, and vice versa? I saw, slowly, that Hejinian’s poetics of philosophical and descriptive inquiry would provoke valuable questions about poetry as a practice of everyday labour, anchored in worldly relations and spaces, and “actual” phenomenological contexts:

Unorganized octave ashes scattered in
the humid light
The unblinking ears are their
damp confidant
The poem is not natural,
unnaturally desired and saturated
The relentless obligation of seductive,
descriptive, and corrupting perceptions
Of some eternal, never-ending, everyday
task

I began my everyday task with sparse directives. Why does Lyn Hejinian write poetry? If “the poem is not natural,” what kind of construction is it? How do notions of contemporary innovation and site-specificity work to produce the “relentless obligation” of Hejinian’s poetic methods? Literary research is about the written construction of contexts. A lack of context that accompanied my earliest readings of Hejinian served usefully, in a sense, to guide later discoveries. It allowed me to complicate a vital relationship between Hejinian as a philosophical poet, with characteristic approaches and singular intentions; and Hejinian as a *Language poet*, whose writerly subjectivity and inquiries were bordered, to some extent, by literary-historical circumstances and group identifications.

Lyn Hejinian is placed frequently, in both critical and cultural discourses, within the “Language School” of poetic experimentalism that coalesced in several urban American locales during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a principal player in a San Franciscan scene of Language writing, Hejinian enjoys an ongoing, productive relation to orchestrations of community that have accompanied her self-identification

within that cell of poetic innovation. Social narratives, spatial habitations, and collaborative textualities generated at different moments within the oppositional milieu of "Language poetry" have been central to Hejinian's artistic project. Such observations need context, however. "Meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts," writes Hejinian, who has remained acutely aware throughout her career of a prolific range of subjective contexts for her writing. In poetry and in thinking about poetry, Hejinian regularly critiques the meaning of her situation within many discursive and material grids: as a non-mainstream and "experimental" American poet and intellectual of the late twentieth century; as a university-educated, white, heterosexual woman; as a "citizen" in a post-war, post-Hiroshima USA dominated for decades by Cold War and international protectionist rhetoric; as a distinguished scholar of the writings of Gertrude Stein; and as a person for whom participation in diverse poetical communities and friendships has been of utmost importance, beginning in the mid-1970s in San Francisco, Berkeley, and New York City, and continuing in Leningrad-St. Petersburg (USSR) during the 1980s.

Already I have used least three different nomens for the experimental writing community that often provides Lyn Hejinian's work with its chief critical notoriety. One of my key methodological intentions in this thesis is to disentangle Hejinian's poetical and philosophical project from narratives that relegate and interpret her work according to pre-established and manifesto-like lists of vocabularies, compositional techniques, intentions, and historical occurrences that often serve to delimit a particular grouping — Language poetry — within American poetics. Following Hejinian's scheme for poetry and poetics as reciprocal practices, I want to explore borders between community "practice" and community "theory," and to show how easy separations between the two are upset by Hejinian's hyper-invested relationship to community. Although certainly attracting her to Language scenes in the late 1970s, Hejinian's communitarian ethics and philosophies are not generated solely within force fields of "material" community. They exist, rather, in mutually contextualising relations with Hejinian's experiences of Language writing. Neither has prior value or significance.

Critical elisions continue to deny the specific differences and epistemological import of Lyn Hejinian’s poetic. It is extremely common for Hejinian to be read first as a Language poet and second as anything else — a dilemma calling attention to the difficult join between theory and praxis. Do Hejinian’s poems and critical essays perform extant theories of community; or are those “theories” developed in a crucible of writing practice? Equally, are Hejinian’s poems theoretically attuned responses to material experiences of community; or material products of communitarian ethics that facilitate Hejinian’s thinking of and in community? Each observation is relevant, and their juxtaposition here tries to make a problem of separations and category assumptions, in favour of equilibria of differences that move beyond binary distinctions. Perhaps the terms theory and practice are not in-different, rather than merely different, to one another, as Hejinian suggests: “Neither in practice nor in theory is thinking separate nor separating; it is precisely the opposite, a mode of non-separation, of conjunction.”\textsuperscript{28} It is possible then, even desirable, to think about a practice of theory and a theory of practice. Hejinian has her own ways of “doing,” thinking about, constructing, and theorising the importance of community, in philosophical and material terms that are more sinuous than either/or renditions of literary history.

Hejinian’s recent collection of critical essays, \textit{The Language of Inquiry}, has fascinating status in this regard. At different times within my discussions, I give equal regard to Hejinian’s poetry and poetical essays, navigating the fit between these textual types. This could be interpreted as a capitulation to Hejinian’s specific “agenda” — as though a handbook of poetics were being held as a mirror to books of poetry, in a selective conversation where metaphoric equivalence (\textit{this = this}) is the sole purpose and outcome of the dialogue. My methods, however, have different intentions and contexts. Hejinian writes:

Theory, as I understand it, is always everywhere mutable. It is the interminable process by which we are engaged with the changing world around us and made ready for the changes it requires from us.... Theorizing is, in fact, the very opposite of theorem-stating. It is a manner of vulnerable, inquisitive, worldly living, and it is one very closely bound to the poetical process.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} Lyn Hejinian, Preface to “A Common Sense,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 356.

\textsuperscript{29} Lyn Hejinian, Preface to “Reason,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 338.
Or more succinctly: "The thinking about practice is also the practice." Hejinian attributes corresponding reciprocity of invention to the interfaces between theory and practice, and poetics and poetry. Theory is a manner of worldly living. In deconstructing likewise the term poetics, Hejinian is asking what poetics is, but also, what it does. We can, of course, read Lyn Hejinian's poetry without reference to her critical essays and inquiries; but we would be missing an important cog of her creative practice, "one very closely bound to the poetical process."

Hejinian's essays are compelling in another sense, involving knotty issues of "mainstream" recognition and pedagogical validation. Fewer than ten critical articles about Hejinian's work are listed in the current (US-based) Modern Language Association database, a significant tool of literary research and information gathering. Though obviously a limited cultural and practical indicator, the MLA standard gives some sense of Hejinian's present "marginality" in relation to literary and poetical studies within university institutions; an issue that I explore in greater depth in chapter three. Much critical work on Hejinian flourishes in less "canonical" regions — including myriad electronic publications and unpublished scholarly projects. Library catalogues, however, point to a second salient feature of Hejinian studies. Nearly all published critical material on Lyn Hejinian focuses on her most celebrated and potentially least innovatively "taxing" work, My Life; a serial prose poem that performs adroit skews of autobiographical practices and literary self-construction. In this thesis I have chosen not to focus upon My Life, in favour of less-examined works including Oxota: A Short Russian Novel (1991), The Cell (1992) and Happily (2000), as well as numerous "sub-marginal" texts from the Hejinian archives at the Mandeville Special Collections Library. The critical centrality of My Life, however, suggests useful points of departure.

32 Lyn Hejinian, Oxota: A Short Russian Novel (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: The Figures, 1991); also Hejinian, The Cell, and Hejinian, Happily, full citations given earlier.
First published in 1980, *My Life* remained Hejinian’s most substantial “book-length” work until publication, several months apart in 1991 and 1992, of *Oxota* and *The Cell*. These were followed in 1994 by a collected volume, *The Cold of Poetry*. During the 1980s, much of Hejinian’s poetry stayed “uncommodified” in a conventional sense — available only in very limited chapbook form or as extracts in journals. Publication in 1987 of an updated, lengthier version of *My Life* consolidated its status as an exemplar of Hejinian’s poetic methods. To some extent the poem still holds critical precedence, and this is partly a function of temporal placement. In a broader context of Language practice, however, *My Life* plays another, different role. Hejinian at times has been cast as the “approachable” or “readable” figure of Language poetry; a characterisation with gendered connotations, where “sociability” is read problematically as a trope for femininity and “accessibility.” Recognisable paradigms of prosodic invention and narrative ordering — 37 poems of 37 sentences each, corresponding to 37 years of Hejinian’s life — have encouraged readings that, in a sense, make *My Life* a near-synecdoche for “accessible” Language writing. With considerable irony, critic and poet Lisa Samuels describes the poem as a “clear-minded... marvel of comprehension” and observes: “[*My Life*] remains the one most understandable work of hers which is readily available. How interesting that it is the one the academy most attends.”

Another concern is perhaps more subtle. *My Life* is read often as a study of the deconstructed lyrical “subject” or “self” — whereby Hejinian’s plays with embodiment, innovation, and autobiography are construed as outstanding (and relatively safe) excursions into *feminine* and *feminist* poetical topoi. Troublesome and reductive generalities come to mind: notions for example that “experimentation” by women writers signifies, as its primary and necessary function, a disruption of notions

35 In chapter five I discuss the different versions of *My Life* and their formal significance, including Hejinian’s decision to problematise static notions of “autobiography” by continually updating the poem.
37 Samuels, “Eight Justifications,” 2.
of gendered "selfhood." Clair Wills offers a strategic counter to such readings: "I am not arguing that the female subject remains a hidden 'body' — a person — beneath the discourses which traverse Hejinian's texts, lending them coherence. My Life is not a representational text in this way." Although such arguments might usefully be examined here, I want rather to explore them at various points across my thesis, in context of specific ideas of subjective mobility. The Language of Inquiry suggests a different project for Lyn Hejinian's poetry, no less focussed upon important gendered subjectivities and knowledges, as Hejinian's incisive essay "La Faustienne" suggests, but claiming catholic ground that has been hard-fought for many women thinkers:

I'd be faking if I said I was a philosopher but I will be candid and say I would love to be. And I think that there's something that poetry, poetic strategies can bring to the writing of criticism, theory, essays and even philosophy, which allows for interpretation, and the discovery and even invention — and I think there's a high degree of invention in really good critical theory, really good essays — the invention, discovery, of linkages between things.

Critical readings of Hejinian's project are beginning to address these desires and textual inventions in serious and exciting terms. My thesis begins, in a sense, by acknowledging Hejinian's increasing self-identification as a poet whose primary interests are epistemological, ontological, critical, and phenomenological.

Several writers and critics have examined rich connections between form and philosophy in Hejinian's poetry; and more explicitly, between subjectivity, perception, and poetical ethics. Rosmarie Waldrop argued at a comparatively early juncture that Hejinian's metonymic uses of descriptive language gave "the perception of natural phenomena... an analytical bent." Charles Altieri investigates the development of radical forms of "sincerity" in Lyn Hejinian's poetry, expressly aligning Hejinian's

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work with formal and ethical methods of the American Objectivist poets. As chapter two illustrates, the writings of Objectivist poet George Oppen have been a pre-eminent influence upon Hejinian’s thinking in the past decade. Marjorie Perloff charges readers to explore the “Wittgensteinian locutions” of Hejinian’s work, and to appreciate the philosophical force of “the peculiar conjunction of abstraction and concrete image” animating Hejinian’s writing. Peter Nicholls suggests that Hejinian has evolved a “phenomenal poetics” and proposes that “any future readings of [Hejinian’s] work which give serious consideration to her stated intentions will have to situate themselves somewhere on the ‘border’ between ethics and aesthetics.”

These appraisals of philosophical and ethical singularity are among the most challenging critical responses to Lyn Hejinian’s poetry. Although transformation during the 1990s of Language writing into a highly-invested and “proper” field of academic study has been fascinating, this thesis limits its commentary on evolving histories and genealogies of the American Language School. Those stories, however, always inform and inflect my readings. To provide important contexts for Hejinian’s fascination with communitarian ethics and philosophies, chapter three gives an account of “the writing of Language writing” that traverses geo-historical events, poetic formations, cultural necessities, and theoretical engagements crucial to the advent of Language poetry in the late 1970s. At other times in my thesis, I read Hejinian “through” the critical texts and discourses of several Language colleagues who, during the 1980s and 1990s, offered some of the most cogent material responses to Hejinian’s poetry, in context of their own situationally-aligned experimentalisms. My thesis takes, as its principal navigational lights, Lyn Hejinian’s exacting reading methodologies and intellectual declarations; in particular, her many astute observations about the ethicality of poetical knowing in the face of otherness and commonality.

Epistemolexical poetry and the spacing of appearances

I return now to key philosophies and methods that might be said, non-exhaustively, to characterise Lyn Hejinian’s poetical project. I will focus on two things: Hejinian’s poetics of perceptual description and epistemic “openness,” and her understanding of worldliness and present reality as states of intrinsic commonality and difference. Poetical writing, asserts Hejinian, is a “primary thinking process” in which discoveries might be made and encounters provoked and experienced.\(^{45}\) It does not occur post factum to living, as a secondary “writing-up” of material actualities or a transparent and unmediated mode of expression. In responding to a world of phenomenal happenings, poetic language must remain aware, in Hejinian’s view, of its own constructive capacities, and its ability to generate and explore the movable limits of meaning. “Writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them,” Hejinian has famously written.\(^{46}\) Poetry applies pressure to relations between language and perception, and becomes itself a site of experience, a means of recognising or discovering cognition. Descriptive processes are the principal zones of meeting for these interrelated threads. For Hejinian, attempting to live “always in a condition of writing” has provided, among other things, a way of troubling over thorny and generative relations that exist between thought and language.\(^{47}\)

Marjorie Perloff suggests that Lyn Hejinian’s poetical inquiries belong to a theoretically inflected moment, originating in the 1970s, in which American poetry effectively began to experiment with key propositions made by early twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein — including a statement from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”\(^{48}\) Hejinian has approached this conundrum from a characteristically liminal position, aware that limits are provisional and always mobile. Rather than asking whether worldly “knowledge” is bound intrinsically to its languages of discovery, Hejinian


\(^{46}\) Hejinian, “Rejection of Closure,” *Language of Inquiry* 51. Chapter three investigates the near-canonical status of this essay.

\(^{47}\) Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 15 December 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].

takes a border position, testing relations between "reality" and poetic language that are mutually constitutive and open-ended, and working the gaps between signifying processes and signified "things." To that degree, as chapter five argues. Hejinian’s work is determinedly post-Saussurean.49 "Words are not equal to the world," writes Hejinian. "A blur of displacement, a type of parallax, exists in the relation between things (events, ideas, objects) and the words for them — a displacement producing a gap."50 Concomitantly, knowledge, which embodies a problem of description, can never resist the shake produced by the essential "restlessness"51 of language, its capacities for both perpetually deferring closure and attracting at any instant a prolific array of meanings.

"Knowledge," advises Lyn Hejinian, "like speaking or writing, is not an entity but a function — it would best be called ‘knowing’ — and the purpose of that function is to contextualize."52 Knowing implies process rather than arrival; not the closures of an exit-from, but an entry-into modes of acknowledgement. "Poetry comes to know that things are," Hejinian writes. "But this is not knowledge in the strictest sense; it is, rather, acknowledgment — and that constitutes a sort of unknowing."53 Knowing is a transaction between perceiving subject, worldly phenomena, and descriptive modes:

It is not knowledge per se that is to be learned, but rather the world, and the method for achieving this learning is a descriptive method, one in which the observing senses [i.e. perceptions] are fundamentally aided by language.54

Taking cues from "language" as a system that produces meanings out of slippage, difference, and contextual relation, Hejinian’s descriptive method maximises a sense of openness and future chance.55 From the apparently illimitable restiveness of language and its teeming array of contexts, philosophy might learn contingency, and

49 Hejinian develops Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist linguistic models in her readings of work by Gertrude Stein. See for example Lyn Hejinian, "Grammar and Landscape" in "Two Stein Talks," Language of Inquiry 116-118. Chapter five makes detailed analyses of these crossings.
51 Hejinian discusses the "restless" and referential properties of language in "The Rejection of Closure," Language of Inquiry 49-52.
52 Lyn Hejinian, "The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem," Language of Inquiry 223.
begin to move against resolution or "mastery" of explication. "Knowledge, in other words, is transitive," writes Hejinian. "It is also transient, though recurring, in situ, in experience."56 Poetry can keep the borders between thought and language in agitated dialogue, and might contribute thus to a revision of philosophical terms and teleologies.

Perhaps Hejinian is answering another of Wittgenstein’s aphorisms, also cited by Perloff: "Philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry."57 "Presumably the converse would be equally valid," suggests Perloff. "Poetry ought really to be written only as a form of philosophy." (184) Lyn Hejinian's claims for the reciprocal inventiveness of poetry and critical thinking certainly corroborate this observation. Her poems shift between describing perceptions of matter, and perceiving the describing of perceptions of matter:

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Exploration takes extra words
Words qua sentience and thinking
These are spread over a
position—being long and pointed
over
They anticipate an immoderate time
and place
Reality moves around making objects
appear as if they belong
where they are
Then it shifts, say, up
and down, with the sunlight's
yellow interstitial coloring matter58
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"It's description that in part is looking at something intensely, making some kind of radical observation, and in part letting the language that emerges from that take me to some perception or sense of the object," comments Hejinian. "It's like an interplay between perception, object of perception and the language that's transacting that, the zone between."59 Hejinian's poetry keeps a language of epistemology elastic. Or rather, it moves "knowledge" from one local boundary to another, and asks it to reassess its terms, assumptions, and chosen finitudes at every juncture.

56 Hejinian, "Quest for Knowledge," Language of Inquiry 226.
57 Perloff, Wittgenstein's Ladder 183-184.
Although wary of classificatory generalisations, I have coined an expression that keeps the linguistic and epistemic aspects of Hejinian’s poetry in equilibrium. We might think of Lyn Hejinian’s poetical inquiries as epistemolexical: epistemological, in their engagement with matters of thought and knowledge; and lexical, if we understand that term to embody close attention to the non-neutral and constructive capacities of (descriptive) language. At several points in my argument, I use the term “epistemolexical” as a tool to signify this constant and productive vacillation between knowing and the inscriptions that we make in order to know. Epistemolexical poetry “takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience,” to cite Hejinian. It is poetry “in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of perceiving.”

In other words, epistemolexical poetry will continually perform and rework, in language, the phenomenal border between perception and description. The border status of the term epistemolexical is crucial. Borders imply an unsolvable dialogue between mutability and linkage, or uncertainty and connection. While borders give “things” transitory presence as separate entities, their logic also implies a possibly fleeting moment of shared contextualisation or inter-dependence.

“I espouse a poetics of affirmation,” Hejinian wrote in 1999. “I also espouse a poetics of uncertainty, of doubt, difficulty and strangeness. Such a poetics is inevitably contradictory, dispersive, and incoherent while sustaining an ethos of linkage. It exhibits disconnection while hoping to accomplish reconnection.” She continues:

Aesthetic discovery can be congruent with social discovery. Aesthetic discovery occurs through encounters, at points of contact, and so too does political and ethical discovery. (235)

For Lyn Hejinian, “aesthetic, political, and ethical” discoveries are a condition of being in the world, an essential experience of worldliness. Hejinian uses the term “worldly” to describe a person’s conscious experiences of phenomenal reality: “[I]n my opinion, there is nothing else to think about. The term ‘reality’ embraces everything; reality is all there is.” Worldliness is an embodiment of being as such, a person’s experience of “all there is,” or the dense, sweet, and sometimes-ambivalent fact of living. Hejinian believes that life is strange, often difficult, and contradictory,

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while simultaneously being inquisitive, rare, and "sustaining an ethos of linkage." Consciousness might be observed to follow the same discontinuous-continuous patterning and trajectory — "sometimes radically, abruptly, and disconcertingly so." A worldly poetics, Hejinian suggests, will thus inevitably "exhibit disconnection while hoping to accomplish reconnection." It will scrutinise changing points of interface between a perceiver’s subjectivity and "all there is" to perceive.

A person's worldly encounters require response, Hejinian argues. Or rather, responding to one’s perceptions of phenomenal occurrences — things, ideas, language, events, objects, and other people — is a method of "social discovery" with ethical dimensions. "[W]orldliness is an essential feature of ethics," Hejinian states. "And, since the term poetics names not just a theory of techniques but also attentiveness to the political and ethical dimensions of language, worldliness is essential to a poetics." For Hejinian, response to a "real" world of phenomenal occurrences is a form of acknowledgement, and the language of poetry is one place in which modes of acknowledging can take place and form:

Language grants (acknowledges, affirms) and shows (or brings into the space of appearance) what it grants; each utterance is a saying of the phrase "this is happening."

As it greets and notices a world of phenomenal happenings, a poetry of "acknowledgement" will discover and navigate its own responsibilities, choices, and descriptive borders; or in Hejinian’s terms, its own sociable, aesthetic, political and ethical horizons — what it comes to know. The process is both affirmative and improvisational. It is certainly uncertain.

Poetry can observe the referential border embodied in the words "this is happening" as it changes from moment-to-moment to offer a perceiving subject new predicaments of thought and response. In this, it can attempt to fathom and describe the materials and ethics of being as they change between contexts. Acknowledgement is an experiential state marked by connection and dispersal. It is grounded in a sense of spatialised

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63 Lyn Hejinian, "Language and Realism" in "Two Stein Talks," Language of Inquiry 103.
64 Hejinian, Preface to "Who Is Speaking?," Language of Inquiry 31.
65 Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 238.
66 This is a development of Hejinian's argument in "Reason," Language of Inquiry 347.
temporality, or being with-and-in time. "Improvisation consists of taking chances, i.e., entering the moment in relation to it — it's about getting in time, being with it," writes Hejinian in "Continuing Against Closure."67 When we "get in time" with things that are happening — an ongoing flow of events, people, objects, and ideas — we are "being with" them, in a relation of reciprocal context:

To enter a moment in relation to it, one has to enter it with something. One is having a time with something — something one is in time with. That something is something that has come to be, it has occurred. Improvisation begins at the moment when something has just happened, which is to say, it doesn't begin at the beginning.68

In Hejinian's view, a worldly poetic will describe things as they enter into states of mutual appearance, or being with. This process is both haphazard and continuous. When things coincide, they momentarily become one another's context for being, and arrive thus into a kind of spatio-temporal commonality. For each new encounter or happening, a new relation of mutual contextualisation occurs.69 These moments of common interaction and occurrence are key departure points for Hejinian's poetic. She observes in Happily: "Perhaps it is the role of art to put us in complicity with things as they happen."70

Lyn Hejinian often uses the phrase "a space of appearance" when describing events of mutual contextualisation — encounters — that comprise a subject's sense of worldliness. The phrase recurs in many of Hejinian's major texts from the 1990s, including the poems Happily and A Border Comedy and the essays "A Common Sense" and "Continuing Against Closure."71 "The space of appearance" is a foundation concept of modernist American philosopher Hannah Arendt, and is used by Hejinian to mean a sphere of public action (or publication) in which people appear to one another and interact as distinct persons and subjects. Arendt writes:

Without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own

67 Hejinian, "Continuing Against Closure," 2; my emphasis.
68 Hejinian, "Continuing Against Closure," 2.
70 Hejinian, Happily 13.

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identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt. ... The only character of the world by which to gauge its reality is its being common to us all.\(^2\)

Describing the space of appearance as “a public realm,” Arendt argues that “the human sense of reality demands that [people] actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively.” (208) Arendt’s concept of actualisation, or being in a state of “full existence,” has a primarily communitarian imperative. At all times, “reality” is what can be shared with other beings beyond the “passive givenness” of one’s being in isolation. Reality is a spacing of the appearance of community. We might say that Arendt’s rhetoric of appearances “resides and comes to pass” (208) in an inter-subjective zone. By Arendt’s estimation, reality can only appear beyond the singular of individuated subjectivity.\(^3\)

Hejinian makes frequent use of Arendt’s “space of appearance” to complement and augment her own concept of a dynamic alliance between poetry and worldly actualities. Poetry is a space of appearance, Hejinian argues, a way of appearing to others while responding to phenomena as they appear to unfold.\(^4\) Poetry can “make articulate and call into full existence” what would otherwise be experienced in seclusion.\(^5\) Within the shifting limits of subjective mobility, poetry can validate “the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity” while also giving appearance to what Arendt describes as a “surrounding world” (208), an assemblage of contexts, events, things, and people. Hejinian quotes Russian novelist Leo Tolstoi: “If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life had never been.”\(^6\) Poetry is a response to conscious life and to one’s consciousness of that consciousness; and more importantly, it can allow that consciousness to be shared as common reality. It might thus enable the constitution of communities.

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\(^3\) My syntax here comes from the title of a work called Being Singular Plural by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, an important text that I discuss in a moment. See Jean-Luc Nancy, Being Singular Plural, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2000).

\(^4\) Cited from the title of a work by San Franciscan innovative poet Leslie Scalapino, How Phenomena Appear To Unfold (Elmwood, Connecticut: Potes & Poets, 1989). Chapter four details Hejinian’s collaborative work with Scalapino during the 1990s.

\(^5\) Arendt, Human Condition 208.

\(^6\) Leo Tolstoi, cited from Viktor Shklovsky in Hejinian, “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 241.
While it would be tempting to buttress Hannah Arendt’s thinking between the almost out-sized polarities of “individual” and “collectivist” discourse, it is important to appreciate the middling mobility of her philosophies of community and to emphasise, in Hejinian’s words, the “shifts and displacements” that occur within such epistemic and ontological boundaries.77 Hannah Arendt’s “space of appearance” notably emphasises spatialised time and mutual placement, rather than non-contextualised temporal equivalence. A subject might arrive within another subject’s field of regard, for example, at a time subsequent to its inception. Its encounter with a person’s attention, however — its “getting in time” with another being, or its appearing to them — is what ultimately affirms its character of reality. While Hannah Arendt does not specifically address the status of “objects” or non-human “subjects” within her theories of community, Lyn Hejinian includes “things” in general within her interpretation of the “space of appearance,” a very important inclusion that I discuss in chapter two.

My second and sixth chapters argue that Hejinian’s sense of phenomenal reality is essentially a problem of perceiving subjectivities. Between an observer and the things that constitute that person’s experience of reality, distances are not necessarily stable — a relation complicated by language. As I shall explain shortly, Hejinian’s “poetics of encounter” stresses interactivity between consciousness and experience, or between perceiving subjects and perceived things. This lends contingency both to perceived “reality,” constituted always as a mobile function of subjective perception, and to “subjectivity,” re-contextualised for every new meeting with perceived things and events. By scrutinising likewise the subjective construction of “objectivities,” and especially the links between object-apprehension and language, we might reassess the border between object and subject as a primary trope of “knowing” and experience. We might thus move toward spatialised and contextualised experiences of knowing that do not limit “difference” to a singular location between the constructed and opposing poles of self and other, or subject and object.

Hejinian figures the many different borders between perceiving subjects and perceived worlds as loci of commonality and strangeness. As Arendt suggests, natality — a state

of beginning — is something that all people and things have in common. It is an essential condition of thing-ness that begins, over and over, in worldly encounters. The moment of phenomenal interface between subjects, however, or between a subject and a world of things, is also a primary site of difference and differentiation, of otherness and separation. Hejinian suggests that our experiences of commonality with others are simultaneously our experiences of manifold differences from others:

Reality is that which is, or can be, shared with other human beings, and it is to be found in spaces of appearance, places where things happen, where things do their thinging. It is in this context that, though still arguing my case against closure, I can speak in favour of the border, which I would characterize not as a circumscribing margin but as the middle — the intermediary, even interstitial zone that lies... between any one thing and another.

Within spaces of appearance, a border exists between any thing and another — a relation of difference and linkage that accompanies every encounter. As Hejinian implies, the “present” is an intermediary zone characterised by necessary mobility and commonality in difference. It is a place where subjectivities and objectivities are actively met, constituted, and altered, and its “rejection of closure” is ongoing and essential.

These discussions invoke the work of two thinkers who will be cited extensively in the first two chapters of my thesis: contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, whose arguments offer exciting and challenging revisions of communitarian philosophies; and American Objectivist poet George Oppen, whose poetry and reading methodologies became hugely important to Lyn Hejinian in the 1990s. Oppen devoted much time during the 1960s and 1970s to the study of appearances, sites of encounter between a perceiving subject and an “actual world.” He was influenced by philosopher Martin Heidegger’s theories of Dasein, or being-there — the conscious experience of “being in the world” and facing the dilemma of one’s impermanence, and the precipitous subjectivity of experience. “Existence one encounters as the existence of

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79 Hejinian, “Continuing Against Closure,” 3; my emphasis.
objects. Yet it is difficult to say that an object exists.... And yet surely there is ‘isness,’” wrote Oppen in a letter.82 He later reflected: “I think there is no light in the world but the world. And I think there is light. My happiness is the knowledge of all we do not know.”83

Lyn Hejinian read extensively from Oppen’s work during the 1990s, a process culminating in detailed written examinations of Oppen’s serial poem “Of Being Numerous.”84 Many of Hejinian’s key philosophical inquiries of the past decade occur in direct, posthumous dialogue with George Oppen’s ethical and phenomenological poetics, as my second chapter demonstrates. In particular, Hejinian develops Oppen’s notions about encounters between subjects and objects, and between subjects, that simultaneously suggest a moment of community and difference:

The individual encounters the world, and by that encounter with something which he recognises as being outside himself, he becomes aware of himself as an individual, a part of reality. In that same intuition, he registers the existence of what is not himself, what is totally independent of him.85

This is an ethical predicament — a worldly theatre of subjectivity and object-apprehension that Hejinian interprets in a slightly different fashion:

Every encounter produces, even if for only the flash of an instant, a xenia — the occurrence of co-existence which is also an occurrence of strangeness, or foreignness. It is a strange occurrence that, nonetheless, happens constantly; we have no other experience of living than through encounters. We have no other use for language than to have them.86

From 1994 onwards, a syntax of “encounter” began to recur and develop in Lyn Hejinian’s writing, beginning perhaps with this description of “the boundary” in A

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82 Oppen, Selected Letters 89.
83 Oppen, Selected Letters 352.
85 Oppen, Selected Letters 91-92.
86 Lyn Hejinian, “Barbarism,” Language of Inquiry 326. This passage also appeared several years later in “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 235-236.
Border Comedy: "The void in which one changes at a moment of encounter." My first and second chapters explore a fruitful meeting between Hejinian’s long-term fascination with encounters and borders, and a phrase by critic Peter Nicholls that occurs happily in a recent appraisal of George Oppen’s writings: a poetics of encounter. Nicholls writes: “A poetics of ‘encounter’ will assume that the domain of the ethical is also the domain of the ordinary and the everyday, of relationships expressing proximity rather than contemplative or legislative distance." Reading Oppen’s work for its ethical potential, and contrasting it to more sententious American poetries of the modernist period, Nicholls suggests that a poetry based “on acknowledgement rather than reification” might be able to “sustain the relationship between things [and] the relationship between people” rather than advancing, via economies of proprietorial representation, authoritarian epistemologies and languages. (160) Lyn Hejinian’s love of borders manifests her own sincere hope for poetries that might offer, in Nicholls’s words, “a way of acknowledging the world and others without seeking to reduce them to objects of knowledge.”

Hejinian cites Nicholls in “Reason,” an essay that upsets a cornerstone of Western epistemology by positing, as the ethical impetus for Hejinian’s poetic, a contextually attuned and non-prescriptive reason. After Arendt, Hejinian proposes a boundless “community of reason” founded upon affirmation of (phenomenal) differences, beyond the statically bordered objectification that accompanies certain “narratives of knowledge.” This community of differences, or spacing of appearances, is dependent upon encounters. Hejinian emphasises co-existence in her poetics of encounter, a term that corresponds with Nicholls’s “relationships expressing proximity.” Like Nicholls, Hejinian attributes dailiness and ordinariness to encounters:

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87 Hejinian, A Border Comedy 18.
It is a strange occurrence that, nonetheless, happens constantly; we have no other experience of living than through encounters.93

In a sense my whole thesis is an investigation of compositional methods that have given shape, over a quarter of a century, to Lyn Hejinian’s *poetics of encounter*. It is also an inquiry into epistemic, ontological, and communitarian implications of such a poetic. What does it mean to “have no other use for language than to have encounters”? Why is this an ethical issue? What links exist between ethical engagement and Hejinian’s serialised poetic forms? And how might we read Hejinian’s continual emphasis upon worldly acknowledgement — in her poems, poetical essays, and within the submarginalia of her letter-writing and auto-archival practices?

The communitarian philosophies of Jean-Luc Nancy are illuminating in context of Hejinian’s recent thinking about worldly encounters. They are highly relevant, also, to Hejinian’s interpretations of her own placement within various material and conceptual communities. In *Being Singular Plural*, a work that I cite frequently, Nancy observes:

Nothing and nobody can be born without being born to and with others who come into this encounter, who are born in their own turn.... Co-appearance, then, must signify — because this is what is now at stake — that “appearing” (coming into the world and being in the world, or existence as such) is strictly inseparable, indiscernible from the *cum* or the *with*, which is not only its place, but also — and this is the same thing — its fundamental ontological structure. That Being is *being-with*, absolutely, this is what we must think.94

Jean-Luc Nancy’s ideas of “co-appearance” and “being-with” bear excellent and obvious similarities to Lyn Hejinian’s concept of a “shared context” or “community of reason” existing between worldly beings.95 “Being in common” is an intrinsic condition of existence, Nancy argues.96 Ontological appearance is indiscernible from with-ness. In other words, intrinsic differences of human “subjectivity” take place in

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93 Hejinian, “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 236.
and as a condition of withness. Nancy's foundational thesis of being-in-common also echoes Hannah Arendt's descriptions of the space of appearance as "a mode of being together," and her proposal that "the only character of the world by which to gauge its reality is its being common to us all."  

Although Lyn Hejinian has not made detailed studies of Jean-Luc Nancy's communitarian philosophies, she refers in "Reason" (1998) to "characteristics of what is being explored under the rubric of 'community' in recent books by Jean-Luc Nancy (in The Inoperative Community), Giorgio Agamben (in The Coming Community), and Jean-François Lyotard (in The Differend), among others." While "Reason" does not make close readings of these works of thought, Hejinian signals clearly, both in that essay and contemporaneous poems, her intense interest in ethical issues and social models that they engage and propose. Using "Reason" as a citation guide, my first chapter explores notable and direct responses to Lyotard's The Differend that occur in Hejinian's long poem Happily, while proposing a parallel between Hejinian's serial poetic of encounters and Nancy's concept of being-with. I investigate correspondences between Nancy's "being-in-common," a state of withness predicated upon shared differences, and Hejinian's formal and thematic emphasis in Happily upon being-in-context. These arguments are critical to my thesis as a whole. Following Jean-Luc Nancy's proposals, and in the specific context of Lyn Hejinian's many explorations of community, I am interested in ways in which community — being in common in difference — might be understood as an arrangement of local occurrences and "betweens," rather than a quiescent entity. Equally importantly, I am looking for ways in which these arrangements might be implied, constructed, tested and inhabited in poetry.

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97 Arendt, Human Condition 208.
99 Lyn Hejinian includes Jean-François Lyotard's The Differend and Giorgio Agamben's works Stanzas and Infancy & History in her list of Sources for A Border Comedy, which was completed several months before she began writing Happily. See Hejinian, A Border Comedy 215. Chapter one makes further discussion of these crossings.
Compositions of the real

Several critics have observed parallels between the most lauded poetical technique of twentieth century modernist writer Gertrude Stein — "beginning again and again" within shimmering matrices of everyday language in order to create, in Stein's words, "a continuous present" — and Lyn Hejinian's engagement, via lengthy, sentence-oriented poetic forms, with the ongoing (or continuous) nature of everyday reality.\(^\text{101}\) The most succinct of these appraisals have come from Hejinian herself. Hejinian has been recognised increasingly, especially during the past decade, as a pre-eminent American scholar and contemporary advocate of the writings of Gertrude Stein.\(^\text{102}\) Adapting certain Steinian imperatives within her own poetical oeuvre, Hejinian has explored conjunctions between composition, consciousness, and "presentness" as it begins again with each new context, or for every different perceptual encounter occurring in poetry.

Thinking about the present illuminates Lyn Hejinian's interest in something she described during the late 1970s as "American literary realism."\(^\text{103}\) In 1981 Hejinian gave several lectures on literary realism during a week's residency at a San Francisco gallery.\(^\text{104}\) Over the previous two years, she had collected responses from various poet friends to a series of questions concerning the placement, if anywhere, of "realism" within their work. During that period she also read dozens of texts that applied broadly to "American realism," including material by Gertrude Stein.\(^\text{105}\) In a letter to her mother Carolyn Andrews, dated 2 February 1981, Lyn Hejinian explained her vision for the lecture series:


\(^{103}\) Lyn Hejinian, unpublished draft notes on "American Literary Realism," Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 11(U), "American Literary Realism 1981 talk at New Langton"]).

\(^{104}\) Hejinian, Preface to "Two Stein Talks," Language of Inquiry 84.

\(^{105}\) See for example Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 2 February 1981, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1. 13]; Lyn Hejinian, letter to Bruce Andrews dated 22 August 1979, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1. 5].
I think I want to argue that at some point the novel falls off its central position and certain areas of poetry (like WCW[illiams]'s Paterson) become the focus for the political and social concerns that give the impetus to realism in art. The Modernists are problematic and probably failed to deal with realism adequately. And then I would get to talk about Post-Modernism, and try to make the case that it moves away from subjectivity and returns to a kind of realism.106

A letter from Lyn Hejinian to poet Bruce Andrews, dated 22 August 1979, reads: "I admit I'm having fun with the Realism talks.... The current political/economic/social state makes me feel urgently pressed to relate what I do to the world to make some sense of my life."107

An early draft of one lecture about "American literary realism" addressed various historical limitations of Hejinian's subject: "The trouble with the term realism is that Realism (with a capital R) tends to become institutionalized and therefore coercive. It takes a fix on reality, imposes a code on perception — literature capturing the world in words.... Perception becomes calcified, the possibility of movement, plasticity, and perceptual activity is lost."108 Realism, Lyn Hejinian seemed to be suggesting, could be recuperated by a process-oriented poetry that took contextual change and perceptual activity as its key dynamics — a poetics of encounter, perhaps. Such poetry would situate itself within a world of phenomenal happenings while refusing to calcify the borders of subjective and objective "reality." Instead, it would keep those borders inter-reflexively mobile and open to moment-to-moment negotiation. A new realism might relinquish "imposed codes of perception" by placing itself, in Hejinian's phrase, into a between zone.106 It would remain aware of disjunctions between an observable "real" and descriptions of reality, and would test and explore the adequacies of language as a medium of worldly assay.

Several years later, Lyn Hejinian was invited to give a series of lectures at the New College in California on the work of Gertrude Stein. Two resultant essays, "Language and Realism" and "Grammar and Landscape," were published in 1986 under the title

106 Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 2 February 1981 [74, 1, 13].
107 Hejinian, letter to Bruce Andrews dated 22 August 1979 [74, 1, 5].
“Two Stein Talks.” In “Language and Realism,” Hejinian “argued for a rethinking of realism in terms of contemporary writing practice” and reclaimed philosophical considerations of the nature of reality as appropriate and necessary poetical inquiries. Much of the essay evolved from Hejinian’s earlier research into American literary realism. As her title suggests, Hejinian was concerned especially with links between language and experience, or language and a world of actualities — “the coming of things to life” over and over and the emergence of “each thing into everything,” into a matrix of being that might be encountered via (poetic) language. “Language and Realism” concludes by enumerating Stein’s contribution to a twentieth century revision of novelistic, nineteenth century “literary realism”:

*Tender Buttons* can be read as a hard-edged, rigorous, analytical, merciless, impassioned realism which

1. is patient and thorough in regarding things in the world;
2. sounds the psychological density of language;
3. keeps its techniques bristling with perceptibility;
4. is motivated by the cathexis of language itself in relation to knowledge;
5. is successful in achieving the inability to finish what it says.

These remarks imply a predicament of subjectivity: how might perceptual, linguistic, and epistemic mobility serve to complicate constitutive relations between “a person” and their surrounding “world”? Hejinian’s appraisal of a Steinian poetic is remarkably precise, while being anti-prescriptive in its syntactical open-endedness. It also reflects Hejinian’s singular writing methods and preoccupations, by giving a miniaturised account of the kind of “realism” that Lyn Hejinian was developing in her own work while writing so persuasively about the texts of Gertrude Stein.

Rather than fixing “things in the world” within coercive limits of phenomenological facticity, Lyn Hejinian’s particular, recuperative, and epistemolexical realism seeks to describe “a process of thingness coming into being, of thinging.” It observes “the

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14 Charles Bernstein, letter to Lyn Hejinian dated 1985, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2(U), “Charles Bernstein”]. Bernstein’s letter addresses and critiques Hejinian’s interest in “realism” and offers a reading of her “Stein Talks.”
present” as an ongoing series of border events and linkages. In a recent essay on Stein, Hejinian makes an observation apposite to her own poetic:

What we call the present is the point of emergence of each thing into everything, the terrain where the constant passage into relations, the coming of things to life, is occurring. This is the point at which Stein situated her task of 'beginning again and again.'

Over several decades, Hejinian has developed poetical forms that allow pursuit and sustenance of similar tasks. Seriality gives Hejinian an ideal vehicle to explore maximum unfolding of everyday happenings across the space of a written page, in part by prolonging the space and time of her philosophical meditations. While allowing large amounts of “material” to enter the scope of Hejinian’s poetical scrutiny, serial forms apply ongoing pressure to links between language and a perceived “present.” They leave a gate open on further inquiry, subsequent encounters, repetition, and future dilemmas of consciousness. Seriality allows Hejinian to “begin again” as she desires, from different perspectives, or to change her descriptive limits in response to changing circumstances. It causes me to wonder in a new way, from a new vantage point.

Hejinian employs serial forms not to fabricate epic “resolutions,” but to resist finite epistemological and ontological narratives.

Within her serial poems, Hejinian has developed line and sentence forms that enable her to track highly specific shifts in the contexts surrounding her utterances. Her lines often spill beyond the width of a page and “break” wherever necessary, almost at random, a technique that heightens a sense of perceptual detail in continual rush. As she describes them, Hejinian’s lines are “the standard (however variable) of meaning in the poem, the primary unit of observation, and the measure of felt thought.” Each line “begins as an act of observation, and is completed by recognition of the thought that it achieves there.” Regardless of its length, each line “affixes detail to time” and follows, “if there is such a thing, a perceptual rhythm.” In other words, Hejinian’s poetic syntax keeps scrupulous account of the present as it changes, continuously, in thought and language. Happily, for example, comprises sentences of variable lengths,

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115 Hejinian, “A Common Sense,” Language of Inquiry 393; my emphasis.
116 Hejinian, A Border Comedy 199.
grouped into unnumbered "sections" that follow the advance and ebb of Hejinian's perceptual and descriptive processes:

Time as something with no subject the word employed early to remark, other people could say as it completes its curve the way a bird takes on final coloring in an unobtainable form but the form approached stayed near and the bird has been there even since which seems like a remarkably short time
Instead of making itself abstract it places itself to take what happens to be happening to value finitude

Hejinian allows herself to be "moved off" her point of observation by new materials that enter her space of regard or encounter. She constantly begins again in tracking different contexts and worldly phenomena that place her writing. Happily announces these methods and interests at its outset:

Constantly I write this happily
Hazards that hope may break open my lips
What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding, and
to doubt it would be a crime against it
I sense that in stating 'this is happening' (3)

While notions of "literary realism" evolved and dispersed within Lyn Hejinian's thinking of the 1980s, the difficult concept of poetry's response to reality has remained crucial to Hejinian's project. In recent years, the terms "phenomenological" and "worldly" have replaced "realism" as key loci for her inquiries. Hejinian's poetry embodies a kind of worldly materialism; unlike, for example, poetries of other-worldly transcendentalism. Ongoingness, mess, and provisionality are closer to Hejinian's sense of living than clean, well-drafted realisations. No transcendent epiphany or "final" statement occurs in a Lyn Hejinian poem. Each rather attains a "piling up" of worldly perceptions in language, whereby every observation is distinct from the next, though linked to it via metonymic association. Hejinian's poetry does provide enduring sustenance, and even spiritual elevation, but this is different from the

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118 Hejinian, Happily 31.
119 "Moved off" cited from "Women and Narrative: Laura Hinton Interviews Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino," unpublished draft manuscript posted to author by Hejinian in August 1998. Citation from page 10 of transcript.
120 Hejinian's "Introduction" to The Language of Inquiry well demonstrates this shift.
"goal" or closed design of transcendence. "The tension set up by the co-existence of beginning and end at each point excites the dynamics of [my] work, and it is vital to my thinking within it," writes Hejinian.\textsuperscript{122} Matter and thought are without end as long as natality is occurring. While "the coming of things to life" continues, poetry will continue to find subjects and objects, and to encounter their limits and duration in language. This is the sense of Hejinian's appraisal of a Steinian "realist" poetic, its patient regard for "things in the world" that amass and move to form a continuing present.\textsuperscript{123}

I do not mean to contribute to literary lineages that position Lyn Hejinian as a post-modernist "inheritor" of Gertrude Stein's modernist legacies. Stein's work has been championed by several "core" Language poets and occasionally claimed outright as a progenitor of the Language line of experimentalism.\textsuperscript{124} Hejinian's work does share profound resonance with many of Stein's guiding imperatives, as my readings of Happily and The Cell will show; and at different moments, Hejinian explicitly acknowledges the lasting influence that Stein's texts have exerted upon her compositional methods.\textsuperscript{125} Detailed comparative readings could explore links between formal "necessities" of Hejinian's and Stein's different innovative eras, for example, or both writers' senses of broader generational meanings for their work. Such accounts might make more of site-specific distinctions between "modernist" imperatives and "post-modernist" forms — following, perhaps, recent propositions by Charles Altieri.\textsuperscript{126} These would make fascinating studies. While such contextualisations of Lyn Hejinian's poetry are implicit always in my readings, especially in chapters two and five, marking the evolutions within Hejinian's poetic of antecedent "modernisms" is not a central project of my thesis. In reading Hejinian's involvement with Steinian texts, I am concerned most of all with a nexus between Hejinian's compositions of a "material real" and Steinian methods of "presencing." Rather than seeking poetical

\textsuperscript{122} Hejinian, "Line," Language of Inquiry 133.
\textsuperscript{123} Hejinian, "Language and Realism" in "Two Stein Talks," Language of Inquiry 105.
\textsuperscript{124} See for example Charles Bernstein, "An Interview with Tom Beckett," Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984 (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986) 400; also Ron Silliman, draft letter to editors of Poetry Flash magazine dated 3 June 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 7, 6]. Chapter three deals with the vexed question of literary "heredities" and Language innovation.
\textsuperscript{125} See for example Lyn Hejinian, Preface to "Happily," Language of Inquiry 385.
heredities and mantles, or limiting poetical evolutions to specific periodisations and monumentalising narratives, I want to emphasise, in Hejinian’s words, “a present relativity across the porous planes of writing.”

I am also thinking of Hejinian as a disciplined reader of poetry. Writers, of course, are readers first — and Hejinian consistently prioritises, and exteriorises in collaborative ventures, her relationship to reading. She is certainly a vigilant reader of key modernist texts, including those that mark turning points in genealogies of American twentieth century poetic experimentalism. But it is important to think laterally, or as Hejinian advises, “to follow one’s parallelisms.” As her extensive letter archives demonstrate and record, Lyn Hejinian has been a meticulous reader of an extremely diverse range of philosophical, scientific, poetical, exploratory, and artistic texts, and has been particularly fascinated by literary biography, obscure popular science journals, and detective fiction. She has shared a stage with rock improviser Robert Hunter of The Grateful Dead and has written text for compositions by jazz virtuoso John Zorn, both of which suggest particular reading experiences and attentions. Critical hierarchies require critical contexts.

Lyn Hejinian’s phenomenological “realism” is specific to her own time and place, and more crucially, to her own political and ethical frames — very different from those of Gertrude Stein. We might keep in mind a quotation from William Carlos Williams’s radical work “Spring and All” (1923), a favourite text for Hejinian during a specific phase of the 1970s, when it proved influential (or “confluent” in Hejinian’s terms) to the writing of several of Hejinian’s close poetical contemporaries. Williams wrote:

Now works of art... must be real, not “realism” but reality itself.... When in the condition of imaginative suspense only will the writing have reality

128 One fine example is Hejinian’s formidable list of “Sources” in A Border Comedy, 213-218.
131 In a letter to Stephen Rodefer dated 22 January 1983, Hejinian distinguishes “influence” from “inspiration” and “confluence,” the latter being “the instinct that leads one to other sources which confirm one in one’s projects.” Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 6, 25]. Ron Silliman discusses Williams’s “Spring and All” in The New Sentence 23-24.
— Not to attempt, at that time, to set values on the word being used, according to presupposed measures, but to write down *that which happens at that time.*

Hejinian’s project resonates well with Williams’s exhortation to “write down that which happens at that time.” Across the closing decades of the twentieth century, Hejinian has fashioned a condition of scriptive imagination that is determinedly “contemporary” and remains acutely aware of its own historical moment, or present contexts for occurrence.

Contemporaneity operates as a liquid undertow to this thesis. It is a term that functions to connect several discrete but related threads: reality, serial poetry, a world of occurrences, and notions of poetry’s “reason.” Here again are the words from *A Border Comedy* that comprise part of this chapter’s epigraph: “‘Making it new’ was the modernist project / Contemporaneity has other concerns / Regarding the way time and things are bound.” With considerable irony and hints of both historical self-placement and distancing, Lyn Hejinian cites a well-rehearsed dictum by Ezra Pound, who often is placed alongside Gertrude Stein as a principal exponent of an American twentieth century modernist poetic. Contemporaneity — otherwise referred to by Hejinian as “the most complex of experiential situations, that of being in context” — has been an absolutely key component of Hejinian’s written inquiries. By her measure, “contemporary poetry” is literally a response to the phenomenal present, a description of things that happen and their contexts for happening. Alongside ideas, events, states of consciousness, and sentient and non-sentient things, *poetry itself* is a happening reality that can be observed and described. These ideas delimit my sense of the flexible terms “literary realism” and “contemporary American poetics.”

To close this introduction, I will spend a while longer with *context* and *contemporaneity.* Alongside worldliness and being-in-common, those ideas give provisional borders to my thesis and recur in different guises across its pages. I want

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133 Hejinian, *A Border Comedy* 35.
to situate Lyn Hejinian within a contemporary field implied by the words "community" and "biography" — terms signifying two important but non-limiting axes of Hejinian’s poetical reality. I offer the following "portrait" alongside a guiding declaration drawn from the most recent update of Hejinian’s iconic anti/autobiographical text My Life: “Who I am, it is only partly revealed in the patterns of my life, something remains hidden in my intentions.”

Living on record: a biographical portrait

“Just as formal occasions, such as telephoning an airline, require Muzak, so informal ones require an epigraph,” wrote Lyn Hejinian in the opening lines of “Language and Realism.” Perhaps this is epigraph enough for a biographical account of Hejinian’s life, but I will add two further quotations, the first from an essay by Gertrude Stein entitled “How Writing is Written” and the second from an interview conducted with Hejinian in August 1998:

The whole crowd of you are contemporary to each other, and the whole business of writing is the question of living in that contemporariness. Each generation has to live in that.... The thing you have to remember is that everybody lives a contemporary daily life. The writer lives it, too, and expresses it imperceptibly.... That is what I mean when I say that each generation has its own literature.

Each of our lives — it’s brief, and it’s so easily lost in the middle of everybody else’s lives, and plus all the other things in the world. And it’s sweet that we live, and rare somehow, and so records of lives I think are of enormous value. And at the same time I think lives are amazingly resilient and tough, and once one has lived one, you can never say they didn’t live it.... I do want there to be a record, not of me, but of the life.

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139 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
“Everybody lives a contemporary daily life,” comments Stein with implacable sense. “Once one has lived one, you can never say they didn’t live it,” answers Hejinian. The distinction between “a record of me” and a written trace “of the life” is pertinent when considering how to gloss Lyn Hejinian’s life as a writer, and depict formative encounters that led Hejinian to embrace writing as a manner of being. *My Life*, Hejinian’s most widely-read poetic work to date, effects a deft critique of biographical and autobiographical processes, and challenges the capacity of any text within either of those genres to make “representations” of lives that are not skewed in some way by authorial intentions and the vagaries of description and memory. “In the term autobiography I wanted to emphasise the writing, the ‘graphy’ part, and I want to likewise de-emphasise the ‘auto’ part, the self part. In fact it’s the language that’s writing the life, not me,” comments Hejinian of the poem.\(^{140}\)

In chapter three I argue for genealogical reading practices that undermine literary-historical reliance on personality cultism, while distancing my readings of Lyn Hejinian’s letter archive from gendered narratives that make dubious links between a writer’s “personal” life or body and the genres via which she collates a “public” body of work. Ann Vickery reasons against certain “mythic inscriptions” that are perpetuated by literary biography. She identifies within Hejinian’s writing a tendency to “shift between biography and autobiography,” a technique that emphasises both “the writing rather than the written” and “the role of the social imaginary in constructing various narratives about the person.”\(^{141}\) What relevance do biographical accounts of Lyn Hejinian have, especially given that her writing deliberately problematises both biography and autobiography, and eschews and challenges their terms and limitations?\(^{142}\) And what relevance do biographies have more generally to critical analysis? A story about the *how* and *who* of Hejinian’s contemporary daily life can barely explain *why* or *what* Hejinian writes. And it must be careful not to perform the kinds of elisions that occur when “the self part,” in Hejinian’s words, is held up as an appropriate (or appropriative) frame through which to interpret a writer’s work. These are old and well-worn lines of thought.

\(^{140}\) Hejinian, “Poetics of Exploration,” 5.


\(^{142}\) While Hejinian’s *My Life* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1980) offers a critique of autobiographical writing, her serial poem *Gesualdo* (Berkeley, California: Tuumba, 1978) performs a similarly fractured version of “biographical” text and is based loosely on the life of 16th composer Carlo Gesualdo.
Biographical portraits might satisfy a certain curiosity for detail, though, while remaining true to Hejinian’s words: “It’s sweet that we live, and rare somehow, and so records of lives I think are of enormous value.”\textsuperscript{143} In mapping something of Lyn Hejinian’s life, I am responding partly to Gertrude Stein’s provocation about literatures specific to their own cultural present, cited above: “The whole crowd of you are contemporary to each other, and the whole business of writing is the question of living in that contemporariness.... each generation has its own literature.” What is Lyn Hejinian’s generation, and what is its literature?

As Hejinian reminds us in “The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem,” knowing is a series of movable moments, a process whose function “is to contextualize.”\textsuperscript{144} It is almost a truism to suggest that historical and biographical contexts in which Hejinian’s literary subjectivity cohered in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s lent very specific imperatives to her poetical project. Those contexts gave Hejinian important access to several constellations of community — initially white, middle-class, and university-educated — that played singular roles at different times in her drama of self-fashioning, and influenced her capacities to “claim” or invest in particular kinds of cultural and literary capital. They also afforded privileged entrée to certain discourses about (political) resistance and art production. Narratives about privilege move on complicated axes, however. When Hejinian first attended Harvard University in the early 1960s, women were still prohibited from entering the specialised poetry reading room. Serious attention to “poetry” was considered a male pursuit and prerogative.\textsuperscript{145}

Jane Jacobs’s work on urban locales, communities, and postcolonial discourses is relevant in this context. In Edge Of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City, Jacobs distinguishes between “real and imaginary” geographies.\textsuperscript{146} Jacobs emphasises the “philosophical and imaginative processes” that have “regulated, bounded and secured space” as a precondition for specific kinds of embodied or tangible (“real”) occupations within cities. Places might give material grounding to praxes of empire,
suggests Jacobs; but *imagined spaces* are equally significant to distributions of power and the constitution of urban communities. She qualifies her distinction:

The possibility of material and imagined geographies being neatly separate... is of course unthinkable — one constitutes the other. (3)

Jane Jacobs's work is concerned with global vectors of imperialism and the way certain cities behave in post-colonial contexts, and I don’t mean to draw absurd parallels between empire and poetical community. But *material and imaginary geographies* are highly relevant to the specific writing scenes that attract a range of monikers and categorical designators including "Language writing," "the Language School," "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing," "Language poetry," "Language," and more recently "LangPo." Why has it been so difficult to name this essentially urban phenomenon within American poetical culture of the 1970s and 1980s? And why has so much attention been focused on marshalling the perimeters of a Language writing community, which at times has propagated a "who's-in-who's-out" approach to poetic histories? While these issues might be rehearsed here to illuminate something of Lyn Hejinian's poetical biography, I intend rather to address them in chapter three when discussing Hejinian's particular and, at times, closely-guarded navigations of a complex equilibrium between community participation and individuated writerly subjectivity.

Jane Jacobs's notion of imaginary geographies makes explicit sense in this context, however. If, as I am arguing, *community* is a processual spacing of time or a mobile collection of happenings and occurrences, rather than a demonstrable or static "entity" with marked borders — a kind of cultural imaginary (*being-with*), rather than a phenomenological and material "fact" — then discussions about *who and what the community is* and *when it began or finished* will always miss their mark. The "real geography" of Language writing will exist always-interdependently with critical and poetical imaginaries. While the name "Lyn Hejinian" can be placed within "the Language School" of twentieth century American poetry as a mode of historical shorthand or poetical directory-making, Hejinian's writing should not be reduced to a set of methods or expressions of a definitively-non-definable "avant-garde" — or
indeed, placed within a micro-cultural "(edge of) empire." At times, Hejinian has contributed to this hierarchy of attention via her own investments in imaginary geographies and descriptions of poetry as a bordered "occupation" that comes to life within communitarian spaces of appearance. My thesis inhabits a conjunctive plane between contexts that does not erase the (epistemolexical) specificities and differences of Lyn Hejinian’s poetical project. When interpreting her longstanding and grateful involvement with certain community formations, including American Language communities and specific groups of Russian poets and intellectuals, it is important to stress a productive equilibrium between real and imaginary geographies.

Conversing with New York “Language” poet Charles Bernstein in 1992, Hejinian stated: “Without expanding the definition of what poetry is, literature and culture [are] going to be left with a limited number of irrelevant models of poetry, as objects of aesthetic reverie, but of no relevance to thought or experience or contemporary living.” In sketching biographical and cultural milieus in which Lyn Hejinian became central to a specific American cell of experimentalism, I want to understand historical forces that have allowed her to make such well-informed claims to this kind of resistant status. I also want to appreciate the contemporary everydayness of Hejinian’s life in writing, and to “recognize and/or produce” social contexts for Hejinian’s poetry. Biographies are extremely useful when they perform in and as context, remaining open to contingency and announcing their own incompleteness. The thing you have to remember is that everybody lives a contemporary daily life. The writer lives it, too, and expresses it imperceptibly.... That is what I mean when I say that each generation has its own literature.

Lyn Hejinian was born Carolyn Frances Hall on 17 May 1941 and spent her childhood years in New England, where her mother, Carolyn Frances Erskine Hall, performed as an amateur chamber musician and her father, Chaffee Earl Hall Jr., worked both as an

147 The degree to which avant-gardism can ever be made subject to definitive "limits" is a rich terrain of inquiry. I engage further with this question in chapter three.
150 Stein, "How Writing is Written," 151 and 154.
academic administrator and painter.\textsuperscript{151} During the first decade of Hejinian’s life, her father “spent the evenings and weekends writing a series of novels” that remained unpublished.\textsuperscript{152} When he returned to painting in the early 1950s, Hejinian inherited his typewriter — a fact often marked as crucial to her love of writing and its mechanical horizons:

My earliest inspirations were my father’s typewriter and the two stacks of paper, one clean and the other covered with type, on either side of it…. My earliest writings were, strictly speaking, typings. I was happy to type almost anything…. It was the material world of writing that first attracted me to it. Because it was material, it was sensual, and despite being material, it was also unpredictable. The urge to write was sparked sometimes by the mere physical activity of writing and sometimes by individual words, but in either case, the urge proceeded knowing what I could or wanted to write about. The typewriter and the dictionary together offered me the promise of projects and discovery.\textsuperscript{153}

At age ten or eleven Hejinian sometimes engaged in “collaborative” writing games, listening to radio shows and typing narrative responses — “plays” — that were mostly dictated by a friend. The typewriter itself, with its chiselled punching through shifting alphabets, was a principal site of fascination. Hejinian once described these early identifications in terms of mimetic restlessness: “My response to art (such as it was in that case) and experience has always been to want to participate — if I like something I want to be it. I am very very restless in that sense.”\textsuperscript{154} Hejinian’s parents and grandparents owned extensive libraries, and Hejinian had intimate knowledge of the libraries’ contents. During her teens she began to “appropriate” books from her father’s collection by writing her name on the frontispiece of select items.\textsuperscript{155} When Hejinian was nineteen, one of her grandfathers donated his library to the University of California in Santa Cruz and asked Hejinian to catalogue it in advance. The collection included an extensive series of scientific journals about exploration and geophysical inquiry that Hejinian found compelling.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{151} Following the death of Lyn Hejinian’s father in the 1960s, Hejinian’s mother Carolyn Hall married Kenneth Andrews and became Carolyn Andrews. This name is used throughout Hejinian’s archived correspondence with her mother.

\textsuperscript{152} Hejinian, “Materials,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 163.

\textsuperscript{153} Hejinian, “Materials,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 162-164.

\textsuperscript{154} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Stephen Rodefer dated 25 January 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 6, 25].

\textsuperscript{155} See Hejinian, \textit{My Life}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, 36 and 40.

\textsuperscript{156} Hejinian, “Poetics of Exploration,” 1; Hejinian, “Materials,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 163.
Recently analysing links between her own work and writings by Stein, Hejinian described a moment of philosophical self-fashioning that occurred in her early teens when she first encountered the metropolitan art world of New York City, once again under parental auspices. “My strong feeling that what appears matters, in the other sense of the term to matter, that it counts, that it warrants attention and concern, that the appearing of things and the reality that that entails involve us in a set of obligations, began in 1954 when I went to New York City for the first time and was taken by my father to an exhibition of abstract expressionist paintings, about which he was enormously excited, and which excited me too. I didn’t know what they were. But I knew that what was happening was real. This was really it. I was committed.” Lyn Hejinian’s literary imagination began to direct itself toward an identifiable and exciting real, an appreciation of the livedness of life that Hejinian saw as a powerfully appealing manifestation of contemporary art production. “Shortly afterward, my father gave me a copy of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas to read. He had two copies, and I wrote my name in one of them. I also wrote my name in his copy of The Myth of Sisyphus, and The Stranger, and in No Exit. I wrote my name in every one of his books. I bought my own copy of Nausea, the Sartre novel, and understood that life is absurd. But this doesn’t lessen one’s obligation to live it, and in fact increases the stakes in doing so. Life is about living.”157

Hejinian writes: “the indivisibility of the writing process is occurring at every point within it.”158 Although it is important to avoid the divisions and deprivations of retrospective “cause-and-effect” analyses, and to consider the performativity of autobiographical constructions, readers can surmise that Hejinian’s first two decades involved many materials and rhetorics of a literary-artistic education wherein knowledge, discovery, and intellectual experimentalism were considered significant and worthwhile aspects of social life. In one letter to her mother, Hejinian describes this education as “liberal.”159 In another she writes with ironic humour about New England Emersonian puritanism and its attractions: “I’m glad in fact of my peculiar Christian Science background — Puritanical stoicism. I Think I Can I Think I Can I

159 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 25 December 1975, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 7].
Think I Can.”¹⁶⁰ Of course, the aforementioned events and influences cannot be read as transparent pre-determiners for Lyn Hejinian’s life in writing. They suggest, however, cultural and class backgrounds that would make an interest in poetry and scholarship familiar rather than strange — comfortable and even essential aspects of everyday living, rather than non-affordable or marginalised activities.

These relations were complicated by gender. Hejinian attended a girls’ high school that prioritised disciplined learning, “yet in a male model; we had tonnes of homework and had to write sixty-page assignments. I worked incredibly hard and I loved it, I flourished there.”¹⁶¹ Hejinian’s parents encouraged her to read poetry from her early teens and steered her toward writing by T. S. Eliot, Samuel Coleridge, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes and Gertrude Stein.¹⁶² In 1933 Lyn Hejinian’s father had corresponded fleetingly with Alice Toklas, who from Paris had posted him a copy of Stein’s Autobiography. “Gertrude Stein was a canonical figure in the culture of my father,” writes Hejinian. “And, in a profound sense, I credit him not only with the origin of my own interest in Gertrude Stein, but also with a sense of my own artistic possibilities. Thanks to my father’s crediting Gertrude Stein, a woman, with genius, I took it that gender would not be a bar to my own attempts to be a writer.”¹⁶³ There are fascinating intersections here: a familial proto-feminist identification with American female literary innovation, alongside an influential paternal figure whose cultural “scene” had already collectively “canonised” Stein, notwithstanding the general unavailability within America of Stein’s printed works.¹⁶⁴

Despite her family’s regard for women artists, Hejinian experienced considerable anxiety about gendered relations to cultural production in a range of public arenas during the 1960s and 1970s. In a series of letters to writer Susan Howe dating from the early 1980s, Lyn Hejinian describes apprehensions that accompanied her self-identification as a writer, many of them concerning the “feminisation” of particular tasks and roles within (white) American bourgeois society:

¹⁶⁰ Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 13 June 1975, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 7].
¹⁶¹ Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
¹⁶³ Hejinian, Preface to “Two Stein Talks,” Language of Inquiry 84.
¹⁶⁴ Lyn Hejinian coincidentally studied in Radcliffe College, the undergraduate women’s college at Harvard University, where Gertrude Stein had been a scholar seventy years previously. See Hejinian, “Three Lives,” Language of Inquiry 275.
[I was] brought up by my parents to be successful in two essentially opposing areas, the one (domestic, familial, with a built-in jeune fille personality) which I associate with the "feminine," and the other (intellectual, professional, capable, with a built-in brusque personality) that I associate with the "masculine" — and the conflict between the two has given me endless difficulties and pain and identity problems.  

At another point Hejinian writes to Howe: "I grew up trying to hide my intellectual bent because it was unlovable — unfeminine." Throughout her teens and twenties, Hejinian felt obliged to navigate a middle zone between competing models of sociocultural capability and acceptability. At Harvard University, she was differentiated from her male university peers in her love of poetry, as gender bias prevented her from accessing certain resources in the oligarchic and elitist structure of Harvard's literary programme. This lent disappointment to her university experiences. Hejinian's critique of the so-called "ivy league" institution also concerned, however, its essentially conservative and commodity-driven nature. She "learned nothing" about "literature" and experienced alienation from the intellectual experimentalism and inquiry that she desired: "Harvard wasn't inventing rigour for us, nor even offering contexts in which we could invent our own. Mediocrity was the reigning ethos, and I was extremely unhappy." Almost twenty years passed before Hejinian felt compelled and able to finesse a language of power and public life that distinguished between aggressively competitive and hierarchical models of learning, and "rigorous" intellectualism and her own Faustian (or Faustienne) "rage to know." Those inquiries began for Hejinian during the early 1980s, when key literary and philosophical texts of French and Anglo-American feminism became more widely distributed among her closest reading and writing contemporaries.

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165 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Howe dated 7 April 1982, S. Howe Papers, Mandeville [201, 1, 8].
166 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Howe dated 20 September 1985, S. Howe Papers, Mandeville [201, 1, 8].
168 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Ron Silliman dated 14 October 1981, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 7, 6].
171 This shift is reflected, for example, in Lyn Hejinian's use of works by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray in "Rejection of Closure," Language of Inquiry 54-55.
In the early 1960s, Lyn Hejinian left New England and returned to urban California, where her father had spent his childhood. In 1968, Hejinian's first lengthy published work appeared in *Epoch*, the journal of Cornell University. Written in the summer of 1964, “Mythopoiesis” was attributed to C. H. Hejinian. Hejinian had married scientific novelist and physician John Hejinian several years earlier, and took the initials of her pen name from her maiden name, Carolyn (Lyn) Hall.\(^{172}\) Hejinian sent “Mythopoiesis” to writer Ron Silliman upon request in the early 1980s, with this fascinating epistolary reminiscence:

[T]he entire middle section of “Mythopoiesis” is an ‘imitation’/parody of the major English writers (no Americans, which is interesting, though obviously the result of my peculiarly ‘proper’ education, in New England). As I remember, the idea was to make a language-bound history, that is a history in the language itself, of poetry and poet — the latter more or less me, though without gender. (That was the first work I ever sent out under the name of C. H. Hejinian.... I got some fan mail afterwards addressed to Mr. Hejinian, and when I responded and said I was a woman the mail ceased — so my instinct for attempting to ‘pass’ wasn’t entirely misplaced or unnecessary at the time.)\(^{173}\)

“Mythopoiesis” marks another intriguing narrative junction. Hejinian self-protectively and cannily chose an ambiguously gendered pseudonym under which to adopt a public role as “serious” writer, and among other things, her long poem explored a poetical subject or persona “without gender.” Hejinian simultaneously placed herself within a mythically inflected “proper” literary field of English classical poetry, high romanticism and neo-Hellenistic allusion. Hejinian later characterised “Mythopoiesis” as “full of drop[ed] names of Greek and Nordic gods,” and now reads her first substantial published poem as “juvenilia.”\(^{174}\) While it would be pointless to over-characterise this nascent moment in a long publishing career, “Mythopoiesis” suggests compelling constellations of literacy, culture, ambition, gender, and innovation. The poem vacillates between American and Anglophile literary proclivities, “feminine” and “masculine” poetic identifications, and experimental and more “classic” lineation and language. Lyn Hejinian was beginning already, in the 1960s, to explore borders

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173 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Ron Silliman dated 14 October 1981, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 7, 6].

and boundary locations, while investing in poetical contexts and histories: “As I remember, the idea was to make a language-bound history, that is a history in the language itself, of poetry and poet.”

Hejinian was also schooling herself in American modernisms and twentieth century avant-garde groupings and began increasingly to identify with the impulses, if not the poetical outcomes, of both the New York School and Black Mountain poets:

21st Birthday [1962], Ken Irby gave me [Robert] Creeley’s For Love. My experience with the Beats immediately was adjusted. I also read Frank O’Hara’s Meditations in an Emergency then — a breath of fresh air — I’d even say of real air…. I allowed myself to be lectured at by Ezra Pound — by then I was trying hard and thought I should be influenced by Pound. I wasn’t. Then I allowed myself to be lectured at by [Charles] Olson, to whom I was more susceptible.

Susceptible, but critical. Lyn Hejinian later distinguished between her appreciation of Charles Olson’s demand for a “projective verse” style that emphasised perceptual vigilance and radical defamiliarisation, and the performative “machismo” of Olson’s invective. While aware of the gender bias of many local innovative models, Hejinian was looking for contemporary alternatives to mainline traditions and forms that persisted via Anglo-American poetical lineages, while synthesising her own set of experimental techniques, philosophies, and thematic possibilities.

By 1970, after a string of published pieces in innovative magazines and journals, including excerpts from “The Winslow Poems: a Group of 99 Poems by C. H. Hejinian” (never completed), Hejinian stopped using an initialled moniker and

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175 Hejinian, letter to Silliman dated 14 October 1981 [74, 7, 6].
began to publish as Lyn Hejinian.\(^{179}\) Several years later, she moved away from the city with her children and second husband, experimental jazz-influenced musician Larry Ochs, to a block of land several miles beyond the North Californian town of Willits. Together Hejinian and Ochs built a house with no electricity, owned a horse called Tuumba, and pursued the development of their respective artistic vocations.

When Hejinian left San Francisco for Mendocino County in 1972, the Vietnam War irrefutably dominated American cultural and political life. Various legacies of 1960s civilian radicalism continued to influence a young, citified pop-cultural psyche: the black civil rights movement, fledgling women’s and gay liberation movements, a hippie revolution whose definitive moments included the San Franciscan “love-ins” and peaceful demonstrations of 1967, and the sprawling musical festivals of the late 1960s and early 1970s — each had their own icons, texts, significant sites and performative agendas. *Freedom then, liberation later. She came to babysit for us in those troubled years directly from the riots, and she said that she dreamed of the day when she would gun down everyone in the financial district.... still here and there in 1969 I could feel the scope of collectivity. It was the present time for a little while, and not so new as we thought then, the present always after war.*\(^{180}\) By 1975, Hejinian would write in a letter to her mother that what “seemed like the beginning of a new utopia” within American culture — “a blossoming of possibility” that occurred “during the early days of the hippie period” — had been replaced by “a stew of media-created fashion and laziness and popular clichés,” despite the “good left in its wake.”\(^{181}\)

Alongside its glorified (and violent) national status, the conflict in Vietnam underscored a change in political, media and language technologies. Lyn Hejinian is one among several Language School poets who have drawn attention to “Vietnam” as

\(^{179}\) One of the first works to appear under the name Lyn Hejinian was from a lengthy collection called “The gRReat adventure,” published in *Amphora* 1 (Summer 1970); available in Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 11(U), “Drafts miscellaneous uncollected poems”]. Hejinian later called this long collage work “a summons to impressionability,” and wrote with humour: “There are very, very few copies of this ‘book’ in existence — I burned almost all of them.” Lyn Hejinian, “Comments for Manuel Brito,” *Language of Inquiry* 191.

\(^{180}\) Hejinian, *My Life*, 2nd edition, 74. Citation from section twenty-nine of the poem, the “year” that nominally corresponds with 1969.

\(^{181}\) Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 21 September 1975, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 7].
a primary zone of resistant mobilisation and cultural politicisation, or perhaps political
accommodation, within American art practices of the 1970s:

Collective action began for me with the civil rights movement — the early
boycotts of Woolworth's, for instance.... Next came the women's
movement, and then the antiwar movement. All three of those called for a
reassessment of the structures of understanding and opinion — which are
both partly language, or largely language — and through language, a
reassessment of the social structures themselves.182

If language could be appreciated as a constructive and material site of power, rather
than a neutral and mediatory tool — a series of embodied power structures, rather than
a post-hoc explanatory mechanism — then poetry, an art-form whose materials are
matters of language, might become a method of direct engagement with political
responsibilities and actions. For Lyn Hejinian, and for several of her poetical
contemporaries including Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten, transformations in the
political “status” of language that accompanied new social formations soon were
buttressed by core texts of structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics and
philosophy, many of which became available in English translation for the first time
during the 1970s.183 “The impact of the Vietnam War on one generation of American
intellectuals cannot, and should not, be discounted,” writes Ron Silliman. “It
dramatically accelerated the growth of the American left beyond the civil rights
movement. By 1970, however, I was, like many other student activists, weary of anti-
intellectualism posing as spontaneity and wary of the groundless and narcissistic
revolutionary hubris that characterized too much of the new left. It was at that moment
that much of the left in America... began to study versions of Marxism seriously,
beginning with Marx and Lenin but also including Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt
School.”184

182 Lyn Hejinian, “A Local Strangeness: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian,” conducted by Larry
McCaflery and Brian McHale, Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors,
183 My third chapter gives a detailed account of this issue. Significant materials include texts by
Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. See for
Landscape” in “Two Stein Talks,” Language of Inquiry 116-118.
184 Ron Silliman, in Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten, Leningrad:
For Lyn Hejinian, such shifts in reading praxis ultimately coincided with her return to the Bay Area of California in July 1977. From 1972 to 1977, Hejinian lived in geographical isolation from urban artistic and intellectual communities. Letters generated and sustained her literary activity, however, and Hejinian continued throughout her Willits years to publish poems in a range of metropolitan innovative writing journals and to cultivate epistolary friendships with many poets including Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe and Ron Silliman.\textsuperscript{185} Letter writing has remained absolutely central to Hejinian’s navigations of community, as chapter four will show. In a sense, Hejinian’s isolation in Willits originated the habit and mode of epistolary self-staging and reciprocal acknowledgement that continues to characterise her \textit{modus vivendi} within (urban) writing communities.

Isolation also influenced one of Lyn Hejinian’s most notable publication projects. In April 1976, she wrote to her mother: “I’ve been busy meeting with printers, with the thought to start a magazine, or booklet series, myself. I’d like to bring out 10 issues a year, each booklet about 16 pages long, devoted to one author.”\textsuperscript{186} By May 1976, Hejinian was using new letterhead paper that read: “TUUMBA PRESS, P.O. Box 1075, Willits, CA 95490.” Hejinian’s Tuumba Press produced hand-crafted chapbooks of innovative poetical writing, and over an 8-year period published a series of 50 new works by 43 American emergent experimental writers — most of them in the first four years of Tuumba’s operation.\textsuperscript{187} Manuscripts and readers were initially sought and courted by letter. While Tuumbs #1 to #11 were printed with the assistance of a local print-shop at which she worked, Lyn Hejinian soon bought her own non-electric letterpress and began hand-setting type and printing all Tuumba Press booklets and materials.\textsuperscript{188} Each chapbook is distinguished by high production values and paper quality, and Hejinian traded on “rarified” status and a non-commodity aesthetic by

\textsuperscript{185} Hejinian first met Andrews and Bernstein at a book fair in New York in 1976, six months after she established the Tuumba Press imprint. Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 17 October 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8]. To avoid potential confusion, I should clarify that Bruce Andrews and Carolyn Andrews are not related.

\textsuperscript{186} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 7 April 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8].

\textsuperscript{187} Tuumba Press flyer, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 1].

\textsuperscript{188} Hejinian was employed at Willits Printing during 1976; see for example letter from Lyn Hejinian to Carolyn Andrews dated 8 December 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8]. Hejinian mentions “finally” buying her own press in a letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 27 November 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8].
hand-numbering the limited 450 copies of each edition. The designs were entirely her own, though various local artists contributed cover images. Ten years after founding Tuumba, Hejinian reflected on its significance to her sense of a collaborative poetic:

I thought of publishing as an extension of my writing and thinking about writing, as an expansion of the ground for aesthetic discovery. And I thought of it, too, as an extension of aesthetic responsibility. I had the sense that my poetics included other writing than my own, by definition. Part of the method was to include it.

In part, of course, my decision to begin publishing a series of books was determined by my living in an extremely isolated situation in northern California; it was rather as if I had decided to be a newspaper reporter in order to hear the news.

Hejinian was solely responsible for the time-consuming tasks of administering Tuumba Press and attracting the subscriptions, often from friends and family members, that kept the press financially viable and contributed to its community-building role.

The first Tuumba chapbook held Hejinian’s own “A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking,” a prose-influenced poem comprising three discretely named pieces. Each was excerpted from a much longer manuscript called The Inclusions (1977), a sequence of sentence-based poems, completed by Hejinian at Willits, that remains unpublished in its entirety. An earlier book-length manuscript of poems, The

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189 Some chapbooks were printed in editions of 475. See for example Kit Robinson, Riddle Road (Berkeley, California: Tuumba, 1982).
191 See for example Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 13 July 1976, where Hejinian mentions friends and relatives who are keeping the press afloat; Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8]. Ann Vickery’s “Supporting a Scene: Tuumba Press” in Leaving Lines of Gender gives a good account of Hejinian’s establishment of the press, especially in regard to women editors who were working already in innovative poetry publishing. Vickery, Leaving Lines of Gender 53–76.
193 “A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking” was originally section 19 of The Inclusions, while “Variations: a Return of Words” began as section 8. See unpublished draft manuscripts, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8, 7] and [74, 8, 8].
Shimmin Ridge Collection (1974), also remains unpublished. Both manuscripts are fascinating montages of textual fragments and styles, and demonstrate Lyn Hejinian’s burgeoning interest in epic improvisational compositions that permit a syntax of inquiry to evolve across maximum (serial) space. They also display Hejinian’s early “encyclopedic ambition,” as she terms it, or “the romantic notion of writing everything that you know” — a compulsion to describe the teeming ongoingness of occurrences that press at the borders of subjective perception.

Shimmin Ridge (1974) adopts the persona of a “field naturalist” who encounters a phenomenal world in language. Its introduction refers to “gratuitous connections or contiguous chance,” two equally apt descriptors for later poems by Hejinian that take happenstance and linkage as their philosophical and compositional thematics; for example Happily (2000) and A Border Comedy (2002). Lyn Hejinian once described The Inclusions (1977), a precursor to her now-famous My Life (1979), as a work in “a prose-like style, though at times written with the attention to detail & the compression of meaning that is the characteristic of poetry, shaping connections where one finds…. the book has become a catch-all for what interests me.” Elements of the aphoristic style later developed in My Life were also explored in “Water and Stories” (1976), excerpted in Barrett Watten’s This magazine in 1977. “Water and Stories” tried to find “a new verse in thought,” a language that “inhabited gaps but exhibited gaps within itself” as it explored the dis/continuities of thinking. Twenty-five years later, such a language of perceptual inquiry continues to characterise Hejinian’s poetic.

Six months after beginning Tuumba Press, Lyn Hejinian began travelling more frequently to San Francisco. In February 1977 she gave a reading with Rae Armantrout in the “Grand Piano” series, organised by Armantrout and poets Ron

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194 “The Shimmin Ridge Collection,” unpublished draft manuscript, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8, 12]. Shimmin Ridge, on the outskirts of Willits, is where Lyn Hejinian and her family were living.


196 “The Shimmin Ridge Collection,” unpublished draft manuscript, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8, 12].

197 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 25 December 1975, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 7].

198 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Bruce Andrews dated 28 September 1977, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 5].

Silliman and Tom Mandel. In July that year Hejinian and her family moved from Willits to Berkeley in the Californian Bay Area, where Hejinian has remained. In a sense this closes my biographical sketch, just as it marks the proximate “entry” of Lyn Hejinian into a metropolitan poetical ferment that cohered, soon after, into a San Franciscan cell of Language writing. It is important to emphasise the richness of poetic activity, often associated with small presses and journals, occurring in different US cities at the time of Language writing’s nominal beginnings in San Francisco, Washington DC, and New York City. Certainly, the innovations of Language poetry did not happen in isolation. Upon meeting poets whom she later regarded as the San Franciscan “core” of a Language writing community, however — Carla Harryman, Ron Silliman, Rae Armantrout, Barrett Watten, Kit Robinson, Steve Benson — Hejinian felt that she no longer had to “fight frustrating battles against incomprehensibility,” and began a series of long-standing friendships, dialogues, and collaborations that continue to affect her poetical projects and responsibilities.

I have offered a detailed story of Hejinian’s writerly “beginnings” as a corrective to narratives that elide her independent development and self-fashioning as an innovative American poet. I also wanted to acknowledge the self-reflexive seriousness with which Hejinian views her occupation as an artist. Lyn Hejinian’s desire to encounter her poetical contemporaries or “generation,” as Stein writes, and her strong impulse toward contextualising and historicising her work, exist alongside a driving personal compulsion regarding her placement within a world of texts, languages, and phenomena. Hejinian came to Berkeley in 1977 with a complex publication history and an evolving set of philosophies, vocabularies, innovative techniques, and impetuses toward political and community praxis. People do not arrive fully formed into pre-existing literary categories such as “experimentalist” or “Language poet.” One is not born, one becomes a writer — in and as a function of context.

20 Ron Silliman, letter to Lyn Hejinian dated 22 December 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 7, 6].
21 Ann Vickery points out that Washington DC is often omitted from critical accounts of Language writing, which usually focus upon San Francisco and New York City. See Vickery, Leaving Lines of Gender, 4.
We have to decide to — and decide how to — be in common, to allow our existence to exist. This is not only at each moment a political decision; it is a decision about politics, about if and how we allow our otherness to exist, to inscribe itself as community and history.

—Jean-Luc Nancy

We have no other experience of living than encounters. We have no other use for language than to have them.

—Lyn Hejinian

Bringing Lyn Hejinian’s writings and philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s ideas into a space of meeting sparks a resonant and extremely productive dialogue. Both Nancy and Hejinian are concerned with the how of being, a core aspect of ethical thinking, and with matters of commonality, referred to by Nancy as situations and states of “being in common.” Both thinkers situate their inquiries alongside and within appraisals of worldliness: Hejinian examines the “in and as” attributes of our “relationship with the world” while Nancy advances a thesis about “being-toward-the-world.” This chapter addresses several questions that appear at a border crossing, or in a ghostly middle ground, between the communitarian philosophies of Jean-Luc Nancy and the context-oriented poetics of Lyn Hejinian. What does it mean, following Nancy, to be always “in-becoming,” and how does Hejinian’s work face and generate that concept? Circumscribed by continual change or moment-to-moment negotiation, what might a poetics of encounter look like, and what might it offer for an encounter with ethics? How does a notion of being-toward-the-world suggest specific kinds of intersubjective engagement and care, or interactivity between responsibility and responsibility?


4 Nancy, “Finite History,” 159.


6 Discussion of the term “a poetics of encounter” to follow.
By extending these trajectories of thought to include Hejinian’s formal poetic methods we might discover a different set of related queries. Are there substantial links between ethical practices and formal poetical choices? Why are Hejinian’s lengthy poetic forms so crucial to her contextually-aware poetical ethic, and to her concepts and experiences of community? By acknowledging and performing a linked sequence of encounters in response to continual fluctuations in context, how might serial poems allow a perceiving subject to continually scrutinise and re-assess her or his own assumptions and placements with regard to changing certainties about what is happening, or ethical dilemmas about the matter of being in (and toward) the world? This chapter examines a core trope of Hejinian’s ethical poetic — “worldliness” — beside Nancy’s description of “the world” as “the way we exist together.” I explore dialogues between poetic form and ethical navigation; more specifically, between the seriality and syntax of Lyn Hejinian’s Happily, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s model of community as “a common spacing of time” or an event of “being-with.” Nancy also refers to it as being singular plural, a state in which difference takes precedence over sameness.

Hejinian’s long poem Happily (2000) can be imagined as an augmentative “writing-through” of Nancy’s recent writings about community, in which knowledge, ontologies, and description are placed into reciprocally constitutive relations. In an essay called “Finite History” (1990), Nancy offers “a way of thinking” about community as a being-in-common — “this is not a theory,” he advises. Happily makes explicit excursions into the how of commonality, producing and affirming in poetry the activity of interrelatedness. The poem performs a linked series of encounters among things, ideas, commonplace events, and manners of regard. Each of its lines brings subject- and object-worlds into mutual context by staging interactions among three elements: a world being perceived, perceptual inventions and processes, and language. In another context Hejinian has written of her poetry:

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7 Nancy, “Finite History,” 168.
It assumes a real world — I recognize the value judgment implicit in this — and then explores the interaction between the world and our consciousness of it and the language in which this is located.\(^{11}\)

In Hejinian's terms, poetic language constitutes one boundary or "medium of proliferating connections" between a phenomenal world as it "happens," and our perceptions of that world, or sense of the world.\(^{12}\) The writing is the encounter — the happening — as much as it responds to what has happened, or what might. Constantly I write this happily.... The polyvalent deictic in Hejinian’s opening to Happily encompasses a field of philosophical inquiry, "things" as they happen, a being in writing, and the poem itself. Each is proximate to the others. The poem accrues its observations and allows them to co-exist rather than asserting "the goal or culmination" of progressive ontological processes.\(^{13}\) This is not a theory.

Constantly I write this happily
Hazards that hope may break open my lips
What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding, and
to doubt it would be a crime against it
I sense that in stating 'this is happening' (Happily 1)

In using the term "writing-through" I do not mean to sketch lineations which give prior standing to a series of texts — Jean-Luc Nancy’s — that can be generically over-determined as "philosophical," or to create chronological, textual hierarchies that afford originary status to particular concepts. I want more to enjoy a suggestive rub between texts, and to enact a critical encounter between Hejinian’s poetry and Nancy’s writings, while tracing something of my own meeting with them. This process might be thought of as a moment of becoming-in-common with the texts, an event of co-incidence. Perhaps critical work is best understood this way; as part of the work of acknowledgement, a porous response to what already has been generated and offered.

As detailed in my introduction, I have followed Hejinian’s citation paths in an essay called “Reason” as a guide for this chapter, and often employ reading methodologies


\(^{12}\) "The medium of proliferating connections" cited from Lyn Hejinian, “The Numerous,” unpublished manuscript posted by Hejinian to the author in August 1998, page 1 of manuscript; "the sense of the world" cited from title of Nancy’s The Sense of the World.

\(^{13}\) "Goal or culmination" cited from Nancy, “Finite History,” 149.
that observe Hejinian’s own contextual approaches to sites of knowing and their generation.14 “Reason” refers to “characteristics of what is being explored under the rubric of ‘community’ in recent books by Jean-Luc Nancy (in The Inoperative Community), Giorgio Agamben (in The Coming Community), and Jean-François Lyotard (in The Differend), among others.”15 While “Reason” does not make close readings of these works of thought, Lyn Hejinian signals clearly, both in that essay and Happily, her attentions to ethical issues and social models that they engage and propose. She attributes her list of contemporary communitarian philosophies to a lucid article by Peter Nicholls entitled “Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen,” and evidently feels this essay to be parallel with her own thinking on Objectivism and ethical poetics.16

My introduction examined Nicholls’s essay as the source for an evocative phrase that recurs throughout this chapter: a poetics of encounter.17 Nicholls argues that a poetics of encounter might offer “a way of acknowledging the world and others without seeking to reduce them to objects of knowledge.”18 It might thus “sustain the relationship between things [and] the relationship between people” (160) rather than advancing, via modes of proprietorial representation, authoritarian epistemologies and languages. How does Happily manifest such a poetics of encounter? And how might Hejinian’s poem allow readers to imagine “community” as an event that can constitute and enable radical, reciprocal affirmations of being involving embodiments of extrasubjective and strangely-political otherness?

Poetics is not personal. A poetics gets formed in and as a relationship with the world. These are the opening sentences of one of Lyn Hejinian’s most recent expository formulations of her poesis, and ways in which one might articulate and test the work of poetry — its ethical and political dimensions, its potential as a zone in which the matter of being might begin to be discovered and addressed. On 9 April 1999 during a conference held at Barnard College in New York City, Lyn Hejinian delivered a paper entitled “Some Notes toward a Poetics” to an audience of several hundred people. Hejinian was one of eight poets who engaged in a lengthy round-table discussion of contemporary American poetics and cultural production under the rubric of meeting and innovation. Folded in beside numerous poetry readings and critical papers, this plenary event staged an exemplary moment of community practice.

I want to use “Some Notes toward a Poetics” as a departure point from which to set moving a linked series of terms — encounter, communality, happening, acknowledgement, context, affirmation — with the hope of illuminating their significance for Hejinian’s current praxis. Encounter has been a favourite trope of Lyn Hejinian’s thinking during the past decade; a temporal span bordered by two lengthy serial poems called Slowly (2002) and Happily (2000), and Sight, a book-length collaboration begun by Lyn Hejinian and writer Leslie Scalapino in 1992. In a more rhizomic sense, the word \textit{encounter} is appropriate to Hejinian’s “entire” or so-far assembled and evolving body of work. It circulates in this thesis as a kind of Deleuzean refrain — an “aggregate of matters of expression,” or a repeating syntactical hyphen performing “the link between truly active moments” in Hejinian’s

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ongoing ethical poietical inquiry and in her continuing fascination with philosophies and practices of community.\textsuperscript{21}

In the second section of “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” Hejinian writes:

Aesthetic discovery can be congruent with social discovery. Aesthetic discovery occurs through encounters, at points of contact, and so too does political and ethical discovery. These points of contact or linkages are the manifestation of our logics; they give evidence of our reasoning and they also serve as the sites for our reasons — our reasons to do what we do.\textsuperscript{22}

Hejinian attributes great import to encounters by making them the site for aesthetic, ethical and political findings. To encounter is to meet, possibly by chance, and to be literally up against (encontre). Hejinian’s phrase “points of contact” emphasises spatiality and mutuality. Something occurs or happens to produce a moment of reciprocal contextualisation, an event of inter-subjective (and intra-objective) bordering or co-incidence. Imagined differently, this coming-into-context creates, and becomes, what happens; it is a happening.

The term “encounter” inhabits a border to excess. It glances continually between abstract nomination (an encounter) and a process of acting or becoming (to encounter), between noun and verb. In Hejinian’s epistemolexical scheme, it might be understood as a boundary guard.\textsuperscript{23} Grammatical inflections perform a specific kind of work here and suggest thought horizons well beyond a much-tested ground of referential motility. Emphasising flux, they remind us that processes of knowing or encounter-discoversies such as those specified by Hejinian — aesthetic, political, ethical — are always mobile, and open to further meetings or happenings. Hejinian’s interest in tropes of encounter corresponds with her reading of “the border” as both a site and an activity of linkage, in an essay entitled “The Numerous”:

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Hejinian, “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 235.
\item \textsuperscript{23} See for example Hejinian’s prefatory remarks to \textit{Sight} in Hejinian and Scalapino, “Experience / ‘On’ Sight,” \textit{Sight}, n.pag.
\end{itemize}
The border I mean... is not an edge, not marginal, but an articulation and provocateur of palpability, the medium (middle) of proliferating connections, where one thing feels the next.\textsuperscript{24}

As detailed at the outset of this thesis, my term "epistemological" attempts to convey something of a constant, mutually-transforming and reciprocally-bordering interactivity between linguistic and epistemic elements within Hejinian's poetic. Nancy cogently describes a related notion in "Finite History." "[E]verything," he writes, is "always inscribed by change and becoming, always carrying the many marks of this inscription."\textsuperscript{25}

We have no other experience of living than encounters, suggests Lyn Hejinian.\textsuperscript{26} "Points of contact or linkages" are the sites of encounter.\textsuperscript{27} In complement, an encounter generates a link while existing as a temporary moment of placement on a shifting plane. Imagined further, each encounter is an instance of mutual contextualisation, and might thus be interpreted as a literal and reciprocal nexus with another being. Perhaps, following Jean-Luc Nancy's explorations in a work entitled Being Singular Plural, encounters might be readily observable moments of being with-one-another (étant l'un-avec-l'autre) or being in co-existence.\textsuperscript{28} Within an ontology of linkage, described by Nancy as a "co-ontology," a ground between subjects — interrelationship itself — becomes a pre-eminent concern.\textsuperscript{29} Hejinian echoes this idea in "Some Notes toward a Poetics." Our meetings or encounters are the sites in which we might discover and make manifest "our reasons to do what we do," our ethical codes and occupations.\textsuperscript{30} I want the term "occupations" to embrace both labour practices or ways of working — what is done and our doing — and places of habitation or occupied spaces. Both are integral to our ways of being in the world. Hejinian's poetic is concerned likewise with active processes, rather than static conditions; for in encounters we discover not only our reasons but also "evidence of

\textsuperscript{24} Hejinian, "The Numerous," 1.
\textsuperscript{25} Nancy, "Finite History," 152.
\textsuperscript{27} Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 235.
\textsuperscript{28} Nancy, Being Singular Plural 32 and 41.
\textsuperscript{29} Nancy, Being Singular Plural 42.
\textsuperscript{30} Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 235.
our reasoning.”31 We discover methods for choosing how to respond to experience, and to our consciousness of experience.

*Encounter* is a term conjoining ideas of ontological coexistence and “reason” within Hejinian’s poetic. It implies the appearance to one another of different beings within a mutual space of time — or being singular within our plurality. To Hejinian, encounters consequently offer the most pleasurably rich and incontrovertible scope for an ethical poetry: a poetry that admits the dilemmas of its placement within a world of occurrences, while simultaneously facing its community. Poetical work is included implicitly in Hejinian’s sense of reason: “we have no other use for language than to have [encounters].”32 With this observation, Hejinian maps an ethical terrain dependent upon poetic inquiry as a mode of precipitating and acknowledging arrivals into mutual context, and hence, the substance of an ethos of commonality. Hejinian is not suggesting that poetry be regarded as the single vehicle for such discoveries, or the most appropriate art form in which to exercise philosophical responsivity to conditions of being and “things” as they happen. She makes a strong and optimistic case, however, for poetic language as a powerfully useful (and perhaps singular) tract of ethical and communitarian inquiry, and even as an engagement of moral necessity.

Responsivity to encounters — or, put differently, to occasions of *communality* — is integral to Lyn Hejinian’s understanding of the “experience of living” and close to her sense of poetry’s responsibility. As noted earlier, Hejinian often characterises poetry as a space of appearance, an evocative concept that she draws from philosopher Hannah Arendt and re-interprets in a specifically poetic vein.33 Within the shifting limits that attend subjective mobility, poetry can validate “the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity” while also giving appearance to what Arendt describes in *The Human Condition* as a “surrounding world” (208) — a mutual real of contexts and events, things and people. Poetry can “make articulate and call into full existence” what would otherwise be experienced in seclusion. “The only character of the world by which to gauge its reality is its being common to us all,” writes Arendt. (208) Poetical writing responds to conscious life and to one’s consciousness of that

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consciousness; and more importantly, it can allow that consciousness (i.e. perception) to appear or to be shared as common reality. Jean-Luc Nancy makes a comparable observation in Being Singular Plural: “Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the with and as the with of this singularly plural coexistence.”

For Lyn Hejinian, the discovery and acknowledgement of communality via poetical description is the ethical and poetical experiment that “must be done.” Poetry can discover and acknowledge ways of being with a world of others and things as they happen, in (and as) a space of appearance. From this nexus of thought, a more general raison d'ètre might be extrapolated: community is Hejinian’s “poethical” reason to do what she does, a signature kaleidoscope through which to view her relation to writing. My aim here is not to understand community as a term of in-difference or solely “material” formation, but as an indicator of intricate, contradictory, and generative potentials — poetical, conceptual and social. In this I am possibly more optimistic (though perhaps less aware) than critic Charles Altieri, who has referred recently to “the strident... replacing of slogans about history (the buzzword of the eighties) by slogans about community (our new toy).” Several of Altieri’s arguments are discussed later in this chapter.

I have borrowed the neologism poethical from American innovative writer Joan Retallack. It is important to attribute this term to Retallack in context of much thinking that has emerged over the past decade within the prolific field of contemporary American innovative poetry criticism. In an excellent essay entitled “The Poethical Wager,” Retallack questions the relevance and ethical bearing of experimental poetry, understood as a practice of labour. She writes: “It strikes me that since the work of any given generation is adding to the initial conditions of the generations to come, one obviously tries to add positive, even constructive, initial conditions.... The poethical wager... is just that we do our utmost on the chance that our work will be as helpful as

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34 Nancy, Being Singular Plural 3.
35 John Cage, cited by Joan Retallack in “The Poethical Wager,” Onward: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, ed. Peter Baker (New York: Peter Lang, 1996) 302. In a letter to me dated 5 August 1998, Hejinian posed these questions: “What kind of work is it that one is doing as a poet? This is a question that Clark Coolidge has sometimes been obsessed with; what do poets do?”
any other infinitesimal initial condition might be.”

Retallack qualifies her open “wager” with a quotation from innovative composer John Cage: “One does not then just make any experiment, but does what must be done.” Cage’s observation has ethical force while remaining non-prescriptive. “What must be done” might alter according to different weathers or circumstances.

Hejinian’s serial poem *Happily* can be read as a sustained inquiry into “what must be done,” or what we are bound to encounter, within spheres traced out by poetical thinking. It was written during 1998 and early 1999, contemporaneously with “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” and published by the Post-Apollo Press in 2000. Early in *Happily*, Hejinian meditates on the purpose of poetry in context of the everyday occurrences (“things as they happen”) that might comprise some kind of common reality:

> Perhaps it is the role of art to provide us with this chance that is
> Perhaps it is the role of art to put us in complicity with things
> as they happen (*Happily* 13)

Throughout her writing career Hejinian has concerned herself with the dilemmas and borders that might comprise a poetical “ethics.” Is poetry limited to making ethical “representations,” or can it actively undertake the difficult work of an ethics? Where might it locate these investigations, in formal and material terms? Hejinian’s anaphoristic use of the word “perhaps” gently reminds us that her poethic is offered rather than prescribed. Perhaps it is the role of art to discover what might be done, or what may be. Reminiscent of Nancy’s syntax of togetherness, Hejinian’s expression “to put us in complicity with things as they happen” suggests a mode and moment of being — “this chance” — that is profoundly and self-consciously communal. Nancy’s idea of *being-with* is well suited to *Happily*, a poem that accumulates sequences of written percepts and observations, many about writing’s knotted relation to thought, and allows them to coincide in their differences.

During the October 2000 Modernist Studies Association conference, held at the University of Pennsylvania, Lyn Hejinian participated in a reading series entitled "Nine Contemporary Poets Read Themselves Through Modernism." She gave a paper that performed a brief exegesis of *My Life* and *Happily*, gathered in company with various writings by Gertrude Stein. While the event itself suggests Hejinian’s dedication to certain "actual" and textual communities, I am most interested in her descriptions of a poetics anchored in the acknowledgement of things in the world as they happen or appear to happen:

Things have presence because they occur in and as motion. They exist by virtue of motion’s "in and as" character. And our role among them is participatory, shared, in and as. This is what is known as the routine, all that is presently in the way and on the way and even, at the risk of sounding Heideggerian, as the way…. The routine is the social motion of worldliness, political in my view because it entails our being with our doing and our doing with our being.

Participatory, shared, in and as, our role among things. Such carefully chosen terms suggest a poetic that cares deeply about purpose and futurity, and a life lived proximate to other people, ideas and things — a life with, in the fullest sense of that word. Hejinian concerns herself not only with what “must be done,” but why the doing matters, and how the doing becomes a matter of being. “Things” gain “presence” — the appearance of thingness or realness — “in and as” a function of continual, circumstantial change.

Hejinian qualifies her frequent use of the word “things” in relation to a poetics of worldly perception: “By things, I mean events, objects, ideas, creatures, conditions, and so on — anything that might be singled out for articulate address.” Within the “social motion of worldliness” or the continuing present, things that are “in the way and on the way” gain the kinesis of encounter. Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of “being-in-common” sits well beside Hejinian’s explorations of our participatory “role among things.” Nancy reads community as the occurrence of togetherness:

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[Community] is not a substance, nor a subject; it is not a common being, which could be the goal or culmination of a progressive process. It is rather a being-in-common which only happens, or which is happening, an event, more than a "being."43

By adopting "being-in-common" instead of "a common being" as a figure for community, Nancy emphasises existential proximity as a process, "a happening as it comes."44 Hejinian's ideas are comparable: community is the advent of "shared context," of the "active correlations (co-relations)" occasioned by encounters.45 For Hejinian as for Nancy, community is an on-going event rather than a finishing point or tangible subject. Attention to a present-in-process is crucial to Lyn Hejinian's poetical reason. It implies a way of thinking that moves beyond proprietorial attainment of "knowledge" and an accompanying telos of closure. Or rather, it moves between — into a border between subjects and objects, perception and description, knowing and saying.

Being-in-common is a state of ethical agency in which modes of co-existence might be chosen, articulated and tested, implies Nancy:

We have to decide to — and decide how to — be in common, to allow our existence to exist. This is not only at each moment a political decision; it is a decision about politics, about if and how we allow our otherness to exist, to inscribe itself as community and history.46

Hejinian writes similarly: "Poetry undertakes acknowledgment as a preservation of otherness — a notion that can be offered in a political, as well as an epistemological, context."47 In "Finite History" Nancy states: "Community... is to be in common, or to be with each other, or to be together. And 'together' means something that is neither inside nor outside one's being.... Together means: not being by oneself and having one's own essence neither in oneself nor in another self." (159-160) And later: "The otherness of existence happens only as 'togetherness.'" (160) How might Nancy's idea

43 Nancy, "Finite History," 149.
44 Nancy, "Finite History," 166. In keeping with Hejinian's contextual poetic, I use the phrase "existential proximity" to elasticise concepts of proximity gauged wholly in reference to a spatio-temporal binary. Existential proximity might include, for example, discursive frameworks and modes of ideation; Hejinian's "events, ideas and conditions." See Hejinian, "Lyn Hejinian / Andrew Schelling," 5.
45 Hejinian, "Reason," Language of Inquiry 347.
46 Nancy, "Finite History," 168.
of between-togetherness — a state "neither inside nor outside" one’s being — relate to Hejinian’s poetic of encounters, and her use of specific compositional forms? How does Hejinian explore a non-prescriptive ethics of knowing and saying through a poetics of context, and how does this relate to Nancy’s idea of “deciding how to be in common”? The subjectivity and community formations implicit in these dialogues of togetherness, otherness, withness and acknowledgement (or witness) are fascinating, and pivotal to Lyn Hejinian’s most recent decade of poetical inquiry.

This is happening

_Happily_ is a poem of phenomenal or worldly occurrences, as encountered in their unceasing mobility by a perceiving and describing subject:

What the circle does real and without contrary taking charge from one to another side of the fiery day is what the time of one thing and another together does taking itself unreaching from hour to hour while the reaching things change
Language is running
Language remains
Wanting to live it, having wanted to, we live we live in it48

In my introduction, I discussed conjunctions in Lyn Hejinian’s poetry between phenomenal happenings, worldliness, description, and ideas of “the real” — suggested here by “the reaching things [that] change.” Worldliness is the context in which living occurs: “one thing and another together... / we live we live in it.” Jean-Luc Nancy writes in “Finite History” that each event of being-in-common opens up “a world, if ‘world’ does not mean universe or cosmos, but the proper place of existence as such, the place in which one is ‘given to the world’ or where one ‘comes into the world.’ A world is neither space nor time; it is _the way we exist together._”49 For Nancy, “worlds” are not tropes of in-different universality or non-heterogeneity. Rather, they appear as assemblages of discrete yet linked instances of togetherness. “The world” implies a process of coming-into-communality, in a “proper place of existence” exceeding

48 Hejinian, _Happily_ 34.
purely spatio-temporal adjacencies. The meaning of *being-in-the-world*, as Nancy argues in *Being Singular Plural*, is always already a common meaning. In fact "there is no meaning if meaning is not shared," since "meaning is itself the sharing of Being."\(^{50}\)

A world is an open-ended set of connections; a way of existing (or more accurately, being-together) that is a function of mobility. It *arrives* or *appears or happens* rather than operating as a monolithic "thing." Hejinian notes in "Reason" that she is indebted "throughout" her essay to terminology drawn from *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, a work by philosopher and linguist Jean-François Lyotard dealing specifically with discursive paradigms or "phrase regimens" and the "linkages" that occur between them.\(^{51}\) *The Differend* proposes a concept of worldliness that echoes Nancy's idea of ongoing arrivals into togetherness: "The referent world is not an object of cognition.... By world, I understand a network of proper names. No phrase can exhaust this network."\(^{52}\)

We might understand in a correspondent light Hejinian's description of a poetics that happens "as a relationship with the world." To Hejinian, the formulation of a poetics is a profoundly sociable or worldly act — an arrival into, and testing of, the limits of context and community:

Poetics is where poetry's engagement with meaning as meaningfulness gets elaborated — poetics is the site of poetry's reason — where the plurality of its logics and the viability of its contexts are tested and articulated. A poetics considers how and what a specific poem means within itself and its own terms and how and why it means (and is meaningful) within a community that congregates around it.\(^{53}\)

A poetics elucidates *poetry's reason* — its capacity to mean, to articulate, and to account for its own positioning within what "congregates" or occurs around it. The distinction that Hejinian makes between "poetry" and "a poetics" is important. It must be considered in terms of epistemological equilibrium rather than categorical

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\(^{50}\) Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 2.


\(^{52}\) Lyotard, *The Differend* 79.

\(^{53}\) Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 235.
separation, as Hejinian suggests: "The two practices are mutually constitutive and they are reciprocally transformative."54 Poetics is a mode of mobile vigilance in which a writer can admit, or perhaps advance toward, contextual reflexivity and a sense of being in the world rather than at an unworldly distance from it.

For Hejinian, a sense of being "in the world" arrives when a person appreciates her or his contemporaneity or placement within a set of links that constitute the present:

What we call the present is the point of emergence of each thing into everything, the terrain where the constant passage into relations, the coming of things to life, is occurring.55

This bears some similarity to Lyotard’s description of the world as a “network of proper names.”56 By Hejinian’s reckoning, poetry’s primary responsibility is toward encountering “worldly” appearances, or in Nancy’s terms, the way we exist together.57 “Since the term poetics names not just a theory of techniques but also attentiveness to the political and ethical dimensions of language, worldliness is essential to a poetics,” observes Hejinian.58 Put differently, poetry is a non-transcendent and necessarily public practice whose reason is grounded squarely in the worldly interactions that facilitate the “coming of things to life.”

Over the past five years, Lyn Hejinian has repeatedly anchored her worldly poetic to the demonstrably positivist phrase this is happening, an utterance that embodies an implicitly momentary and therefore moving sense of the present.59 “It is not possible,” concurs Jean-Luc Nancy in The Sense of the World, “…to give up thinking that something is happening, that something here called ‘world’ is happening to us, and that it is here and now that this is coming to pass and that the here and now takes place in accordance with what it transmits to itself of what it represents as being where it

56 Lyotard, The Differend 79.
comes from."\(^{60}\) When "a world" is noticed in poetry, or when co-incidences between things and beings are recognised and generated, a manifold affirmation takes place. Occurrences — "not only objects, but also events, emotions, ideas, and the various interconnections that bind them within the world,"\(^{61}\) as Hejinian writes — are acknowledged and given phenomenal presence "in accordance with where they come from" (this is happening); while subjects themselves, along with states of togetherness in a world of everyday events, simultaneously are given meaning and form (this is happening and can be perceived, and is our context for perceiving). Poetry's fluid and transmutable potential for affirmation — for making a positive record of appearances — is pivotal to why it "matters" for Hejinian to write. And the development of a "poetics" provides Hejinian with an additional, philosophical chance to address seriously the issue of poetry's reason and matter within the world.

It is worth noting a further parallel between Hejinian's poetic of encounters and certain threads of inquiry pursued in Lyotard's The Differend. While advancing a thesis in "Reason" about poetry's capacities for contextual reflexivity, Hejinian makes a qualified claim in a footnote to sharing "some of the same goals" as The Differend regarding explorations of links between discursive praxis, ideation, and worldly experience. She is not specific about those goals or moments of convergence. In The Differend, Lyotard writes: "Reflection requires that you watch out for occurrences, that you don't already know what's happening. It leaves open the question: Is it happening?"\(^{62}\) "Watching out for occurrences" and affirming them in language could stand comfortably as a description of Lyn Hejinian's core task in Happily. Equally applicable to Hejinian's poetic is Lyotard's idea that you don't already know what's happening — or that elements of contingency and doubt are intrinsic to knowing and describing. Lyotard observes:

In sum, there are events: something happens which is not tautological with what has happened. Would you call what happens the case? — The case, der Fall, would be that something happens, quod, rather than what happens, quid. — Would you say that "the world is all that [which] is the case," as Wittgenstein does? — We could if we distinguished between the case and that which is the case.... The case is: There is, It happens. That is to say: Is it happening? (79, interpolation included)

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\(^{60}\) Nancy, The Sense of the World 147.  
\(^{61}\) Lyn Hejinian, "Language and 'Paradise,'" Language of Inquiry 61.  
\(^{62}\) Lyotard, The Differend xv.
Although she situates her poetry within appreciations of worldliness, Hejinian wonders in doing so, as Lyotard does, whether there are considerable distances between material and commonplace realities — actual things and events, or “that which is the case” (quid) — and our sense of the world, or perception of what happens (quod). And like Lyotard, Hejinian is concerned utterly with the “phrase regimens” or descriptions that are a (written) response to perception, and ways in which our methods of saying in language might play a significant constitutive role in our praxes of knowing. How might the event of acknowledgement itself differ radically from events that happen and are acknowledged? What differences exist between “things” that occur and our perception that things are occurring, or in Lyotard’s distinction, between what and that? If, as Hejinian writes, “the only things for which we have words are appearances,” are we capable only of interacting with our perceptions of things and not with “things” themselves?63 Does the world need to be “noticed” in order to be “real,” and do things matter and have material substance without being perceived?

These are well-trodden queries, but they are relevant to a poetry that explores links between appearances, presencing, thought and language. Lyotard’s meditations on that, what and worldliness are audible in the following passage from Happily, in which Hejinian reflects upon the difficult “realism” that poetic language might ascribe to occurrences via acknowledgement:

I was going to speak of doom eager to resume consecutive events ploughing through the space surrounding them to something now, no ellipsis, just mouth open in astonishment or closed to suck quid and quod, that and what
Not proving but pointing not disappointed boldly taking aim obliged to acknowledge I admit to being sometimes afraid of the effort required for judgment, afraid of the judgment required
That can happen only after that it has happened is ascertained, if you can keep up, time can’t be banished, being real
In the world we see things together, the judgments have been made, takes the chalk, draws the milky line (21-22)

Things "in the world" appear "together" as a series of "consecutive events." Or rather the world is, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, a condition of togetherness. The world, quid, exists beside our perception of it, quod. "We see things together" — but only within the milky lines of a particular ethical framework; one that embodies, alongside its insistence upon "being real," a necessary measure of ambivalence ("I admit to being sometimes... afraid of the judgment required"). The certainly uncertain phrase "if you can keep up" is reminiscent of Hejinian's opening words to the preface of Writing Is an Aid to Memory, a long poem published twenty-two years prior to Happily: "I am always conscious of the disquieting runs of life slipping by."64

A poetic that takes worldly affirmation as its core principle must confront the difficult epistemolexical spheres of doubt and contingency, two obvious counterweights to the material and experiential rhetoric encoded in Happily's meditations upon the phrase "this is happening." A focus upon empirical positivism risks, superficially, charges of a-historical and universalising authoritarianism: this is happening and does so out of time, and only thanks to the regard of a human observer who possesses "knowledge" and whose experiential subjectivity is the central locus of a poem's meaning. A dialectics between affirmation and contingency drives Happily, and the poem's internal mechanics actually depend upon this quandary of experientialist poetics. "I espouse a poetics of affirmation," announces Hejinian. "I also espouse a poetics of uncertainty, of doubt, difficulty and strangeness."65 "Reason" directs that a "responsible" poetics will acknowledge "swarms of contradiction and ambivalence" and will have "dilemma (as a border under pressure of doubt, as a border in question) as one of its central features."66 I want to consider in turn the affirming and doubting elements of Happily, before suggesting how their combination is crucial to Hejinian's poetical ethics.

During a recent reading of her own poetry's Steinian attentiveness to the runs of life slipping by — or "consecutive events ploughing through the space surrounding them to something now" (Happily 21) — Hejinian stated: "I am attracted to and engaged with what comes into view. Things have presence because they occur in and as

65 Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 235.
motion.... And to acknowledge it is to acknowledge that the world exists, things are
happening, and it matters. How and why things matter, how they materialise, how they
appear, is contingent but intrinsic.... What matters appears and what appears
matters." Poetry affirms the presence of things as they happen "into view," or a
subject's perceptual terrain. Poetry matters, literally — it shows things as they
materialise, and thus bears a kind of witness to its worldly time. To Hejinian this is a
useful and happy endeavour:

Eudaimonia is the joy one experiences in the mattering of life — in the
sufficiency of its matter. It is pleasure in the fact that it matters.
It is matter with history, not so much because it has a past as because it
cares about the future.... We care about the idea of what's going to
happen to humanity. If we didn't, life would be meaningless.68

A positive worldliness that takes "pleasure in the fact that it matters," related perhaps
to what Hejinian identifies as "Calvinist" and "liberal" elements of her upbringing in
American New England, has characterised her poetic throughout her writing life.69 "To
improve the world," she mused in 1998, "one must be situated in it, attentive and
active; one must be worldly."70 Ten years earlier she tendered this observation in The
Cell: "There is that in poetry / The approach of a great improvement."71

Charles Altieri ventures that within Lyn Hejinian's contextual and material poetic
"may lie our peace"72 — a phrase rich with worldly futurity, and substantiated by
Hejinian in different terms: "As writers we care for and about the future; we make it
matter. I can only agree with Viktor Shklovsky when he says that 'the creation... of
art can restore to [us] sensation of the world, [it] can resurrect things and kill
pessimism.'"73 In "Reason" Hejinian again cites the Russian Formalist writer
Shklovsky, developing his concept of experiential renewal through a poetic of
ostranenie ("making strange") and linking poetry's purpose to affirmations of
"liveliness": "It is the task of poetry to produce the phrase this is happening and

69 See for example Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 13 June 1975, Hejinian Papers,
Mandeville [74, 1, 7].
70 Hejinian, Preface to "Who Is Speaking?," Language of Inquiry 31.
72 Altieri, "Possibilities of Postmodernism," 155.
73 Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 241; interpolations included.

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thereby to provoke the sensation that corresponds to it — a sensation of newness, yes, and of renewedness — an experience of the revitalization of things in the world, an acknowledgment of the liveliness of the world, the restoration of the *experience* of our experience — a sense of living our life.\textsuperscript{74}

During discussion in 1998, Hejinian speculated upon a reciprocity of “care” that is established when poetry “produces the phrase *this is happening*,” or records worldly appearances:

> It’s a Heideggerean fascination, that the thing that makes a human human is his or her ability to record the appearing of the world; and through human seeing of the appearing of the world, the world gets to appear. So actually the world does perhaps care that we’re seeing it.\textsuperscript{75}

As a writer, Hejinian avows to “care for and about the future” by “making it matter,” or allowing it to materialise. She constructs here a reverse scenario: the world “cares” to be seen, in order that it might “appear.” I do not think Hejinian means this statement to be anthropomorphic or appropriative, even though it seems to mediate worldly “objectivity” through a human-subjective lens, and rhetorically attributes sentient qualities to an entire world. Rather, Hejinian is interested in poetical guest/host relationships, where things and people are ordered via dynamics of *mutuality* and co-existence: “The word as symbol establishes a guest/host relationship between speaker and things of the world. We are strangers to the things of which we speak until we speak [or write] and become instead their guests or they become ours…. We tell in order to become guests and hosts to each other and to things — or to become guests and hosts to life.”\textsuperscript{76}

Hejinian stresses in *Happily* a belief that the world (*quid*) exists happily in excess of human regard (*quod*): “Joy — a remnant of an original craziness we can hardly remember — it exists, everything does, without us.”\textsuperscript{77} Her focus, then, is directed


\textsuperscript{75} Lyn Hejinian, interview with the author, 3 August 1998.

\textsuperscript{76} Hejinian, “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 238; my interpolation.

\textsuperscript{77} Hejinian, *Happily* 8.
toward what happens between things and people as they coincide, and to "worldliness" as a state of linkage or togetherness. We can only know the world as a function of the interrelation that happens with phenomenal observation, or within a shared space of appearance. Poetry is propiation, argues Hejinian, citing philosopher Martin Heidegger — "a speaking that matters," or a transformation of relations between "strangers" (people or things) into relations of being-with, or guest/host relations. "To appropriate... is to grant, to acknowledge, to own up, to love, to thank, to make a hospitality bond with."  

Reciprocity of care takes a fascinating place in a very recent piece of Lyn Hejinian's critical writing. In "Figuring Out," Hejinian reads Deer Night by American experimentalist poet Leslie Scalapino beside core tenets of Mahayana Buddhism, following Scalapino's predilections and methods. Hejinian suggests that in Scalapino's poetic "one is not separate from occurrence" and that "it is extraordinarily difficult, perhaps even impossible, for a person either to find his or her place in the landscape or to separate from it."  

Observations of occurrence (this is happening) immediately place an observer into mutual context with "things" that appear to happen, so that "one is not separate" from them. One's subjectivity indeed is related to, and dependent upon, the "objectivity" of the "things" that one observes: we cannot separate from the landscape. By understanding occurrence in terms of guest/host relationships, where care is not solely a property of human volition or sentience but a state of interaction, Hejinian emphasises intersubjectivity and interobjectivity, and a middle ground between subject and object. These qualities are crucial to Jean-Luc Nancy's proposed idea of "community" as being-in-common or being-with, and to the "Middle Way" Buddhism touched upon by Hejinian in "Figuring Out." An extract from a letter written in 1984 by Lyn Hejinian to her mother, Carolyn Andrews, offers a rare and fascinating link between Hejinian's own reading praxes and Buddhist thought:

Every time I make the effort to investigate Zen Buddhism it seems to satisfy almost all the criteria I can imagine for spiritual usefulness and philosophical logic.

78 Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 238.
79 Hejinian, "Figuring Out," 4 and 1.
80 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 23 September 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 16].
Hejinian goes on to identify "poetic paradox" that "reside[s] irreducibly and fully in the Zen Koan" as the principal source of her interest in Buddhist philosophy. My second chapter will address radical subjectivities and objectivities implied by guest/host relations, as touched upon by Hejinian in "Figuring Out." I note them here simply to open an important window and to provide further context for Hejinian's interest in an ethics of worldliness.

_Happily _makes strong links between "happiness" and _happenstance_, or circumstantial "things in the world" (_this is happening_) that arrive constantly to revivify experience and provide "a sense of living our life".  

Our names tossed into the air scraped in the grass before  
having formed any opinion leaving people to say only  
that there was a man who happened on a cart and  
crossed a gnarled field and there was a woman who  
 happened on a cart and crossed a gnarled field too  
 Is happiness the name for our (involuntary) complicity with  
 chance?  
Anything could happen  
A boy in the sun drives nails into a fruit a sign (cloud) in the  
wind swings (_Happily_ 5-6)

Anything could chance into one's everyday space of regard, figured here by the strangely-familiar, archetypal woman and man who "happen on a cart" to cross a field. Their movement is temporal but their fable-like presence also suggests timelessness — a binary linked in Hejinian's use of repetition. "Revitalization of things in the world" is effected here by juxtaposition of ordinary and extra-ordinary elements, necessitating a reader's heightened regard for worldly occurrences. Hejinian's descriptive processes skew everyday objects and perceptions and allow them to interact in strange ways: "a boy in the sun drives nails into a fruit a sign (cloud)." "Happiness," writes Hejinian, "is a complication, as it were, of the ordinary, a folding in of the happenstantial." 

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82 This is a practical example of Viktor Shklovsky's _ostranenie_ or "making strange," discussed in Shklovsky's "Art as Technique" at 20-21. Chapter five discusses the Formalists and these methods in detail.  
Marjorie Perloff focuses upon a dialogue in *Happily* between contingency or the proximate chanciness of things that happen to constitute one’s worldly present, and the sufficiencies of happiness. She cites Hejinian’s description of happiness as “a lasting state of being... neither subject to change nor capable of effecting change.”

While affirming events of everyday life, Hejinian admits “pleasure in the fact that it matters” — or happiness. She also embraces the idea that “anything could happen,” an arbitrariness of occurrence — happenstance — that she reckons into all narratives of knowing. Such paradoxically opposing meanings find equilibrium within *Happily*. They are best described by Hejinian’s own phrases “contingent but intrinsic” and “a folding-in of the happenstential.” Embodied in dialectics such as temporal and a-temporal coincidence, or affirmation beside incertitude, *dilemmatos* provides *Happily* with key formal and material dynamics.

Quandary — a term of dilemma that the Oxford English Dictionary lists, appropriately, as being of uncertain origin — is implicit always in the welcome optimism and enthusiasms of Hejinian’s poetics of worldly care. “Reason” thus qualifies a poetics of worldly affirmation:

In assuming a positive value to experience for its own sake, and in advocating thereby an art which heightens perceptibility, one risks appearing to privilege sensation over cogitation, to promote immediacy and disdain critique. There is a danger that one implies that the questioning of experience may serve to distance and thereby diminish at least aspects of it, and that this is antithetical to “real” artistic practice. This is the basis of art’s supposed hostility to criticism, theory (thought), and occasionally hostility even to examination of its own history. Or, to put it another way, on these grounds, the philistine romantic attempts to justify his or her rejection of context.

These are critical elements of Hejinian’s poetic. Positive accounts of phenomenal experience within Hejinian’s work are contingent upon factors that she groups under a rubric of “critique and history,” otherwise referred to as “context.” The meanings that

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we give to worldly occurrences depend upon diverse factors including the extent of their duration, their mobility and placement in relation to other things, the medium in which they are acknowledged, and an observer’s subjectivity. Affirmations of things that “happen” are provisional in an intrinsic sense, a function of inevitable changes that comprise ongoing “reality.” In other words, happiness finds its continuity in contingency — in and as a matter of context.

Along comes something — launched in context

This section offers a reading of “context” as a foundational, ethical qualifier to Lyn Hejinian’s worldly poetic. In an essay comically titled “The Quest For Knowledge in the Western Poem,” whose materials she developed as a counterpoint to Oxota: A Short Russian Novel, Hejinian makes two opening gambits:

What does a poem know?
Or more specifically, what does a Western poem know?88

Language poet Barrett Watten echoes Hejinian’s inquiries in Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union, a collaborative prose work.89 “Does poetry have any knowledge, and if so, what?” asks Watten. (42) In “The Quest For Knowledge,” Hejinian interprets knowledge as a relation mediated by “the context in which it is meaningfully known,” a context that might include language as one of its many vectors. (221) “Knowledge,” she writes, “like speaking or writing, is not an entity but a function — it would best be called ‘knowing’ — and the purpose of that function is to contextualize — to contextualize in the profoundest sense, so that knowledge is not only knowing of (which is experience in potentia) and knowing that (which generates propositions) but also knowing how.” (223)

In concert with post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose text Aporias she cites in “Reason,” Hejinian is observing epistemologies at problematical points of

88 Lyn Hejinian, “The Quest For Knowledge in the Western Poem,” Language of Inquiry 211.
reference and description. She reads each "reality" as a function of its surrounding discursive and historic-cultural (worldly) location, subject to differ\'{a}nce and recombinant possibility. We know that something happens, or of and about something, or how it seems, but always in relation, or as. "In this manner," writes Russian poet Nina Iskrenko, "the world is conceived not as a collection of objects, but as a system of links." Hejinian has coined a comparable phrase to describe knowing as "a site of relationship," a way of addressing occurrences by virtue of their linkages: the as effect. She writes: "It is in and amid the interconnections... that meaning and its concomitant knowing abides." Reality does not exist in vacuums of representation and (discursive) substitution, where one signer denotes or substitutes for one single entity or "thing."

This is not to imply that "meaning" is impossible, intrinsically — a popular clich\'{e} accompanying diverse readings of Derridean post-structural thinking. It is contingent rather upon referentiality and the local stopping work of context or circumstance. "From the very first moment... [a statement] trembles in an unstable multiplicity as long as there is no context to stop us," writes Derrida. "Consecutive events" come to present notice "ploughing through the space surrounding them," answers Hejinian in Happily. (22) "Each reality needs to be affirmed" (4) — along with the happenstance that attends its appearance:

Constantly I write this happily
Hazards that hope may break open my lips
What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding, and
to doubt it would be a crime against it
I sense that in stating 'this is happening' (3)

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92 Nina Iskrenko, "We Are the Children of Russia's Dull Years (on the poetic tendencies of the 1980s and some of their sources)," Crossing Centuries: The New Generation in Russian Poetry, ed. John High et al. (Jersey City, New Jersey: Talisman House, 2000) 303.
93 Hejinian, "Figuring Out," 4-5.
95 For Ferdinand de Saussure's groundbreaking thesis on referentiality and signification, see "Nature of the Linguistic Sign," Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader 10-14.
96 Derrida, Aporias 9.
In other words, *reality* — “what I feel is taking place,” or what I might “know” and affirm, as suggested by the phrase “this is happening” — arrives always in *context* and *motion*. “Hazards” recalls both the haphazard nature of occurrences, and the contingencies implied by utterances that “tremble in an unstable multiplicity” (Derrida) without contextual arrest.

In the past four years, Hejinian’s work has explored an aphorism that conjoins a perceiving subject’s sense of the world and the intrinsic role of context: “Along comes something — launched in context.” The phrase begins two sections of the essay “Reason,” where Hejinian describes it as “the sentence with which I’ve become obsessed.”97 It re-emerges as a headnote to the 57th section of Hejinian’s ongoing work *My Life*, an increment corresponding to the year in which Hejinian wrote “Reason.”98 It appears again in “Some Notes toward a Poetics”99 and as the eighteenth “sentence” of *Happily* (5). Fragments of it surface at subsequent moments of that poem as Hejinian returns repeatedly to poethical contemplations of the phrase *this is happening*: “Context is the chance that time takes…. / Something launched without endpoint…. / From something launched we extract our sentences…. / Launched? Nothing is not so…. / Something comes…. / It is midday a sentence its context — history with a future.”100

Lyn Hejinian explains her maxim as a dyad of affirmation and contingency:

One cannot meaningfully say “this is happening” *out* of context. At the very moment of uttering the phrase, “natality” occurs. And from that moment of incipience, which occurs with the recognition of the experience of and presented by the phrase *along comes something — launched in context* through the phrase *this is happening*, we are *in* context, which is to say, in thought (in theory and with critique) and in history.101

Hejinian’s phrase embodies the historical provisionality of every utterance. It addresses the present while acknowledging potential futures: the mutual context that arrives with every encounter between *observer* and *occurrence* will transform as soon

100 Quotes in order appear at 5, 7, 29, 13, 26 and 7 of *Happily*.
as something else is “launched” into the space of regard. A distinction made by Hejinian is relevant here. “Along comes something — launched in context” is “a motif, not a theme” in *Happily*. “In the Russian Formalist sense,” she observes, a motif is “an integral part of the dynamic that structures the work by propelling it.” Hejinian’s refrain in *Happily*. By declaring a poetic of encounters that contextualises it affirms, “along comes something — launched in context” provides a structural key to the poem. It also marks two related ethical investigations that drive *Happily*: a rejection of poetical closure in favour of a regenerative, contextual poetics of acknowledgement, and an inquiry into ontologies of intersubjectivity and coexistence.

Hejinian observes that *Happily*’s lines move forward by “advancing speculations, and bringing [the poem] up short, and turning it around, and taking it off again” as they trace “the development of [an] idea, the hovering of the idea.” Rather than arriving complete at any concept or perception, *Happily* remains open to uncertainty and contradiction. This impetus toward dis-closure is drawn partly from wayward qualities essential to consciousness and language, in Hejinian’s view — and thus to knowing. Acknowledgement, an interactive and epistemological process, has markedly different ontological status from knowledge, which implies the shutters of termination (arrival) and attainment. Worldly “things” are allowed to remain mobile in *Happily*, open to rearrangement and a renewal of meaning in subsequent contexts and encounters:

Even after the closeness of the room which is now vacant I rise
at the thought of the future of all the positions of things
and re-enter the room (*Happily* 17)

While “it is the task of poetry to produce the phrase *this is happening* and thereby to provoke... an experience of the revitalization of things in the world,” as Hejinian writes, or to “make it new,” after Ezra Pound’s famed shibboleth, it necessarily must do so within the differential bounds of context. This is implied in one of *Happily*’s

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103 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
most arresting lines: "And each time the moment falls the emphasis of the moment falls into time differently." By insisting upon multiple, specific contexts, each with their own duration, Hejinian refuses the static and proprietalor "control" of meaning that might accompany non-contextual descriptions. As Hejinian sees it, such static conceptions of "knowledge" are a central feature of poetries that are "hostile to criticism and theory" and "even examination of [their] own history."

Hejinian embraces context to offset the potential a-historicism of a poetics anchored to the phrase "this is happening." Within Happily, equal regard is given to the sufficiency and contingency of matter. Experiential "realities" in the poem gain historical trajectory via precise descriptions of their local surroundings, and meditations upon their momentariness. Affirmations are matched by proximate counter-expressions of context and dilemma:

Something that leaps into motion in the cold air uncovered in a motion
There's no one 'correct path'
No sure indication (27-28)

This emphasises a perceiving subject's own contextual location, and refuses narratives of proprietalor knowledge-fixing in favour of epistemological contingency. "'Understanding' is used to apply discovery a term of affirmation but what of not entering," muses Hejinian. "Happiness is independent of us bound to its own incompleteness sharply."

Throughout Happily, "context" and "dilemma" are signifiers for an ethics of non-prescriptive knowing: "Of each actuality I'm uncertain and always was uncertain and such uncertainty is certain." As philosopher Giorgio Agamben implies, there can be no ethics without contradiction, since a declared resolution to inquiry — a "destiny" or finishing point, where everything is known or attained — would nullify the purpose of an ethics, which requires judgements about the changing borders between ongoing

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106 Hejinian, Happily 27.
108 Hejinian, Happily 27 and 24.
109 Hejinian, Happily 36.
materials of living, and appreciations of potentiality. In this sense, it becomes ethical to insist upon ambivalence, in order to critique narratives that bind living processes within non-generative logics of complete “knowledge.” By being ongoingly “generative rather than directive” and “open to the world” as it perpetually changes, a context-oriented poem can effect rejections of closure in knowing and being, or epistemology and ontology. "The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable,” argues Hejinian.

In the following extract from Slowly (2002), a “sequel” to Happily, Hejinian encodes openness of knowing by using the words “occasional,” “secret,” “merely reflected,” “imply” and “tempered.” She moves the signifier “rain” through a contextual change that immediately shifts its meaning and weight:

Of unhappiness producing an intense form of ambivalence unambivalently I feel an occasional fast flush of discovery
   The mind’s eye looks down with all the wits
   like the sand of the mindful about it
   It is all a secret, a rain, a merely reflected gleam to imply
   The rain falls softly on a field of tempered blades

These lines sustain positive ambivalence, affirming “occasional discovery” while refusing an end to inquiry — refusing knowledge in favour of acknowledgement. “Knowing is not a terminus but an incitement,” Hejinian advises. It is a certain admission of uncertainty.

Hejinian frequently uses the terms “inquiry” and “reason” to suggest this kind of contextual knowing. Although she names her key poethical conceit after a cornerstone

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11 Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” Language of Inquiry 43. Chapter three discusses the publication history of this essay.


13 Hejinian, Slowly 15.

of Western philosophical vocabulary, a torque of nomenclature is at work: "Reason itself operates in the border between concepts — and again between several interdependent pairs of concepts. Reason may even constitute such a border zone." Poetic reason is "a simultaneously descriptive and ethical realm," Hejinian argues. By inference, philosophical reason is also chancy, and subject to the descriptive, differential motions of language: "Reason... is philosophy’s fundamental concern. But as a foundation it is everywhere fissured; reason is a concept that constantly bifurcates." In claiming "reason" as a core term of her poetics, Hejinian critiques a narrative of immutable "logic" while poaching jewels from its linguistic citadel. She gains an amount of cultural legitimacy and "knowing" credibility while effecting, in writer Charles Bernstein’s words, "the poeticizing of philosophy."

_Happily_ explores "reason" as a form of border knowing. The work is neither poetics nor philosophy, but both, met within poetry:

There really is something to try over
To the air to draw sentence forms and to hang in suspense no further than this no more than need be
Reason offers
Reason in sentences covers kindness — doorways, bridges, floorboards
Reason opens approaches
Reason describes an artificial (there is no other) paradise and succumbs to lethargy, indifference, the world changing, unchanging, and it is, it comes with a musical shock....

Logic tends to force similarities but that's not what we mean by 'sharing existence'
The matter is incapable of being caused, incapable of not being so, condensed into a cause — a bean, captive forever
Perhaps
Because this object is so tiny
A store of intellect, a certain ethical potential, something that will hold good....
It seems we've committed ourselves

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116 Hejinian, Preface to "Reason," _Language of Inquiry_ 337.
117 Hejinian, Preface to "Reason," _Language of Inquiry_ 337.
119 Hejinian, _Happily_ 12-13 and 15-16.
Reason "covers kindness," offers poetry "something to try over," and "opens approaches." Qualified here by Hejinian's use of the words perhaps and seems, and in the ambiguous turns of certain, a poem's "ethical potential" resides in its capacities to critique its own placement within a world of transitions between objects, others and ideas. In this — launched in context and reason — it might "hold good." As things arrive within the field of her subjective consciousness, Hejinian links them via language. They are not forced into sameness by the causal similarities of "logic," a narrow shadow to philosophy's Reason. They are acknowledged rather in the specific contexts of their arrival, or with their differences preserved. "Context is a past with a future," writes Hejinian. "That is the sense of the phrase this is happening. That is what gives us a sense of reason."\(^{120}\)

Happily offers readers a poetics of reasoned "admission" rather than a poetry of knowledgeable "confession." To admit (L. ad-mittere, send) is literally to send along or make room, while to confess (L. con-fiteri, declare) is to avow clarity or truth. One word opens where the other closes. Happily admits the mess of surrounding history: "Whatever I see in thought as life I come to coming to me in history." (19) It concurrently refuses to privilege the interiorised and transcendent reflections of a single sentient being(-Poet) — a poetic telos that Hejinian describes as "anti-intellectual and ultimately philistine," "romantic," and "boringly persistent."\(^{121}\) Hejinian's appeal to a sense of public worldliness short-circuits the pretended seclusions of lyrical utterances that try to control "private access to the real," in Charles Altieri's view. Such discourses ask that meaning be "tied closely to the demands of [a] specific ego," one that postures toward a-temporal confession while universalising its concept of life's materials.\(^{122}\) To different observers, the same things appear in different contexts and bear divergent meanings. Hejinian's I refuses to possess material that it notices, and happily lets differences co-exist:

... a dozen things singly through different mental states, mental states here and there as if unknown to each other things happen to them differently...

\(^{120}\) Hejinian, "Reason," *Language of Inquiry* 347. I am grateful to Logan Esdale who encouraged me to think further about the word "reason" in this context by writing, in an e-mail to me dated 9 February 2001: "I'm intrigued by [Hejinian's] seeming attempt to resist tossing 'reason' in the historical trash, and redefining it so that saying 'I'm being very reasonable' sounds neither masculine or feminine."


\(^{122}\) Altieri, "Possibilities of Postmodernism," 153.
Something comes
The experiences generated by sense perception come by the
happenstance that is with them.\textsuperscript{123}

\textit{Being in context} — a state of ongoing encounter — is described by Hejinian as "the most complex of experiential situations."\textsuperscript{124} Context historicises the relationship between a perceiving subject and a world of things. We might imagine it as the border \textit{between} those things, or the place of encounter. In this way, "context" also announces "commonality." Hejinian describes context as "the medium of our encounter, the ground of our becoming (i.e., happening to be) present at the same place at the same time.... it comes into existence \textit{qua} context when something is launched in such a way as to become perceptible to us and thereby to involve us — whomever we are — strangers (even if, perhaps, only momentarily strangers) to each other previously and now inseparable components of that experience."\textsuperscript{125} Within the reciprocal contextualisation of each new encounter, provisional \textit{community} arrives. We reach here an exciting set of links active among this chapter's principal elements: Lyn Hejinian's serialised poetic forms; a contextual poetic, at once affirmative and contingent, that gets formed "in and as a relationship with the world"; a non-prescriptive ethics of knowing; and Jean-Luc Nancy's community \textit{in-becoming}.

Context is a pivot between \textit{Happily}'s poetics of acknowledgement, and Nancy's model of community as a state of being-with. By acknowledging a world of occurrences as they happen into "co-ontologies," as discrete materials that retain their singularities, \textit{Happily} generates a way of thinking about commonality that echoes Nancy's model for community — an event of being-in-common that is in constant arrival:

The happening consists in bringing forth a certain spacing of time, where something takes place.... In order to say "we," we have to be in a certain common space of time.... [C]ommunity itself is this space.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{123} Hejinian, \textit{Happily} 22 and 26.
\textsuperscript{124} Hejinian, "Introduction," \textit{Language of Inquiry} 4.
\textsuperscript{125} Hejinian, "Reason," \textit{Language of Inquiry} 342.
\textsuperscript{126} Nancy, "Finite History," 156-157.
Community, *commonality*, is "not the anonymous chatter of the 'public domain,'" a concept tied to the ubiquitous city-states of early political philosophy. It is rather a zone or place created by intersubjective linkages, argues Nancy, an occurrence-between that is a "spacing of time" — "if one still wants to call this 'community,'" he remarks. Perhaps we could call it a state of *continuous encounter*. This would echo Hannah Arendt's communitarian "space of appearance," a description comparable with Nancy's "common spacing of time." It would correspond also with Giorgio Agamben's idea of community as a state of "incessant emergence," proposed in *The Coming Community.* Or following Hejinian, we might call it *being in context*.

Nancy's rhetoric of community corresponds beautifully with Hejinian's interpretation of context, "the medium of our encounter." Where Nancy uses being-in-common as a trope for community he might equally write, within the turning limits of textual transliteration, being-in-context. Context literally implies linkage; and links that happen with encounters enable the task of "presenting or representing ourselves as a community." They are the event of a community whose continuity resides in perpetual motion. "Philosophy needs to think in principle about how we are 'us' among us, that is, how the consistency of our Being is in being-in-common, and how this consists precisely in the 'in' or in the 'between' of its spacing," suggests Nancy. This "spacing of time" is history, finite in the sense of its moment-to-moment character. Or as Hejinian writes in "Reason," this spacing of time is context:

> If one sees history as, at the very least, a set of relations — or, to be more precise, of active correlations (co-relations) — then that seems not too far from a workable characterization of the context of something. And it not only allows one to situate that *something* within history as a descriptive and explanatory account of what has happened, but it also gives *something* a history with a future.

Context names the fact of active co-relation, argues Hejinian, or the spacing "between" that constitutes Nancy's sense of being-in-common. To understand

127 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 7; see especially Nancy's discussion of "first philosophy" at 21-28.
130 Agamben, *Coming Community* 20.
131 Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 237.
community in context, as “a past with a future,” is to view it as a discrete series of historical links, always reassembling in the *withness* of encounter.\(^{135}\)

Lyn Hejinian depicts *context* as a circumstance of interrelation with continually mobile horizons. It is important, however, to distinguish her poetic preservation of differences from non-specific rhetorics of proliferation. In an essay that helped to prompt Hejinian’s investigations in “Reason” of context and numerousness, Language poet Barrett Watten argues that “context is not fully accessible from a universalist notion of difference.”\(^{136}\) Watten analyses a post-modernist “poetics of possibility,” characterised by “claims for the possibility of form rather than the specificity of form.” Such a poetics validates “the possibility of language rather than a specific use of language,” he argues, and the “possibility of difference rather than a specific difference.” (4) Watten is critical of “much recent [American] experimental writing” that fails to relate its formal choices to a Realpolitik of worldly cultural production, even while it claims to effect “openness” and readerly agency. Such poetry risks “reproducing the liberal dynamic” of universal “possibility.” (4) It does away with local consequence and specific cultural sites in which material texts are produced and circulated, in favour of “a skeptical abstraction… that presumes a value of language as critique but that refuses cultural engagement in more specific terms.” (3)

Watten calls for a *cultural poetics* that links specific poetic strategies, including deployments of form, to “specific social investigations” and modes of cultural organisation. (3) “Abstract” and innovative poetic techniques cannot be equated uncritically with the proliferation of “difference” as a cultural or societal principle, Watten argues, and are in danger of effecting instead what Lyn Hejinian interprets in “Reason” as a “withdrawal into numerousness”:

This is not to reject “numerousness”…. Nor is it to say that a poetics of possibility is wrongheaded. But if we stop there, we risk a directionless pluralism, one we may claim as a politics but which stops short of


activating relationships within that plurality — and lacking participation in that formation of relationships, "possibility" is likely to turn into what I believe to be a dangerous immanence.  

In rejecting a "poetics of possibility" whose universalising discourses make context "inaccessible," Watten matches Hejinian in making context comparable with history.  

A specific poetics is central to this critique: one that limits interrelation amongst materials, or closes down on future modes of being and knowing — that is, future ontologies, epistemologies, and histories.

As a common spacing of time existing between things, context is a site of "activ[e] relationships within the plurality" of occurrences. For Lyn Hejinian, this is paramount to its ethical force. When experience is valorised for its own sake, adrift from historicity, no ethical dilemmas or linkages are active. "It's in experiencing change as an exemplary connection that ethics becomes identified with linkage," argues Hejinian.  

During conversation in August 1998, Hejinian spoke of "the problem of negotiating the mass of information that comes at one, as sense percepts or ideas, and the ethical questions that get raised by the requirement — and I really do feel it to be one — that one in some way evaluate and respond to what happens, even if it's only to acknowledge that something's come along." She continued:

That seems a kind of ethics. One has to also foreground the fact that one is making choices, and at the same time one is making them in contexts. So that this ethics can't be a prescriptive one, because a prescriptive one couldn't possibly take account of all possible contexts. So it actually has to be almost like a pragmatic one, that one is operating in a field of possibilities and choosing among them, and validating some, signing on to some, invalidating others.

Although "the mass of information that comes at one" in a life may appear to be prolific and indistinguishable, Hejinian suggests that a responsible (or responsive) person will acknowledge details as they happen and make contextually-grounded differential choices, "validating some, signing on to some, and invalidating others." It follows that an ethical poetics will take moment-to-moment account of context as an.

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137 Hejinian, "Reason," Language of Inquiry 348.
138 Watten, "Bride of Assembly," 4 and 11. See also Barrett Watten, Bad History (Berkeley, California: Atelos Press, 1998).
140 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
historicising and limiting condition upon the possibilities of poetry's knowing, or its reasoning. The keys to this "kind of ethics" are elasticity and difference: a capacity to change bearing or make new linkages on a moment-to-moment basis, in response to whatever materials might arrive into a space of appearance.

How does this relate specifically to poetic composition? A poem such as Happily may concern itself with ethical issues — non-prescriptive epistemologies, and contextual ways of knowing and being — but how does it perform these investigations? Can poetry effect, in Watten's terms, "a specific politics" rather than "the possibility of critique," or "specific difference" rather than the mere "possibility of difference"? Emphasis upon non-authoritarian knowing occurs often at a lexical level within Happily — in collocations of words and phrases that embrace provisionality and context, for example. But does this alone promulgate an ethics? How might we approach an analysis that "is not simply a question of language but of the entirety of cultural form?"

**Ethical forms: the shape of unknowing**

The mere existence of prolific arrays of "things" in poetry, regardless of their intentions or positioning within a subjective observational milieu, will not necessarily guarantee Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of being-in-common. Nor will it inevitably speak of an ethics. "Co-incidence" as perceived by a sentient being would seem inadequate as a foundation for community. Or rather, rhetorics that make prima facie connection between the phrase "this is happening" and worldly commonality require further scrutiny. As Lyn Hejinian asserts, an unqualified pluralism that is "lacking participation in the formation of relationships" might pave the way for "a dangerous immanement" in which no thing is distinguished from another and an ethic of totalising sameness prevails. "Merely to be 'with' one another in a universe of

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141 Watten, "Bride of Assembly," 7.
142 Watten, "Bride of Assembly," 4 and 3. Watten engaged similar issues in Total Syntax when writing: "There is also a syntax of context, 'exterior' to the work, in the way the work makes its statement at a particular point in cultural time." See Barrett Watten, Total Syntax (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 68.
143 Hejinian, "Reason," Language of Inquiry 348.
discourse is the most external relation that terms can have, and seems to involve nothing whatever as to farther consequences," writes Hejinian. She is citing William James, a prominent American nineteenth and early twentieth-century psychologist and linguist. James’s investigations into “radical empiricism” as a descriptive method for tracking cognitive processes — specifically the volume Essays in Radical Empiricism — have been of great significance to Hejinian. They were also important to James’s one-time pupil Gertrude Stein, who studied psychology with him at Harvard’s Radcliffe College during the early twentieth century.

The key to discussions of ethicality and “participation in the formation of relationships” is poetic form itself. Does Lyn Hejinian’s deployment of certain sentence, line and paragraph types actively enrich our understanding of “specific differences” and social inquiries, and how might these inhabit Happily’s use of “context” as a formal conceit? How does the poem participate in generating open linkages, to offset the potential “immanentism” of its material collections? And how do its lines perform the moment-to-moment ethical accounting that Hejinian propounds? “What interests James (as it interests me) are not so much the things, which simple conjunction leaves undisturbed, but the transitions between them and between them and us,” observes Hejinian. She continues:

It is in these transitions that the activity of being is exercised — the work of being in the world, perceptible and, in the case of sentient things, perceiving, or, in the case of nonsentient things, susceptible to the influence, the causative capacities, of other things, sentient or not. These interrelated transitions form a system of perceptible effects. For James, these are the materials of cognition and hence of consciousness.

To appreciate the philosophical provocations of Lyn Hejinian’s recent writings, poetics must be understood as an active, formal praxis. I have argued that Happily admits context as a means of embracing both a non-prescriptive ethics of knowing, and co-ontological ways of being among (and with) worldly occurrences. This chapter concludes with a close reading of the poem’s formal mechanics, to show Hejinian’s

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144 See for example Hejinian, Preface to “Strangeness,” Language of Inquiry 136.
146 Lyn Hejinian outlines conceptual relationships between texts by William James and Gertrude Stein in “Language and Realism” in “Two Stein Talks,” Language of Inquiry, 92-105. My fifth chapter further explores these dialogues.
“interrelated transitions” at work and to clarify links between Happily’s contextual, poetical innovations and ethical inquiries.

Peter Nicholls asks relevant questions about poetic form and socio-cultural organisation, or aesthetics and ethics, in Lyn Hejinian’s poetry. Under a rubric of “phenomenological literatures” that address worldly occurrences via radical modes of description, Nicholls points to difficult relations between poetic form and negotiation of “particular social perspectives” (241) in Hejinian’s work:

The fit between this kind of statement and the poetry itself will remain problematic…. And whether a particular form of poetic writing can sustain the large ethical claims Hejinian proposes via [philosopher Hannah] Arendt remains, for me, something of an open question. What we can say with some certainty is that Hejinian has now compelled us to ask it, and any future readings of the work which give serious consideration to her stated intentions will have to situate themselves somewhere on the “border” between ethics and aesthetics. (252)

In a sense, publication of The Language of Inquiry in 2000 verifies Nicholls’s (earlier) comments regarding Hejinian’s “stated intentions” and future readings of her poetry. The Language of Inquiry makes unequivocal, and demonstrably available, Hejinian’s hope that her work is read “somewhere on the border” — whether between poetry and philosophy, ethics and aesthetics, poetics and ethics, or public and private discourses. As Nicholls suggests, Hejinian has compelled readers to ask an open set of questions about poetic form, ethics, and the social and philosophical “effects” of her poetry. One need only read the formidable list of “Sources” in Hejinian’s A Border Comedy (2001), dozens of them philosophical works, to appreciate the explicit centrality of links between poetics and philosophy in Hejinian’s recent writings.

Questions about the socio-cultural impact of experimental strategies are undeniably standard fare when discussing avant-garde poetics. The initial, community-oriented stages of the American Language School attract much attention in this regard, partly as a result of certain writers’ own investments in innovation and consequence, as observed wryly by Hejinian: “We were espousing an admittedly utopian enterprise —

one that was attached to a virtually explicit agenda underlying every poetry discussion at the time; it was intrinsic to our poetics, and its clear aim was to improve the world."¹⁵⁰ In researching parallels between Hejinian's context-oriented forms and models of community such as those proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy, I keep in mind a critical debate about Language writing and political efficacy that occurred during the mid-1980s, and that might be rehearsed usefully here.

Jerome McGann cites Ron Silliman's poem Tjanting as an exemplar for links between poetic form and social inquiry.¹⁵¹ Tjanting uses the Fibonacci sequence as a numerical model for parallel sets of sentences that interact, as thesis and antithesis, to produce synthesis. This is a classically Marxist dialectic, in Silliman's estimation.¹⁵² Charles Altieri stingingly criticises McGann's interpretation of Tjanting as "a localized instance of class struggle itself" — a reading that Altieri dismisses for relying "almost exclusively on metaliterary abstractions" as "a substitute for careful poetic and conceptual analysis" regarding "effective social action" and its link to poetics.¹⁵³ Altieri in a sense follows the dialectical form of Tjanting by setting up a polar contest. On one side he places "encouraging readers to produce their own meanings" and on the other, "work[ing] analytically through the contradictions of the existing social structure."¹⁵⁴ To the first he attributes a diffusion of collectivity, and to the second, a measure of social solidarity.

Analyses that routinely oppose direct social action and aesthetic strategy, or that encourage separation between writerly production and readerly consumption, are replete with impossible choices. Without advocating pluralistic coveralls, I want to think beyond a mutually-exclusive binary that counterpoises political action and effect and poetical abstraction and affect. When discussing claims for "the political and ethical dimensions" of poetry, it is important to "expose the illusions... of customary


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reading privileges” as McGann directs, while simultaneously “locat[ing] in specific works” of poetry “effective social content,” as per Altieri’s demands. Like Barrett Watten, Altieri wants a critique that questions “the entirety of cultural form.” Such criticism must move beyond language qua language as its sole exemplar, he argues:

But in fact grammar contains as many instances of dominant logical hierarchies as it does figures for an open and communal temporality, and it offers as many models of constant tension among subjects because of its play with differences as it does instances of integrating particulars with a collective order.

In other words, we cannot rely only on site-specific uses of language to gauge the measure of a poem’s political or ethical engagement. More particularly, we cannot use signifying procedures of language as a model for “difference” and then assert that grammar itself necessarily offers a mode of social comprehension based on differentiation and gathering of particulars. Something more is needed.

Altieri considers McGann’s claims for Tjanting in light of “actual class struggle” and “intensify[ing] the reader’s hopes and commitments in that practical sphere.” He then calls for material “accounts of production” that address socio-economic aspects of poetry’s circulation, pitting these against “empty rhetorical claims.” While speculating about ethical navigations in Lyn Hejinian’s poetry, I have focused instead on philosophical effects, or ways of thinking that a contextual poetic might engender. Differences between material and ideational “outcomes” of experimental art practices correspond in a sense with Jane Jacobs’s useful distinction between “real and imagined geographies” as cited in my introduction — a frame of thought that emerges from recent post-Marxist and culturally-focused geographical research. I have not given space within this thesis to detailed analyses of such developments in cross-disciplinary thinking. They hover peripherally, however, to any discussion about social impact and cultural forms.

156 Watten, “Bride of Assembly,” 3.
159 Jane Jacobs, Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 3.
Making available new tools for comprehension is a significant component of radical art-making. Its reach may be difficult to gauge in material terms, or subject to passionate debate regarding "accessibility" and specialisation of language and readership. But as Hejinian contends, everything "seen in thought and life" comes to us "in history" (Happily 19) — and activating different reading contexts and histories is preferable, in her ethical view, to making limiting demands for universal applicability. My focus upon Hejinian’s exploration of contingent epistemologies and ontologies — ways of existing in thought and being — tries to provide a necessary and useful philosophical adjunct to more materially focused accounts of the social "effect" of poetry. Here concepts link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their contours, articulate their respective problems, and belong to the same philosophy, even if they have different histories. Along with an ethics of non-authoritative inquiry, Lyn Hejinian’s poetry advances ways to understand commonality in terms of plural singularity. These are viable, challenging, philosophical and ethical sketches for socio-cultural organisation.

Such inquiries are intrinsic to the forms of Happily. The poem’s lineation is chosen to effect, in Hejinian’s words, “the shape of unknowing” — a form of reason that resists a telos of completion. By offering extensive displays of poetry in, as and about context, the poem formally requires and enacts difference and linkage, and motivates their occurrence. Hejinian writes: “Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts. Such contexts rarely coalesce into images, rarely come to terms. They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiation of denotation into relation.” Happily’s sentences track this endless radiation as it happens, while generating new links and transmutations between things — new encounters. Denotation becomes relation. Things get in time and place with one another in Hejinian’s written inventions, without necessarily coming to terms:

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159 In an interview with me on 3 August 1998, Hejinian advocated contextually-specific readings in favour of what she describes as an "intensely problematic everyman approach," commenting: "Everybody is uncommonly different from everybody else."


What is a slip of the tongue in quickening tempo over itself the
busy world seeking out a given time interval or probing it
Suddenly it encounters a wind, an onion, a reason (11)

These lines perceive disparate material within a “busy world” while performing odd
conjunctions between elements. Sentences that advance, turn, and begin again allow
Hejinian to “seek out” and embrace minutely detailed changes in context and
consciousness over “a given time interval,” while admitting things in their differences.

I return here to observations made by Hejinian and cited earlier: “Poetry comes to
know that things are. But this is not knowledge in the strictest sense; it is, rather,
acknowledgment — and that constitutes a sort of unknowing. To know that things are
is not to know what they are, and to know that without what is to know otherness (i.e.,
the unknown and perhaps unknowable). Poetry undertakes acknowledgment as a
preservation of otherness.”164 Via seemingly haphazard juxtapositions of percepts and
contexts, Happily draws our attention to spaces between materials and lines. To a
perceiving subject, the actualness of something — its phenomenological presence —
depends on differentiating borders, which are formed in the presence of countless
other beings and things. In these liminal zones, alterities are constituted and preserved:

Here I write with inexact straightness but into a place in place
immediately passing between phrases of the imagination
Flowers going optimistically to seed, fluttering candles lapping
the air, persevering saws swimming into boards, buckets
taking dents, and the hands on the clock turning—they
aren’t melancholy
Whether or not the future looks back to trigger a longing for
consonance grieving over brevity is ‘unfinished
work’ to remember to locate something in times to
come
Such a terrible thing whistling at the end of the rope is a poor
way of laughing
And okay in the dim natural daylight producing it in fragments
to the skeptic to take it is recognizable
Only the dull make no response
Each reality needs to be affirmed (Happily 3-4)

Things appear “in place” or on location in Happily, even as they “immediately [pass]
between phrases of the imagination” to occupy another, different place. Objects and

subjects, sentient and non-sentient, are put into “active correlation” with others over the long reach of a sentence. “Composition by juxtaposition presents observed phenomena without merging them, preserving their discrete particularity while attempting also to represent the matrix of their proximities,” observes Hejinian of her descriptive methods. She writes “with inexact straightness” in Happily — both an admission of descriptive contingency and a refusal of sameness. Poetry will only ever “produce in fragments” the un/knowing that accompanies a sense that each reality is happening and needs to be affirmed. “Unfinished work” leaps forward in the lines above, neatly marking the impossibility of an ethics or poetics that would impose an endpoint to life’s materials. While we might “grieve over [the] brevity” of our own existence — and mortality is certainly a key refrain in Happily — we cannot arrest the appearances that will continue, in phenomenological terms, to constitute the moving world, even without us in it.

Happily’s exploration of sentence forms that problematise the “knowing” of a describing subject are reminiscent of Gertrude Stein’s languages of experiential observation. Hejinian writes: “The motion of appearance is active, ongoing — it is what Gertrude Stein called composition. Composition as Stein understood it consists of the way one exists in and as one’s time.” Happily approaches the composition of worldliness from a comparable stance. The poem’s lines admit “the motion of appearance.” They seam between temporality, language and space, measuring “active, ongoing” elements as they coincide within a subject’s perceptual field to alter one another’s borders. Hejinian describes this in musical terms:

One grammatical device appearing in the work [Happily] is the one producing “accordioning” sentences, ones with solid handles (a clear beginning and a clear end) but with a middle that is pleated and flexible. My intention was to allow for the influx of material that surges into any thought, material that is charged with various and sometimes even incompatible emotional tonalities.

A single sentence from Happily shows this grammatical instrument at work:

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'I' moving about unrolled barking at blue clouds devoted —
to each other? to hasten to the point? to evade anxiety?
to picture? (13-14)

The form of this sentence allows it to enact several kinds of "unknowing." We hear Lyn Hejinian's signature piling-up of languaged thoughts in response to a "surging in" of material. The word "devoted" jumps away from "blue clouds" and filmic strobing occurs as different "emotional tonalities" are placed together. Both lexical units are made strange in a moment of reciprocal contextualisation. A pleated series of inquiries follows, each linked to a previous term while gaining incremental distance from a turn (—) in Hejinian's thinking. The dash disrupts certainty of lyrical flow, while multiple questions and deferrals offer philosophical ambivalence in hyper-performance. Hejinian's "I" is qualified to suggest humorously skeptical distance from an I who takes an authoritative stance in relation to a poem's materials.

In "Composition as Explanation" (1926), Gertrude Stein proposes and enacts formal affinities between teeming, perceived reality and the potential run-ons of descriptive language:

In [my writing] there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present. A composition of the prolonged present is a natural composition in the world.... I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one.... So then I as a contemporary creating the composition in the beginning was groping toward a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and again.169

"Natural" suggests an "actual" real as Stein experiences it, in consciousness and language, manifest in the phrases "a constant recurring and beginning" and "a marked direction in the direction of being in the present." Describing her technique of a continuous present, Stein could almost be referring to the perpetually mobile nowness that Hejinian explores in Happily ("What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding").170 Stein viewed her own compositions as formal realisations of constant change: "And after that what changes what changes after that, after that what changes


170 Hejinian, Happily 3.
and what changes after that and after that and what changes and after that and what changes after that." Stein tested the capacities of sentences to accommodate the endless materials that comprise one’s sense of reality, and Happily’s “pleated and flexible” sentences develop this innovation.

Hejinian’s “Preservation” from The Green also fathoms a kind of continuing present. Its prose lines conjoin their narratives across and though stopped sentences, tracing a “mindfulness” that emerges incessantly in relation to life’s materials:

I wanted the moment to contain itself with detail. More often places empty out, punctured by various distractions. From the rubble downpour we make a monument to propitiate the shake in life.... I come up against the concrete surface of the words, staring hard, and then skim back, to remark on shorelines not merely flat. Emerging mindfulness, moving socially alongside.

“Rubble downpour” and “the shake in life” are tropes for reality’s unceasing mobility, as perceived by a sentient observer. “Moving socially” could imply a state of being always-already in language and worldliness. Containing itself with detail, a paradoxical figure, signals a desire to preserve from effacement the specific, historical conditions in which things happen. Such attention to context explains Lyn Hejinian’s career-long choice of lengthy poetical forms in which changing events are admitted, literally, over a sustained interval. Hejinian’s poems rarely float as unanchored, one-off meditations or observations. Seriality allows everydayness to find maximum space and placement in language, while remaining incomplete. Or as Hejinian observes: “Seriality is quite a different matter. Time as it divides produces repetitions and permutations; time as it accumulates produces sequences, series. ‘Where do we find ourselves?.... In a series of which we do not know the extremes.’”

171 Stein, “Composition as Explanation,” 33.
173 Writing in Gender Trouble about cultural constructions of gender, Judith Butler proposes an idea of being “always already” in language, or in a context where signifying practices and “worldly” meanings are always reciprocally linked. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (London & New York: Routledge, 1990) 143.
Hejinian's formal attention to each moment as it "contain[s] itself with detail" recalls Stein's matrices of dailiness that brim with connectivity. This excerpt from "A Vocabulary of Thinking" in Stein's *How to Write* seems to prefigure Hejinian's "emerging mindfulness moving socially alongside":

> It is a way of letting it be partly hers and theirs and it is also a way of their leaving it one at a time as often as it is of any use to anyone. It is moreover as much as they care to allow them to arrange it.... Coming with and an arrangement of their being more than half placed in an allowance of the most elaborate and very careful interchange.\(^{175}\)

Stein's poetic arranges things into "elaborate and very careful" grids of context or "interchange" — a working description of Hejinian's method in *Happily*. Stein's suggestive phrase "coming with and an arrangement of their being" happily matches Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of *being-with* in perpetual arrival. Nancy argues in "Finite History" that history "spaces time itself, spacing it from its *continuous present*.... A happening happens between present and present, between the flow and itself."\(^{176}\) Here, linking opposite ends of a century, we find a remarkable thread that runs between Jean-Luc Nancy's model of community *in-becoming* and Gertrude Stein's most lasting gift to twentieth century poetic technique — "beginning again and again" to create "a continuous present." It is impossible to know whether the syntactical chime is coincidental.

It is interesting to note that Lyn Hejinian once identified *How to Write* as her favourite Stein text, and was preparing a detailed essay on Steinian poetics while writing *Happily*.\(^{177}\) "A Common Sense" reads Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* as a formal "achievement of the commonplace" in response to appearances that comprise the present.\(^{178}\)

*[Stanzas in Meditation]* was written in and of reality, or what [Stein's] one-time mentor William James described as 'where things happen'....

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\(^{176}\) Nancy, "Finite History," 156; my emphasis.

\(^{177}\) See for example Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 24 October 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 16] in which Hejinian writes about Stein: "I've been reading my favourite of all her books, 'How to Write.' Despite its title, it seems the least authoritarian of her books." Hejinian began "A Common Sense" several months before writing "Happily," and the two texts bear notable philosophical similarities. See Hejinian, "A Common Sense," *Language of Inquiry* 355-382.

[It] is written from within this immediate, ontological experience of the everyday.... The commonplace is a totality; a place, physical or mental, we (things that exist) hold in common with each other. It is the totality of our commonality; it is meaningful as that, as the place where we know each other and know we are together. (362-365)

By making "commonality" crucial to Stein’s quotidian poetic, Hejinian draws a fitting link between poetical forms about dailiness and ways of thinking about togetherness. Although we may not immediately imagine Stein as a communitarian thinker, The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family’s Progress (1925) — Stein’s epic work of “portraiture” — suggests a fascination for human relations in the demos or public sphere that complements her microscopic interest in the domus or household realm, as evinced in Tender Buttons (1911).179

“A Common Sense” certainly reveals Lyn Hejinian’s own investment in conjunctions between commonality and a poetics of everyday reality. We might remember Hannah Arendt’s assertion: “The only character of the world by which to gauge its reality is its being common to us all.”180 It figures that community might be understood best in terms of a continuing present, or in Nancy’s words, what “happens between present and present.” Happily is a composition of what occurs between this and this and this. The poem’s syntax allows and requires such movement — as observable in these lines, where method generates and becomes content:

Like ants swarming into pattern we get to the middle of the
day many distinct sensations that must be it
Music checks the relaxation the contrasting aspects constantly
changing set going
The ceaseless onset cuts this recognized sensation hurrying
after it alive (16)

In concert (or community) with Nancy and Stein, Lyn Hejinian records “the transitions between [things] and between them and us”181 that are the materials of worldly living — “this recognized sensation hurrying after it alive.” To borrow William James’s phrase, Happily “is made by relations that unroll themselves in time.”182 The poem is a

180 Arendt, Human Condition 208.
study of linkages and separation, shared contexts and differences. We might glimpse traces of allegorical and conceptually realised community somewhere amongst these formal linkages. Or at least, we might engage the ethical import of linkages and contexts, as Hejinian recommends: “That seems a kind of ethics. One has to also foreground the fact that one is making choices, and at the same time one is making them in contexts…. one is operating in a field of possibilities and choosing among them, and validating some, signing on to some, invalidating others.”

In “Language and Realism,” the first of two lectures on Stein’s work written for presentation at a Californian university college early in 1985, Lyn Hejinian connects Gertrude Stein’s innovative forms and William James’s theories of consciousness and language. She disputes James’s descriptive phrase “stream of consciousness” in favour of perceptual experience as disjunctive and “discontinuous,” and elaborates upon Steinian methods that foreground such cognitive movements. Hejinian follows James, however, in observing linkages between things as primary sites of meaning. In describing perceptions of perceiving, all three thinkers refuse “closed” models for thought, in favour of “shapes of unknowing” that embody ongoing motion:

James thoroughly understood, and Stein animated in practice, the vital, even vivacious, relationship of language forms and structures to perception and consciousness…. [Consciousness] often does appear broken up, discontinuous — sometimes radically, abruptly, and disconcertingly so. It would seem that Stein wondered about this.

“Discontinuous” shapes of thinking do not necessarily contradict a Steinian continuous present, which gains constancy from change itself, via the perpetual beginnings that arrive with new worldly encounters. Hejinian suggests that “the realness of reality, what gives things realness” is a dialogic function of composition and perception, and argues that poetic syntax “can be as complex as thought” as it

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183 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
explores inventions of consciousness. Writer Charles Bernstein concurs with Hejinian in an essay called “Thought’s Measure,” proposing thought itself as a structural model: “By imagining the free-associative order and relations in ‘thinking’ as a mode, new domains of compositional possibility can be located.” Hejinian describes Happily in similar ways: “Every phrase, every sentence, is an investigation of an idea.... In addition to the question of happiness, I was interested in the happenstance it inhabits, and in the ‘incorporation’ itself of happiness — in the incorporation of thought as a coming-to-be in sentences.”

Happily’s long, linked lines are calibrated finely to such epistemological inquiry. They exert a balance of horizontal and vertical pressures upon pages and allow repeated returns to everyday perceptual inquiries. The poem maximises “the free-associative order” of consciousness as mediated by language. Rather than naturalising “thought” into superficially unified directions, Hejinian explores an artifice of disjunctive perception. As I suggested earlier, reason is not the same as logic, and requires different compositional methods. Sentences in Happily give form and possibility to sustained philosophical regard while mapping its potentially skewed outcomes:

Time as something with no subject the word employed early to remark, other people could say as it completes its curve the way a bird takes on final coloring in an unobtainable form but the form approached stayed near and the bird has been there ever since which seems like a remarkably short time (31)

Observations unfold across lines, relinquished only as new things occur to shift Hejinian’s thinking. This dynamic is exteriorised toward the poem’s end: “I hear its lines leaving in a rumor the silence of which is to catch on quickly to arrange things in preparation for what will come next.” (39) Happily begins again, wherever and whenever necessary. Linebreaks occur as sentences run over a page, rather than to contrive linguistic alignment or give rhetorical emphasis. We might imagine this

technique as a kind of accidental enjambment. The poem is left partly to chance, or to whatever comes, happily.

Hejinian also allowed chanciness to enter Happily at another compositional level. She wrote the poem in serial stages, returning each time to "re-encounter" her previous thinking and let it move her to new inquiries. Each section corresponds to one sitting. In discussion, Hejinian likened this to collaborative processes where texts are passed between two or more persons, so that re-entering an adjusted text produces a moment of estrangement — a new encounter with one’s own subjectivity in response to materials that enter one’s space of regard. Such a process was followed in Sight. Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino posted work back and forth to one another and added to it in alternating increments. Alterity literally became a collaborative method, as I discuss in chapter four. Hejinian modelled Happily upon an idea of collaborating with oneself, to maximise the haphazard nature of "things" that are the poem’s primary matter and context. Seriality was a formal means of optimising the poem’s "unknowing," or its distance from itself — intervals between sections during writing were often lengthy. Hejinian did not want to "predetermine the outcome of [her] reasoning" by closing down the poem’s form and allowed it, rather, to remain cumulatively active. Epistemic openness is sustained between paragraphs in Happily, and not only between and within specific lines.

In offering models for "the shape of unknowing," Happily asks readers to scrutinise our perceptions of perceptual processes, or the ways by which we come to know and encounter worldly things. There is parity between ethical frameworks that appraise community as a continuous event in-becoming, and Lyn Hejinian’s serial poetic forms that return over and again to material; that acknowledge and spatialise occurrences, or affirm "the fact that things are happening" while enacting linkages between things. Stretching sentences in Happily effect a version of Jean-Luc Nancy’s "common spacing of time." They generate and thank commonality as it (re)arrives, unrolling time across successive discrete series of localised events. It is primarily in this sense

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190 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
that *Happily* can be understood as a poem about commonality or being-in-common, a calibration of “the work of being in the world” beside constitutions of community.\(^{194}\) The poem investigates thingness-in-co-relation — the fact of *being-with*, or “a system of perceptible effects.”\(^{195}\) While this does not substitute discursively for relations of material “community,” it negotiates the ethicality of socio-cultural and ideational forms, while preserving, in Barrett Watten’s terms, “specific histories of difference.”\(^{196}\) As *Happily* attests, we are “living in context” among worldly occurrences and “a crowd” of others, and need to ask when “we [began] to share that existence”:

The manner in which we are present at this time to and fro
appears, we come to point of view before us
The matter is here
Can we share its kind of existence?

... They say there is no defining that but to say that is defining that, living in context
One would think of all the social forces traveling with a show of indifference over a crowd or a sound brought to a sound
A good person would be starred ill and well in a life he or she couldn’t know how to refuse
Every day we may never happen on the object hung on a mere chance
When and where one happens it will surprise us not in itself but in its coming to our attention not as something suddenly present but as something that’s been near for a long time and which we have only just *noticed*
When we might ask did we begin to share that existence  (*Happily* 13-15)

\(^{196}\) Watten, “Bride of Assembly,” 4.
Chapter Two

All things explain each other, but they do not explain themselves.

— George Oppen

Subject and object give a poor approximation of thought. Thinking is neither a line drawn between subject and object nor a revolving of one around the other. Rather, thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth.

— Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

In September 1963 American Objectivist poet George Oppen wrote a letter to his sister June Oppen Degnan who, as publisher of the San Francisco Review, was also co-publisher of Oppen’s 1962 collection The Materials. Oppen’s letter declares that the “rather awesome and mineral” reality of “our encounter with the universe, in history” is veritable ground for a poetical philosophy about “the tremendous pull of truth, the tremendous desire to know and to say.” Such a poetics might refuse “knowledge of everything” (92) in favour of an ever-negotiable process of arrival into knowing, borne out of renewed encounters with worldly materials and happenings. The letter explains subjectivity as a state dependent for its meaning upon commonality-in-difference, or relationships with other discrete beings and things; a version of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s being-with, as described in the previous chapter. Oppen writes:

The individual encounters the world, and by that encounter with something which he recognises as being outside himself, he becomes aware of himself as an individual, a part of reality. In that same intuition, he registers the existence of what is not himself, what is totally independent of him, can exist without him, as it must have existed before

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4 Oppen, Selected Letters 92 and 355. The Materials was published by San Francisco Review in conjunction with New Directions Press.
5 Oppen, Selected Letters 92.
him, as it will exist after him, and is totally free of nothingness and death.
(91-92)

Published a year earlier, *The Materials* begins with an epigraph from Jacques Maritain, taken from a text called *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*: "We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things."\(^6\)

George Oppen's statements of nascent community, in which human "subjectivities" are not isolate but embedded and formed within terrains of matter and ideation, are echoed by Lyn Hejinian in *Happily* — a poem that emphasises difficult, coeval relations between human subjects and worldly things and conditions, or "what is taking place." Hejinian begins:

\begin{quote}
Constantly I write this happily
Hazards that hope may break open my lips
What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding, and
to doubt it would be a crime against it
I sense that in stating 'this is happening'
Waiting for us?
It has existence in fact without that
We came when it arrived \(^7\)
\end{quote}

These ideas recur several pages on: "[I]t exists, everything does, without us." (8) *Happily*'s opening lines mirror Oppen's description of encounters in which a person knows simultaneously that the world has existence in fact without subjective apprehension, and that she or he is a part of reality — part of a shared space of appearance, in philosopher Hannah Arendt's terms: "The only character of the world by which to gauge its reality is its being common to us all."\(^8\) *Happily* concludes by reiterating an experience of being-in-common (and in-context) that is grounded in subjective perceptions of actuality and distinctness: "No, happily I'm feeling the wind in its own right rather than as / of particular pertinence to us at a windy moment." (39)

In another letter to June Oppen Degnan dated August 1970, George Oppen tenders the phrase "it is what is happening" as a "sure" expression of being, "the process which is

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occurring, the process which is existence."⁹ Presaging Happily's exploration of links between things that happen and states of happiness, Oppen writes: "Something is happening! Time is not a flow of nothing.... I don't know how to measure happiness The issue is happiness, there is no other issue, or no other issue one has a right to think about for other people, to think about politically, but I don't know how to measure happiness.... ((to say that something is happening, to say that time is creative, that it is not the unrolling of a script already written, is to say 'freedom.'))¹⁰ My previous chapter closed with several provocations from Happily that are remarkably similar to George Oppen's convictions about the matter of being, and that share something of Oppen's ambivalence regarding the measurement of "knowledge" in unequivocal terms. Hejinian writes: "The matter is here / Can we share its kind of existence?... / When we might ask did we begin to share that existence." (13-15) This chapter continues to address Hejinian's poetic of worldly occurrences and her interest in philosophies of co-existence, but from another perspective. I want to investigate intersubjectivity relations and objectivities that are implied by a poetics of encounter.

Lyn Hejinian's inquiries into happenstance and poetical composition occur within many ideational-literary contexts. Gertrude Stein's work is an obvious exemplar. Over the past decade, however, George Oppen has been equally significant to Hejinian and perhaps the pre-eminent "guard" to her thinking about worldliness, ethicality and a poetics of interrelation.¹¹ This chapter begins with those connections. I then correlate one of Lyn Hejinian's most current readings of encounter — the guest/host relationship — with ideas of community as a "happening" that can engender radical, reciprocal affirmations of "being" involving embodiments of extra-subjective otherness.¹² I also want to consider models of ethical community founded in neighbourliness, proximate care and being-for-the-other that are proposed by

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⁹ Oppen, Selected Letters 212.
¹⁰ Oppen, Selected Letters 212-213. Oppen makes these remarks in context of social and economic liberation for women, an issue that he supported wholeheartedly and publicly. He wrote to June Oppen Degnan: "I am, obviously, talking of freedom. I'm for it Even furiously for it: of course I am." Selected Letters, 213.
¹¹ I take the term "guard" from Hejinian's long poem "The Guard." Discussion to follow.
¹² On community as "a being-in-common which only happens, or which is happening, an event, more than a 'being,'" see Jean-Luc Nancy, "Finite History," The States of "Theory": History, Art and Critical Discourse, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 149.
Emmanuel Levinas in a text called *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, useful corollaries to Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of being-with.\(^\text{13}\)

During an interview held in May 1975 in San Francisco, Reinhold Schiffer asked George Oppen to explain his statement that “the image is encountered and not found,” to which Oppen replied: “You can’t close yourself to it. I was talking against lying. You know what you’ve seen, you know what you’ve experienced.” He later commented: “One’s subjectivity is also encountered, not found.”\(^\text{14}\) This was two years before Lyn Hejinian returned in April 1977 to the Bay Area of San Francisco, having left in 1972. In a sense, chapters one and two of my thesis provide prepoetical foundations for more “concrete” accounts of Hejinian’s involvement with material communities.\(^\text{15}\) As a forecast for discussions in chapter three of Hejinian’s specially invested relationship to a Language writing community, and adapting Oppen’s marvellous phrase, I want this chapter to test the maxim that one’s community is encountered not found.

\[\text{We awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things}\]

Gertrude Stein’s inventions have shown Lyn Hejinian much about an aesthetics of perception as contextualised by problems of descriptive language. Stein wrote of and in context, extending sentence dimensions until the vast, minute changes and details of present “reality” could become a literal procedure — a worldly composition. Hejinian returned to close scrutiny of Stein’s work when writing “Two Stein Talks,” a set of lectures that she gave at the Californian New College in 1985.\(^\text{16}\) In a letter to her mother Carolyn Andrews dated 20 November 1984, Hejinian places Stein’s writings into a fascinating genealogy of phenomenological and linguistic texts:

\[\text{13 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 14.}\]
\[\text{14 George Oppen, “Interview with George Oppen,” conducted by Reinhold Schiffer, } Sagetrieb 3.3 \text{ (Winter 1984) 18-19. I first encountered this suggestive phrase in Peter Nicholls’s article “Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen,” }}\]
\[\text{Journal of American Studies} 31.2 \text{ (1997): 160.}\]
\[\text{16 Lyn Hejinian, Preface to “Language and Realism” in “Two Stein Talks,” *Language of Inquiry* 85. As discussed in my introduction, Hejinian also read Gertrude Stein’s writings during the 1950s and 1960s, but not in great detail.}\]
For the most part I have been reading and taking notes on the Stein lectures. From *Tender Buttons* to the question of subjectivity and objectivity in perception, and from perception to the expression of that perception (and the psychology motivating our desire to express), and from that to the medium of that expression, i.e. poetic language -- you can imagine my reading list. To understand Wittgenstein, must one understand Husserl and Heideger? [sic] To understand Merleau-Ponty, must one understand Wittgenstein. To understand Jakobson, must one understand Merleau-Ponty, the Prague Linguistic School, Saussure, Chomsky.

Sorry -- I’m thinking out loud. Actually, for the present, I’d better just do my best to know Gertrude Stein.17

Border-zones between “subjectivity and objectivity” and “perception and poetic language” became the substance of Hejinian’s lectures, published two years later in *Temblor* magazine as “Language and Realism” and “Grammar and Landscape.”18 The same borders animate and inhabit a long poem that Hejinian completed several months before commencing the Stein talks. “The Guard,” a work in eight sections of varying lengths that Hejinian began in late 1982, was published in 1984 as the fiftieth and final instalment of Hejinian’s first Tuumba chapbook series. It concludes with another kind of border: “this / is the difference between language and ‘paradise.’”19

In a letter to Language poet Rae Armantrout that she wrote a year before completing “The Guard,” Lyn Hejinian set herself the task of discovering “how to talk about my own work.”20 Following inquiries into phenomenology that she made while researching “Two Stein Talks,” Hejinian wrote “Language and ‘Paradise’” in 1985, a serialised exegesis of “The Guard” that includes twelve concise meditations on twelve lines excerpted from the poem.21 “As for the position of the perceiver in the phenomenological situation — or in the poem, a poem — it is not a self, neutral and stable, but a contextualised and contextualising subject, a person,” observes Hejinian in the essay. (63) At an interface between perception and description we might locate the “subject,” a being-in-context who is also a being in time and in language.

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17 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 20 November 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 16].
20 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Rae Armantrout dated 22 October 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 1].
"Language and 'Paradise'" was influenced partly by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception*, a text cited by Hejinian midway through her essay: "In trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning, we shall have the opportunity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy." Though seductive in its promise of radical flight into extra-subjective states of being, Merleau-Ponty's avowal resists the mediate nature of language itself, argues Hejinian:

[Language] serves as a guide to phenomena, certainly, bringing us face to face with them, but it stands as a guard against our being "ultimately at one" with them, since language is the principal medium through which we objectify things and our experience of them. But is this... even an accurate characterization of the circumstance of description? It's through language, after all, that we discover our nonautonomous being. The very fluidity of meaning that we note in the relation of words to things, signifier to signified, makes fluid what might otherwise become rigid. (69)

"The Guard" plays with many meanings that guardedness might attract, although descriptive language itself is undoubtedly Lyn Hejinian's primary guard. Positioning her poem between worldly phenomena and perceptual processes, Hejinian scrutinises language as the "principal medium" through which we discover both separateness and linkage; our own particularity, for example, alongside "our nonautonomous being." While language permits prolific, different responses to the fact of being, it also "guards against" our capacities to "create the subject by saying," or to satisfy yearnings for "perfect and complete expression." I am indeed / no longer a beginner who throws herself / on such dense inverted picturing — / I too have discarded / and discarded. My aporia achieved / the glamorous anticipation of an answer ("The Guard"). We require those ambivalent and productive gaps, however, in order to "make fluid what might otherwise become rigid," as Hejinian argues persuasively in "The Rejection of Closure": "While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things." This distinctness occurs as and within the difference between language and "paradise."

In the excerpt from "Language and 'Paradise'" cited above, Hejinian posits an existential dilemma. When coming "face to face with phenomena" and thereby discovering "our nonautonomous being," we concurrently realise the impossibility of ever being "ultimately at one" with other things and beings. Language shares something of this complex property — it particularises and distinguishes while it accumulates and conjoins. Hejinian's quandary of subjectivity and community recalls a comment by George Oppen, also cited earlier:

The individual encounters the world, and by that encounter with something which he recognises as being outside himself, he becomes aware of himself as an individual, a part of reality. In that same intuition, he registers the existence of what is not himself, what is totally independent of him.26

Although Oppen was concerned less outwardly with thematising the constructive role of language in transacting and ordering such relationships, he was compelled similarly by moments of phenomenal facing between subjects, in which differences might at once be challenged and restored. He too read Merleau-Ponty's treatises on phenomenology.27 Like Hejinian, who describes the person as "a contextualised and contextualising subject,"28 Oppen understood being as a relation of context and linkage — "all things explain each other, but they do not explain themselves."29

Chapter five will suggest that The Cell is Lyn Hejinian's best achievement, both formally and conceptually, of an argument between particularity and linkage. In The Cell, a long serial poem composed between 1986 and 1988, Hejinian deepened investigations into ties between poetical description and phenomenal perception while making objectivity central to her epistemological landscapes.30 If language is "the principal medium through which we objectify things and our experience of them," as Hejinian suggests (above), how might objectivities influence and recontextualise subjectivities during perceptual and descriptive encounters? How might a poetics of

26 Oppen, Selected Letters 91-92.
27 Oppen, Selected Letters 311.
28 Hejinian, "Language and 'Paradise,'" Language of Inquiry 63.
29 Oppen, Selected Letters 93.
intersubjective and interobjective encounters affect our comprehension of being such as it is.\textsuperscript{31}

During the mid-1980s, Lyn Hejinian began increasingly to locate her concept of an ethical poetics in a fold between describing and perceiving, and within the abstract terrain of intersubjective encounters convened by language. While Stein’s writings enriched Hejinian’s understanding of a radical syntax of perception, Hejinian encountered a different and complementary rhetoric in work by the American Objectivist poets. Late in 1985, Hejinian revealed her interest in specifically ethical facets of a conversation between description, apprehension and poetic form when writing:

I have never been confident that I have entirely understood Zukofsky in his use of the word ‘sincerity’ in his essay “An Objective”: “In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist.... This rested totality may be called objectification....” If one’s intention is to write poetry “which is the detail, not the mirage,” then the relationship between words and things is sufficiently problematic, that ‘sincerity’ must replace both ‘accuracy’ and ‘honesty’ in the ethics of an aesthetics of perception (and, ultimately, consciousness).\textsuperscript{32}

Written contemporaneously with Gertrude Stein’s “How to Write” (1927-1931), poet Louis Zukofsky’s “An Objective” was published in 1931 and ultimately gave its name to the chronologically disparate Objectivist poets.\textsuperscript{33} Among them was a close friend and colleague of Zukofsky’s, George Oppen, who published first in 1934 (Discrete Series, The Objectivist Press) and again many years later in the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{34}

Since moving to Berkeley and participating in the Language school’s nascent moments, Lyn Hejinian has returned repeatedly to Zukofsky’s notion of “sincerity,”

\textsuperscript{31} “Being such as it is” cited from Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 101.
\textsuperscript{34} See Oppen, Collected Poems 1-14 and Oppen, Selected Letters xii.
which she describes in her essay “Barbarism” (1995) as “the ethical principle by which the poet tests words against the actuality of the world, the articulation of our status as presences in common (and only in common) with other presences in the world.”35 Zukofsky’s thinking with the things as they exist certainly offers nourishing ground for a poetry that affirms our standing as “presences in common” with things that constitute “the actuality of the world” — whether sentient others or non-sentient materials, ideas and conditions. For Hejinian, sincerity operates in and as a zone of encounter, a place of “appearances” that act as guards between worldly things and our discernment of them. In a sense, sincerity corresponds with poetical reason in Hejinian’s vocabulary. Both qualities suggest ethical imperatives that accompany “actualities” and our responses to them; and both mind the gap between words and things, a gap in which with-ness or commonality might be experienced and questioned simultaneously.

In essays of the past decade that examine sincerity as one foundation of a poetical ethicity discovered “in common,” including “The Numerous,” “Barbarism,” “A Common Sense” and “Reason,” Lyn Hejinian effectively claims George Oppen and Gertrude Stein as her key poetical antecedents or genealogical predecessors; though she is scrupulous, as ever, in avoiding literary-historical heredities and mantles.36 Where Stein’s works explored an aesthetics of perception, certain texts by Oppen — and to a different extent, Zukofsky — contained a more overtly “politicised” vocabulary that Hejinian developed into the 1990s while pursuing an ethics of the aesthetics of perception, her own lucid description of Zukofsky’s project.37 “Worldliness” dominates the poetics of both Oppen and Stein; but Stein’s anti-transcendent, micro-focus on materiality was not motivated necessarily by stated ethical concerns. “This is happening” in Stein’s compositions — the worldly present is all that happens, in great quantities — but Stein’s concerns lay elsewhere than directing a profusion of occurrences into explicitly communitarian narratives and meditations. Not so for Oppen, who spent many years as an active though sometimes-critical member of the Communist Party and who commented in a later, reflective

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interview with Reinhold Schiffer: "I have a sense of the direction of history... and there is no morality except through some sense of where humanity is going.... Certainly there is some sense of what we want humanity to become."\textsuperscript{38}

Lyn Hejinian has found an attractive composite in the poetical worldliness of Gertrude Stein and George Oppen, somewhere between Stein's precise regard for "things [that] are always on the way" or a "present... filled with the ordinary," and Oppen's "trying to construct a hope for the world other than the so-called mysticism" of more transcendent artistic philosophies.\textsuperscript{39} When introducing "Who is Speaking" in \textit{The Language of Inquiry}, a paper that emerged from heated discussions about exclusivity and cultural power during the early Language years, Hejinian writes:

[T]he fact of the matter is that the world requires improving (reimproving) every day.... To improve the world, one must be situated in it, attentive and active; one must be worldly. Indeed, worldliness is an essential feature of an ethics.\textsuperscript{40}

Stein's attention to the continuing everyday and Oppen's responsibilities and responses to actual happenings — "including," he states, "the incapability to deny what one's seen" — are met in Hejinian's worldly and ethical poetic, which emphasises acknowledgement of the occurrences that comprise one's changing, daily present.\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Time can't be banished, being real / In the world we see things together, the judgments have been made, takes the chalk, draws the milky line. (Happily 22)}

I want to look closely at George Oppen's use of Louis Zukofsky's trope of \textit{sincerity}, a dialogue of great significance to Hejinian. To first establish important cross-readerly terrain, I will sketch a brief history of Hejinian's encounter with key Objectivist texts. Upon returning to the Bay Area of California in 1977, Lyn Hejinian began to study Zukofsky's texts in detail, often in company with her friends Barrett Watten and Ron

\textsuperscript{38} Oppen, "Interview with George Oppen," 14. Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes in the \textit{Selected Letters} that although the Oppens felt they had left the Communist Party by 1946, the climate of McCarthyism prevented them from technically leaving the party until well after that time (xv).


\textsuperscript{40} Lyn Hejinian, "Who is Speaking?", \textit{Language of Inquiry} 31. For archival material relating to that crucial discussion within the San Franciscoan Language writing scene see Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Laufer dated 13 February 1983 [74, 2, 10]; Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 1 April 1983 [74, 1, 15]. Both in Hejinian Papers, Mandeville.

\textsuperscript{41} Oppen, "Interview with George Oppen," 19.
In 1978 she participated in a San Francisco-based “Poets Theater” group performance of Louis and Celia Zukofsky’s A-24. A fascinating tape of the event is held by the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State University. Its label reads:

A-24, 11/15/78. Arrangement by Celia Zukofsky of four works by Louis Zukofsky. Performed by Steve Benson, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Kit Robinson and Barrett Watten with Bob Perelman on piano.\(^4\)

Perelman played the complicated Bach scores underlining the work. During conversation in 1998 Lyn Hejinian identified herself and these same five poets, plus Rae Armantrout and Ron Silliman, as “the group” that constituted a Language writing core, a delineation considered further in chapter three.\(^4\)

Zukofsky’s prototypical formal innovations were scrutinised and discussed frequently among Language poets in the late 1970s. They were also subject to diverse, consanguineous “claims”; as evinced by a public lecture on Zukofsky planned in 1979 by Barrett Watten, at which poet Robert Duncan “upstaged” Watten by “seizing” the microphone, professing intrinsic conjunctions between his own work and Zukofsky’s and preventing Watten from speaking — an event interpreted this way by Ron Silliman five years later in a colourful letter to Poetry Flash magazine.\(^5\) Without irony, Silliman identifies “a critically important, but little understood, aspect of Zukofsky’s method” (2) and then repeats Duncan’s alleged conjunction by placing himself into a poetical tree comprising “Rimbaud, Stein, Zukofsky, Spicer and others (Robert Duncan included).” (4) Genealogical petitions aside, Silliman is right in

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\(^{4}\) These two friendships often are singled out by Hejinian as “sources” for her interest in various experimental schools, including and especially the Russian Formalists. See for example “Roughly Stapled: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian by Craig Dworkin” (1996), Hejinian author pages at Electronic Poetry Center. Available at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/hejinian/interview-backup.html>; page 1 of transcript.

\(^{5}\) Tape #260, Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives, San Francisco State University. The “Poets Theater” was established in 1978 by Eileen Corder, Carla Harryman and Nick Robinson. It ran until 1984, with many Language writers becoming involved at different times in its many projects. See also Ann Vickery, Leaving Lines of Gender: a Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing (Hanover, New Hampshire and London: Wesleyan UP, 2000) 7 and 119.

\(^{4}\) Lyn Hejinian, interview with the author, 3 August 1998.

stating the significance of Louis Zukofsky’s tremendous works to different, succeeding “generations” of American counter-cultural poets; and perhaps hyperbolic in naming Zukofsky “the first (and for a long time the only) poet to read Pound and Williams with what we would recognize as a modern eye and ear.” 46

Between 1981 and 1983 Lyn Hejinian also met regularly with two other friends, writers Cindy Altman and Jean Day, to read and discuss Louis Zukofsky’s entire epic A. 47 Focus upon George Oppen’s writings came later as Hejinian undertook teaching engagements at various academic institutions in the late 1980s. Published six years after Oppen’s death in 1984, Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s marvellous 1990 edition The Selected Letters of George Oppen marked a turning point in Oppen scholarship and, during the 1990s, undoubtedly provoked and rejuvenated interest in Oppen’s ethical poetics. 48 The Letters also clarify links between Zukofsky’s work and Oppen’s thinking, and help to problematise notions of literary periodisation and designation that followed Zukofsky’s manifesto-like declarations of “objectivism” in the early 1930s. As Peter Nicholls observes, most writers now associated with the Objectivist group continued to publish in the 1970s. William Carlos Williams was an exception, inhabiting an antecedent moment that heralded Objectivism in its “first phase.” 49 “The matter of designation — whether the Oppen-Zukofsky group were modernists or not — is not of especial importance in itself,” writes Nicholls, “but what does interest me is the intermediary position they now seem to occupy: between modernism and postmodernism, perhaps; a betweenness, at any rate, which seems highly characteristic of much of this writing at the level of both its formal and social ambitions.” (154)

Writing to poet Charles Tomlinson in 1963, George Oppen names four writers who founded the short-lived Objectivist Press in 1933 in an inaugural moment of


community praxis — himself, Zukofsky, Williams and Charles Reznikoff. Oppen stresses common focus upon poetic form beside differences among writing styles, backgrounds and generational positioning:

As to the 'Objectivists' -- the word properly in quotes because the word has caused some confusion: it derived from an insistence on 'objectification,' on form... Tho Zukofsky wrote also of 'sincerity' as the 'epic quality.' As you suggest, no one's work altered, so far as I know, after the word was coined. It appeared in -- I think three -- essays that Zukofsky wrote. And of course those are simply Zukofsky's essays. I must have owed more to Zuk. than either Williams or Rezi [Reznikoff] could have: both Rezi and Wms being older than Zuk and I younger.... We were of different backgrounds; led and have led different lives. As you say, we don't much sound alike. But the common factor I think is well defined in Zuk's essay.50

Commonality in difference is well-travelled ground for Lyn Hejinian, and group delineations accrue hyper-invested status in ongoing debates about Language writing. More interesting are alterities associated with Nicholls's concept of "betweenness." Hejinian's ongoing exploration of betweens — borders, encounters, contextual poetic forms and intersubjectivities, for example — would seem to follow Nicholls's depiction of "much [Objectivist] writing at the level of... formal and social ambitions." What if Lyn Hejinian were categorised as a very late-wave Objectivist rather than a first-wave Language writer, or regarded as a poet of a third space between or beyond modernism and post-modernism? Asking similar questions in an essay called "This L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E," Kate Lilley suggests that the early stages of Language writing were characterised by canny calibrations of "grassroots organising and modernist homage" and "nostalgic technologies... used to produce notoriously impenetrable aesthetic texts, fetish objects of antique postmodernity."51

In "The Transformations of Objectivism: An Afterword," Charles Altieri argues that there are "substantial continuities linking objectivist poetics" to the development in Lyn Hejinian's poetry of a neo-objectivist sincerity, the characteristic identified by

50 Oppen, Selected Letters 82-83.
51 Kate Lilley, "This L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E," Jacket 2 (1997): e-journal. Available at <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/lilley02.html>. Citation from page 2 of transcript. At page 7, Lilley asks: "What if the self-designated first and last generation of language writers were to be reclassified as, for instance, third generation objectivists or second generation Black Mountain poets?"
Oppen as Zukofsky's "epic quality." He names "objectivist sincerity" and "insistence on the poem as a material object" as two key values that have evolved through several generations of writers subsequent to the Objectivists. (302) Genealogical and generational identifications are complicated by such "contemporary transformations," Altieri argues: "Objectivist ideals of sincerity still drive work extending from Creeley and Duncan to Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, and Nathaniel Mackey.... Objectivist sincerity can be understood as a commitment to resist two different kinds of closure — one rhetorical and the other formal." (302) Sincerity is not simply a mode of address, but a poetics as such; a structural dynamic and way of proceeding.

As described by Zukofsky in "An Objective," objectification did not mean reification of isolated, worldly phenomena borne out of authoritative experientialism. By rather stressing poesis — the active, processual making of a poem as an object — objectivism embodied a critique of poetics that pretended a-historicism and non-contextualisation:

A poem. Also the materials which are outside (?) the veins and capillaries— The context— The context necessarily dealing with a world outside of it— The desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars— A desire to place everything— everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context—

A poem. The context based on a world.... The desire for inclusiveness— the desire for an inclusive object.
A poem. This object in process—

Objectivism’s linkage of poetic form and worldly inquiry, synthesised here by Zukofsky as "the desire for an inclusive object," gave attractive precedent to Language poets in the late 1970s. Ron Silliman echoed this passage from "An Objective" when describing the "new sentence," a prose poetic that developed, in his view, in the work of several Language-oriented writers during the late 1970s: "The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences." Louis Zukofsky's poem as a contextual "object in process" that is "based on a world"

also prefigures Lyn Hejinian’s poem of co-existences and serialised encounters; a poem addressing the “inextricable[e...] direction of historic and contemporary particulars.” In Zukofsky’s elegant and immense works, sincerity is both a formal and thematic function, manifest in the poet’s inclination “to place everything.” Hejinian matches Zukofsky’s sentiment when referring to the “encyclopedic ambition” of her own early works, a comment that also recalls Gertrude Stein’s exemplary modernist desire to “really be knowing all the ways there are of feeling living.” Happily’s opening procedural statement is remarkably close, too, to Zukofsky’s objective: “What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding, and to doubt it would be a crime against it.”

Ambivalent seeing: George Oppen’s worldly sincerity

In 1994, Lyn Hejinian began a detailed study of George Oppen’s poetry that adopted “sincerity” and “betweenness” as key motifs. A working note to the unfinished piece asks: “What does one do with what Zukofsky terms ‘sincerity’?” O’s Affirmation was written by Hejinian as the tenth George Oppen Memorial Lecture in Twentieth Century Poetics and delivered in San Francisco on 8 December 1994. Renamed “The Numerous” some years later, the essay performs an ambitious, piece-by-piece interpolation of Oppen’s forty-part poem “Of Being Numerous” in context of post-structuralist theories of impasse and aporia. Oppen completed the poem early in 1966. It was published in Of Being Numerous, a 1968 volume that gained him a Pulitzer Prize in 1969. An earlier, eight-part version of the poem was printed as “A

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56 Hejinian, Happily 3.
58 The essay remains incomplete; all page numbers refer to the draft posted by Hejinian to the author in 1998. Dates from a recording of Hejinian’s lecture. The annual event was organised and introduced by Aaron Shurin and taped by the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives. See archival tape #830, Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives, San Francisco State University.
59 Hejinian takes this term from Jacques Derrida’s text Aporias, which she cites for the first time in “The Numerous” at 6. See Jacques Derrida, Aporias, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery and trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1993).
Language of New York” in *This in Which*, a 1965 collection bearing an epigraph from Martin Heidegger: “the arduous path of appearance.”

*This in Which* followed *The Materials*, a 1962 collection by Oppen that marked the close of a long publication hiatus following his 1934 work *Discrete Series*. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Thackrey pragmatically connect Oppen’s twenty-five year poetical “silence” to his active service in World War II and a period of political exile in Mexico (1950-1958), during which the FBI revoked the passports of Oppen and his wife Mary Oppen; the couple had joined the Communist Party in 1935.62 Developing that interpretation, Lyn Hejinian’s “The Numerous” links Oppen’s impasse to an ethical necessity for *unknowing* and *acknowledgement* in the face of atrocity, specifically the events of Hiroshima and Auschwitz.63 Silence, as John Cage famously demonstrated, is not a condition of inactivity or emptiness but an eloquent response to literal aporia; to a context in which “all possibilities for meaning have been suspended.”64 The twenty-second part of “Of Being Numerous” concludes with a deft appraisal of silence and poetical veracity — “Clarity in the sense of silence.”65 Hejinian observes throughout Oppen’s poem a worldliness that remains conscious of utter contingency:

As Adorno says, “After Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right unless it has undergone a transformation.” Credibility, in other words, in the sense I want to use it, is not the mild term with which we are familiar but a powerful counter to the threat of effacement…. Credibility is not about certainty or truth but about occurrences: “For a phrase to survive the test of universal doubt stems neither from its being real nor from its being true, but from its merely being what happens, *what is occurring[*…*]”, what, in-time and in-the-world, *is*.66

Remarks made by George Oppen to Reinhold Schiffer gain specific *gravitas* in post-war and post-holocaust contexts: “you know what you’ve seen, you know what you’ve

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61 George Oppen, *This In Which* (New York and San Francisco: New Directions, 1965) 9.
experienced.⁶⁷ They are testimony to Oppen’s unshakeable belief in a poetics of occurrences and happenings — the only things, in his view, by which “reality” might clearly be gauged. As Hejinian writes (above), things that “occur” constitute “what in-time and in-the-world, is.”

Hejinian’s credibility is a composite of Zukofsky’s sincerity and Oppen’s poetic of actual appearances, and Hejinian reads all three as “powerful counters to the threat of effacement.” As an ethical principle, credibility is “not about certainty or truth but about occurrences,” writes Hejinian.⁶⁸ But what exactly are occurrences, and how do they relate to credibility in (poetic) language, to the phrases in which we express our understanding of phenomenal happenings? “Whatever may be doubted, the actuality of consciousness cannot be doubted,” wrote Oppen in a letter of 1974. “‘Therefore consciousness in itself, of itself’ carries the principle of actualness.”⁶⁹ Though unable to proclaim immutable knowledge or truth, we can validate our perceptions of reality, or “what happens.” This space of dilemma is paramount within Oppen’s poetic, and contributes to radical skepticism about representation and truth that animates “Of Being Numerous.” The poem sails a gulf between conscious certainty about an “actual” present, and existential ambivalence — “the test of universal doubt” that Hejinian identifies as the core principle of Jean-François Lyotard’s text The Differend.⁷⁰

In the last poem of This in Which entitled “World, World—,” Oppen claims perception itself as the only indubitable measure of actuality: “‘Thought leaps on us’ because we are here. That is the fact / of the matter.”⁷¹ Credibility is a kind of acknowledgement of this qualified actualness, in Oppen’s view, that resides in contingent but intrinsic relations between “matter” and a cognisant subject. It is both admitted and contextualised in poetic utterances, which give presence to a co-ontological milieu or space of appearance — Hannah Arendt’s foundation concept — in which perceptual

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⁶⁷ Oppen, “Interview with George Oppen,” 18.
⁶⁹ Oppen, Selected Letters 290. Oppen is quoting from “Who Shall Doubt,” a poem that he was writing at the time. See Collected Poems 253.
⁷¹ Oppen, This in Which 85; Collected Poems 143.
subjectivities are formed.72 “World, World—” closes with a statement of actuality that depends upon extra-subjective proximities:

We want to be here.

The act of being, the act of being
More than oneself.73

Written during the same era of Oppen’s writing life, “Of Being Numerous” is a lengthy test of conceptual grids implied by “being here” and “being more than oneself.” The word “credible” appears toward the poem’s end in the thirty-ninth section, and the twelfth part of the poem begins with an epigraphic citation: “In these explanations it is presumed that an experiencing subject is one occasion of a sensitive reaction to an actual world.”74

We can presume a point of relation with “an actual world”— but how to affirm it? And what do we actually engage, when encountering or experiencing the world? If truth and knowledge cannot be fixed, and if a gap remains between ourselves and the world as we observe it, how might we measure our sincere response to “being here”? Where can we locate “a certain ethical potential, something that will hold good,” as Hejinian wonders in Happily?75 Oppen believed admission of these epistemological and ontological dilemmas to be paramount to a poem’s credibility. His poetry is an engagement of unknowing, a term that features in Lyn Hejinian’s recent readings of a poetic of appearances.76 Although truth and sense are pivotal terms within “Of Being Numerous” they are qualified throughout by pervasive hazard:

It is not easy to speak....
We want to say / ‘Common sense’ / And cannot....
I tell myself / only what we all believe / True....
One witnesses—. / It is ennobling / If one thinks so....

72 Arendt, Human Condition 208.
73 Oppen, This in Which 85; Collected Poems 143.
74 Oppen, “Of Being Numerous,” Collected Poems 155. “Credible” appears in “Of Being Numerous,” Collected Poems 179. See discussion below regarding Oppen’s citations within poems, many of which remain obscure. Oppen was reading from both Heidegger and Kierkegaard while writing “Of Being Numerous,” but I have been unable to identify this quotation. See Selected Letters 129, 135 and 156.
75 Hejinian, Happily 16.
Near is / Knowledge // Tho it may be of the noon's / Own vacuity....
Occurring 'neither for self / Nor for truth.'

Underlying Oppen's skepticism about truth and witness is a deeper ambivalence about common sense, a signifier for community itself. I will discuss this "ambivalence" in a moment, keeping in mind the etymology of that word — a state in which opposing opinions co-exist in equal measure. Staying for now with Oppen's principle of actualness, I want to think about "appearances" as a mobile zone of transaction between a perceiving subject and a surrounding world.

In a footnote to "Barbarism," written several months after her essay "The Numerous," Lyn Hejinian argues that Louis Zukofsky's poetical sincerity became for Oppen "a test of truth" that emerged in part from political conviction. She cites the penultimate middle stanza of "The Building of the Skyscraper" from This in Which:

It is the business of the poet
'To suffer the things of the world
And to speak them and himself out.'

Hejinian has omitted the stanza's preceding lines, which complicate Oppen's own use of the word truth:

There are words that mean nothing
But there is something to mean.
Not a declaration of truth
But a thing
Which is. It is the business of the poet
'To suffer the things of the world
And to speak them and himself out.'

Oppen's citation is not identified by Hejinian. Although Oppen occasionally sourced such quotations in letters to friends and colleagues, this one does not appear in the Selected Letters and remains something of a mystery. Hejinian does contextualise the

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78 Hejinian, "Barbarism," Language of Inquiry 335.
79 Oppen, This In Which 73, Collected Poems 131.
80 Oppen, This In Which 73, Collected Poems 131.
81 In an e-mail to me dated 10 August 2002, Rachel Blau DuPlessis wrote: "Oppen's allusions... are quite difficult to track. So I don't know. Oppen didn't usually mention what he was reading in the letters, either."
poem via writings by Martin Heidegger that were important to Oppen, and cites Heidegger’s On the Way to Language: “Saying sets all present beings free into their given presence, and brings what is absent into their absence.” She then observes that “[for] Oppen, truth consists in bringing what is present into appearance and what is absent into absence, and because this occurs in and as speech (saying), ‘sincerity’ is synonymous with truth.”

Oppen’s distinction in “The Building of the Skyscraper” between “a thing which is” and “a declaration of truth” is important. A person might sincerely say that something has been perceived — a thing which is. But distinctions exist between what and that, or “the world” and its “appearance” to a human subject. While ethically unable to limit things within universalising narratives of “knowledge,” a person might perhaps honour the “truth” of worldly occurrences by “speaking them and himself out,” or giving close regard to signifying processes and respectfully acknowledging their distance from “something to mean” (above). This style of descriptive sincerity retains a formal sense of “the gap between ourselves and things,” as Hejinian suggests in “The Rejection of Closure,” and between words and the world.

As discussed in the previous chapter, hesitations produced in such gaps do not nullify worldly acknowledgement. Oppen saw ambivalence as necessary if one were to affirm occurrences in their own right and context, rather than via anthropomorphic meaning-systems: “It’s ambivalent all through the poems. They even directly contradict each other. Well, it’s the situation we’re in.” Happily explores similar quandaries. In a letter dated 23 June 2001, Hejinian stressed the ethical value of contradiction:

What I have learned from [Oppen’s work] is the value of uncertainty, the commitment to doubt (and even to ambivalence). The plain & ordinary daylight of which he speaks does not always illuminate things clearly.

While Oppen could not substantiate “plain and ordinary” truth as an object of apprehension, especially considering historical manipulation of “truths” toward

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84 Oppen, “Interview with George Oppen,” 16.
atrocious ends, he advocated sincerity to *knowing* and *saying*, while embracing their contradictory and mutable potential. The twenty-sixth and longest section of "Of Being Numerous" dwells upon this predicament: "We want to defend / Limitation / And do not know how."\(^8\) One might *test* the truth but not *declare* it. Alternatively, one might *attest* in occurrences a belief in the actuality of consciousness, as experienced via encounters that affirm the presence of things.

This dilemma is particular for Oppen in context of Martin Heidegger’s writings on appearances, saying, and presence; admired by Oppen despite intense political contradictions.\(^7\) Oppen found Heidegger’s notion of “Dasein” — “the taking-place or the existing... in this world here” — both compelling and relevant, and spent much time during the 1960s attempting to fathom Heidegger’s *Essays on Metaphysics: Identity and Difference*.\(^8\) Jean-Luc Nancy describes *Dasein* in language that is reminiscent of Oppen’s vocabularies of worldly reality:

> But — these things: there are things. All these things, all these bodies, their areas, their *arealities*.... In accordance with this existential condition [*Dasein*], the primary theme of all existence... is, first of all, the spacing/spaced taking-place-there. This existential condition is the *worldly*.\(^9\)

There is uncanny resonance between Nancy’s spatialised view of worldliness — “these things, there are things” — and Oppen’s petition to ontological materials in the first lines of “Of Being Numerous”: “There are things we live among.” The common link may be Heidegger. “[A poem] is an instance of ‘being in the world,’” wrote Oppen, at “the limits of judgment, the limits of pure reason... I said, remember: ‘All this is reportage’ An account of being in the world, to stick to H[eidegger].... [Of Being Numerous] stays pretty close to that realistic point.”\(^9\) Oppen includes Heidegger’s phrase “all this is reportage” twice in a serial poem entitled “Route,”

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\(^7\) Lyn Hejinian, letter to the author dated 22 February 2000.  

published in the collection *Of Being Numerous.* The poem concludes: "These things at the limits of reason.... by this we know it is the real / That we confront." 

We might here recall Oppen's suggestive epigraph to *This in Which,* "the arduous path of appearance." Susan Thackrey sources the phrase to Heidegger's *An Introduction to Metaphysics,* first available in English translation in 1961. The dustjacket of *This in Which —* Oppen's third book — carries a significantly fuller version: "the third path, the arduous path of appearance." In a letter to Robert Duncan, Oppen interprets the characteristically pensive address to worldliness that opens "Of Being Numerous" as evidence of "my dedication to 'realism,' to the proof in the image rather than in the creation of image for the first time": 

There are things  
We live among 'and to see them  
Is to know ourselves'.

Occurrence, a part  
Of an infinite series

"An infinite series" suggests a tryst between descriptive language and teeming "reality" as experienced in consciousness, our sense of *Dasein.* Lyn Hejinian makes a useful distinction between Oppen's notion of appearances as the principal constituents of reality, and a world of things that remain ever-distant from perception: "empirical reality is solely phenomenal — a matter of appearances — and we can never see anything as it is.... The only things for which we have words are appearances." If we merely apply language to our *perceptions* of occurrence, then perhaps "the third path... of appearance" is a *state of encounter* between ourselves and other things that exist. It lies between Oppen's "mineral world" and our apprehension of it; what appears as real to us, and truly startles us in some way.

92 Oppen, "Route," *Collected Poems* 196.  
93 Thackrey, *A Radical Practice* 35.  
96 Hejinian, "Figuring Out." 2 and 6.  
97 Oppen speaks of "a very great love for the mineral world, for the way things behave, the way things are" in Oppen, "Interview with George Oppen" 16. See also "the pure joy / Of the mineral fact" in "Of Being Numerous," *Collected Poems* 94.
Appearances can be trusted as actualities, that is, even when we cannot substantiate absolute knowledge about a world that is. Oppen states:

What I trust is the image because that's what... you know you saw, what you know you felt, what you responded to.... This is almost in non-technical terms what's commonly called a realist philosophy and approach. This simply means that it's impossible to doubt the existence of the consciousness itself.\(^8\)

An appearance is an encounter between oneself and something other, a point of interactivity and mutual contextualisation. Such encounters involve intersubjective facing — an experience of commonality — even as they preserve a fundamental gap between things, or a potential difference. Oppen's arduous third way lies between a thing and a perceiver and is a co-existential engagement of both; an experience of actualness that happens as "a common spacing of time" (Nancy), without precluding the uncertainty and unknowing that are necessary for future ethical engagements.\(^9\) This third way is arduous precisely because it rejects closure, Susan Thackrey suggests. By studying perceptual processes rather than conceptual finities, a poetry of appearances removes a guarantee of "completed presence."\(^10\) For George Oppen — and for Lyn Hejinian — this provisional facticity is a kind of ethical trustworthiness, and should be affirmed as such.

In my introduction I argued that Hannah Arendt's notion of a "space of appearance" has become central, over the past five years, to Lyn Hejinian's poetic. During the mid-1990s, Hejinian read Arendt's The Human Condition and began to connect Oppen's ideas about appearances and commonality with Arendt's thesis on "common sense" and the space of appearance. Arendt characterises the polis as a realm of shared sense, arguing that "[i]t is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality and are not merely felt as irritations of our nerves or resistance sensations of our bodies."\(^11\) She correlates declining "common sense" and community disarray, writing that a "noticeable decrease in common sense in any given community" is an "almost infallible sign of alienation from the world." (209) The

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\(^8\) Oppen, "Interview with George Oppen," 18.
\(^10\) Thackrey, A Radical Practice 36.
\(^11\) Arendt, Human Condition 208-209.
space of appearance or *polis* arrives in the simple act of saying, a form of togetherness in “speech and action”:

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.... [The space of appearance is] the space where I appear to others as others appear to me.... To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To men [sic] the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all; “for what appears to all, this we call Being.”

Arendt’s *reality* is shared definitively; it is a space in which people appear to one another as humans, in speech and action. To appear “to others as others appear to me” is to coexist in *otherness*, or in a state of alterity. Oppen echoed Arendt’s philosophy when writing in a letter: “There are certain things, appearances, around which the understanding gathers. They hold the meanings which make it possible to live, they are one’s sense of reality and the possibility of meaning.” Oppen was less certain than Arendt about a common experience of reality, it seems — though equally convinced of a link between “one’s sense of reality” and “appearances, around which the understanding gathers.”

Lyn Hejinian presented a paper called “George Oppen and the Space of Appearance” at the annual Modernist Studies Association conference on 2 November 2002. While that essay is too recent for inclusion within this thesis, its title prompts speculations about Hejinian’s evolving interest in Oppen’s way of thinking about *community* and the *spacing of appearances* in poetry. Poetry is “action” in Arendt’s terms, a place in which “human distinctness” and the particularisation of things can be achieved or witnessed. “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth,” writes Arendt. In speaking to and with others, we experience a moment of renewal or natality, alongside a confirmation of our essential difference from other beings and things. Or to cite the epigraph of Oppen’s *The

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103 Oppen, *Selected Letters* 123.
"we awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things."106 The worlds that are constituted in Arendt’s view by "action" are reminiscent of Jean-Luc Nancy’s states of "togetherness" in which differences are preserved.107 This in turn corresponds with Lyn Hejinian’s commitment, both politically and philosophically, to a kind of differential pluralism. Poetry for Hejinian takes place in the polis as an action that can affirm new communities; new spaces of appearance, or ways of understanding common (worldly) reality that articulate difference rather than suppressing it. "Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction," observes Arendt in *The Human Condition*. (175) "When I say 'equals' I don’t mean indifference but distance," answers Hejinian in a poem called "The Composition of the Cell" — not sameness, but particularity in togetherness, or otherness in being-with.108

In "Reason," Hejinian reads Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous” as “a testing of the same context, the same reason” that she explores in her essay, and implicitly aligns her writing project with Oppen’s poetic of occurrences and appearances.109 In the introduction to *The Language of Inquiry* she writes: "Like George Oppen, I am aware that poets work in the context of 'being numerous.'" (4) And two pages earlier: "Poetry undertakes acknowledgment as a preservation of otherness — a notion that can be offered in a political, as well as an epistemological, context." (2) These are extremely interesting statements of Hejinian’s poetic. They make strong links between a poetry of worldly appearances and an ethics in which the maintenance and admission of difference is paramount. This is possibly the most significant aspect of Hejinian’s readings of Oppen, especially when considering Hejinian’s devotion to forms of community that sustain epistemological and ontological openness, and Oppen’s comparable traversing of communal rhetorics and possibilities.

Oppen interpreted “appearances” as perceptual sites of encounter and transaction between things — ideas, subjects, objects, materials. A poetry of appearances might thus acknowledge and examine the embedded and co-existent nature of subjectivities

107 Nancy, “Finite History,” 159.  
and objectivities. As Hejinian suggests, it might allow moments of otherness to exist and be faced without limiting their essential strangeness. Susan Thackrey observes a similar, mobile alterity in Oppen’s poetic: “in perception the ‘thing’ is simultaneously complete as a being, incomplete, and arriving.” The “truth” of perception resides in a strangely intermediate zone of unknowing, where actualities are “incomplete and arriving” and remain open to future change. My first chapter explored parities between Lyn Hejinian’s compositional choices and her rejection of closure in knowing, while relating both to models of commonality founded in difference rather than sameness. In Hejinian’s most recent work, the guest/host relationship recurs as a linking motif between “a preservation of otherness” and “a poetics of encounter.” Before addressing that motif and its implications for models of (ethical) community, I want to consider otherness in relation to several events that dominated George Oppen’s idea of the present.

Oppen used letter-writing to explicate a poetics, and to record historical events and methodologies that animate and situate his poetry. Specific words and ideas from Oppen’s poems are dwelt upon, tested and seriously refined in his letters; and Rachel Blau DuPlessis has marked an intertextual trail through the Selected Letters to demonstrate their integral role in Oppen’s praxis. In a letter to poet John Crawford, Oppen places into epistemological context the irrefutably violent imagery that appears in “Of Being Numerous”:

The next section [of the poem] acknowledges the relation of ontology to ethic. Atrocity becoming ordinary — worldly.

Oppen’s sense of poetic “sincerity” was shaped critically by political atrocities, including his own experience in World War Two and observation of two holocausts. As a former member of the Communist Party, Oppen was disenchanted throughout the 1960s by the repressive turn of regimes in Eastern Europe. In a letter of 1973, Oppen expresses admiration for a phrase by poet Michael Heller, sent by Heller in a

110 Thackrey, A Radical Practice 36.
111 Oppen, Selected Letters xxviii.
112 Oppen, Selected Letters 119.
113 While abhorring the violence of anti-Semitic fascist ideologies, Oppen also found disturbing the racism of Communist Party discourses that would not tolerate difference: “(anti-Semitism (nihilism) of the Jewish Communist: to die for anything but one’s Jewishness holds the promise of not being forgotten ((the proletariat will not be exterminated))).” Oppen, Selected Letters 281.
letter: “the commonplace is at the moment lost.” Oppen muses, “Well, I’m glad I read that. One can make a life out of that sentence.”114 In context of severe dysfunction within numerous twentieth-century Western political scenarios, the problem of community haunted Oppen. “The issue is happiness, there is no other issue, or no other issue one has a right to think about for other people, to think about politically, but I don’t know how to measure happiness,” wrote Oppen in 1970.115 His sense of “the relation of ontology to ethic” was troubled deeply by observations of difference under erasure, a result of prescriptive, authoritarian narratives about collective “right” or happiness — including those of Stalinism and Fascism, and within his own government’s treatment of political dissenters: “That denial / Of death that paved the cities… and the pavement // Is filthy as the corridors of the police.”116

Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* begins by acknowledging historic events that have brought crisis to twentieth-century thinking about commonality:

> The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer… is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community.117

Such dislocation rests upon transformation of others and “otherness” into the Other, argues Nancy, a trope of revulsion and fear that permits subjective suspension of responsibility toward other beings and things, and that demands adherence to “sameness” over difference and interactivity.118 It is beyond the intentions of this thesis to discuss such psychoanalytic terminologies in detail. I rely, however, upon a distinction between otherness and sameness to make figurative sense of the models of community-in-difference that are proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy and advocated by Lyn Hejinian. Nor can I give lengthy regard to geopolitical events that contextualise “Of Being Numerous.” They strongly influence a dialectics between particularity and collectivity that underwrites Oppen’s poem, however, and are central to Hejinian’s readings of Oppen’s quandary about commonality. As Nancy observes, we cannot

think about “community” in the late twentieth-century without acknowledging the severity of its dissolution in specific locales. Philosophical discussions about “new” community models, particularly those that emphasise difference, take place in the ubiquitous shadow of dilemmas about “nation” and empire.

This returns us to poetry’s ethical capabilities, and Hejinian’s claim that “poetry undertakes acknowledgment as a preservation of otherness.” ¹¹⁹ Dedicated partly to the memory of those who died during the Jewish Holocaust, Emmanuel Levinas’s *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence* interprets “saying” as a manifestation of “sincerity”:

Saying... is this dedication to the other, this sincerity.... Sincerity is not an attribute of saying; it is saying that realizes sincerity. ¹²⁰

This is remarkably similar to Oppen’s and Hejinian’s sense of poetical *credibility*, or poetry’s obligations toward response in the face of atrocity. Via a kind of saying that is *toward-the-other* and *toward-the-world*, poetry might resist authoritarian discourses that proclaim uniformity and invalidate difference as a prelude to literal effacement. Saying is definitively communal, implies Levinas; always in “dedication to the other.” Jean-Luc Nancy echoes this idea: “There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, because *meaning is itself the sharing of Being.*” ¹²¹ A poetry that affirms encounters among things and beings might articulate traces of intrinsic communitarianism that inhabit our present, as Nancy implies: “‘Literature’ does not here designate what this word ordinarily indicates. What is in fact involved is the following: that there is an *inscription* of the communitarian exposition, and that this exposition, as such, can only be inscribed, or can be offered only by way of an inscription.” ¹²² By perceiving otherness as a function of interrelation between subjects, poetry — “an inscription of the communitarian exposition” — might bear equal witness to otherness and withness.

In a sense, Levinas’s “saying as dedication to the other” answers one of Theodore Adorno’s most famed statements, relevant to George Oppen’s poetic: “to write

¹²⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 143.
¹²² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 39.
poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism." Hejinian addresses Adorno's challenge in her essay "Barbarism," well aware of specific resonance it might gain for Oppen in light of his Jewish heredity. "Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities," Hejinian says. She interprets "barbarism" as an urgent need for languages that speak differently to those substantiating atrocious acts. Barbarians — from the Greek barbaros, meaning foreign — are strangers or border dwellers, argues Hejinian. Poets might learn from barbarity "the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness." (326) In doing so, and in rejecting homogenising narratives that support reprehensible events, poetry might gain "enormous mobility" and explore "transformative strategies" (328) — including poetic methods that heighten strangeness as a means of admitting, rather than appropriating, otherness.

Barbarism and bordering are central tropes within Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous.” The poem’s eighteenth section recalls both the Jewish and atomic holocausts:

It is the air of atrocity,
An event as ordinary
As a President.

A plume of smoke, visible at a distance
In which people burn.

If atrocities can be made "as ordinary / As a President," then perhaps Lyn Hejinian is right in understanding strangeness rather than sameness as proper ground for an ethical poetic. Hejinian links Oppen’s phrase “atrocity becoming ordinary” to poetical methods that defamiliarise, citing Victor Shklovsky’s Formalist technique of ostranenie or “making strange” as evidence of ethical dimensions that can accompany innovative poetic strategies. "[I]t is more than habituation that would sunder our connection to atrocity, that would efface it and render it innocuous," writes Hejinian.

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123 Lyn Hejinian cites this translation of Adorno’s statement in “Barbarism,” Language of Inquiry 325. In a footnote to the essay Hejinian points out a different translation: “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (334). Ron Silliman begins an essay entitled “Of Theory, To Practice” with that version of Adorno’s apothegm. See Silliman, The New Sentence 58.
126 See also Lyn Hejinian, “Forms in Alterity: On Translation,” Language of Inquiry 300-301.
"It is also that it presents us with an epistemological impossibility, a situation in which there is nothing to know."\(^{127}\)

Nothing to know, Hejinian argues, because knowledge has already been determined, foreclosed and cut adrift from context:

An act of atrocity can establish a place for itself in a logical narrative and thereby seem historical, explicable. But it only does so by breaking the chain of phrases, so that nothing is happening. Nothing is meant.\(^{128}\)

In Peter Nicholls's view, "to speak politically of the holocaust would be to move within the world of distinct positionalities and moral judgements" — Hejinian's "logical narratives."\(^{129}\) The more "inchoate forms" and linkages of a poetry of encounters, however, might preserve a space "between 'you and I,'" an alterity that Nicholls reads as "a condition of both authentic social relations and of the writing in which they are exemplified."\(^{130}\) In this light, and as a statement of method, Hejinian's often-repeated counter to a-historicism gains new ethical weight: "Along comes something — launched in context."\(^{131}\) Something is happening, something is meant. More importantly, it happens "in context, which is to say, in thought (in theory and with critique) and in history."\(^{132}\) Hejinian's testimony of presence is mirrored by Oppen: "It is the air of atrocity."\(^{133}\) In two words — it is — Oppen circumvents erasure. He declares trust in occurrence as a gauge of worldly actuality and, ultimately, history. Everything is meant by Oppen's statement of fact, by these "small nouns / Crying faith."\(^{134}\) We perceive that something occurs and are responsible for admitting it as reality. Poetry can choose credibility, sincerity in saying, while forbearing the incredible. In this it becomes contemporary; a witness to a common space of appearance, and to the present.

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\(^{129}\) Nicholls, "Of Being Ethical," 167.

\(^{130}\) Nicholls cites "between 'you and I'" from Jean-Luc Nancy. See Nicholls, "Of Being Ethical," 164.

\(^{131}\) Chapter one contains extensive discussion of this maxim. Also for example Hejinian, "Reason," Language of Inquiry 339.

\(^{132}\) Hejinian, "Reason," Language of Inquiry 346.

\(^{133}\) Oppen, "Of Being Numerous," Collected Poems 160.

\(^{134}\) Oppen, "Psalm," Collected Poems 78.
"The context is history / Moving toward the light of the conscious," writes Oppen. Of Being Numerous" plants its responsibilities between one and many, in a border zone where ethicality moves continuously to accommodate contextual-historical change. The state of being numerous, or living in the continuous present, requires site-specific testing of context that gives provisional ethical limit to (social and political) possibility. In the face of an historic impasse involving discourses of individualism and collectivity (the "shipwreck / Of the singular"), we are responsible for choosing "the meaning / Of being numerous." Oppen's images of wreck and numerousness are expressions of deep and difficult obligation. When facing both our ongoing "encounter with the universe" and atrocities borne out of totalising discourses, how to find a poetic that admits difference and contextual limitation as tools of ethical navigation? The "shipwreck of the singular" could mean disregard for being-with that has validated atrocious acts. It could be the wreck of discourses, including poetries, that put commonality and individuation into perpetual opposition. Or it might refer to moments when context is abandoned; when no boundaries are active.

Oppen is profoundly skeptical about universalising political narratives; but equally despairing of alienating individuation as a response to the "unmanageable pantheon" of "the existence of things." Somewhere between, along the "arduous third path" of encounters, is a way of being that preserves difference while acknowledging community. As Peter Nicholls suggests in "Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen," this encodes a somewhat anxious model of commonality:

Even as we think the condition of 'humanity,' then, the collective reveals itself as a collection of singularities, and our only way out of a static ambiguity is to map the constant oscillation between these two conditions, their constant fading into each other.

Oppen viewed "social being as both divided and shared," argues Nicholls (162) — hence the vacillation between affirmation and doubt that animates "Of Being Numerous." "Common sense" may be impossible to define or prescribe, but this does

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137 "Encounter with the universe" cited from Oppen, Selected Letters 92.
140 Nicholls, "Of Being Ethical," 163-164.
not negate commonality as a core element of experience: "There are things / We live among ‘and to see them / Is to know ourselves." Perhaps, as Lyn Hejinian observes, an ethics can only emerge within this space of dilemma — when we find ourselves inhabiting a boundary, or at a limit that marks a point of commonality and difference, withness and otherness.

Dilemmas of singularity and plurality are paramount in our relations with others, as Emmanuel Levinas suggests: "Does a face abide both in representation and proximity; is it community and difference?" Where can we locate our responsibilities toward-the-other and toward-the-world, the very cares that are abrogated in events of atrocity? Lyn Hejinian and George Oppen might answer — within states of encounter, moments of strange and provisional being-in-common. "It is necessary to ask if in [the ethical aspect of being] there is not heard a voice coming from horizons at least as vast as those in which ontology is situated," writes Levinas. (140) Oppen likewise admits the other within his poetics of occurrence, as "part / Of an infinite series" of worldly actualities:

And yet at night
Their weight is part of mine.
For we are all housed now, all in our apartments,
The world untended to, unwatched.
And there is nothing left out there
As night falls, but the rocks

The horizon, on which the guest will appear

Lyn Hejinian’s most compelling accounts of reciprocal care and ethical responsibility reside in her exploration of guest/host relations and tropes of neighbourliness. Both include "otherness" and "withness" as integral components. As a window onto

143 Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 154.
guest/host thinking, I want to address a poetical dialogue that complements Hejinian’s recent work on George Oppen while pre-dating it by several years. On 16 May 1988 in a letter to poet Clark Coolidge, Hejinian describes a new collaboration that she is beginning with a Russian writer, Arkadii Dragomoschenko. The project emerges from Dragomoschenko and Hejinian’s ongoing epistolary, cross-cultural and translational friendship:

Meanwhile, Larry’s sister Jacki proposed to the Ford Foundation and some other agencies that she make a film to be shot at the edges of understanding, or at the edges of culture, with a script based on correspondence between me and Arkadii. We are to write to each other on the 29th of each month on a specific word -- we have a list of 20 words. I don’t know what kind of film she can make... but she wants also to make a book out of the correspondence and photographs.... The book and the film are to be called “Neighbors,” which is also our first word. The word sossyed (neighbor) in Russian is a very loaded one, since it is the term for the persons who live together in communal flats.¹⁴⁶

Navigations of commonality and guest/host relations are a literal part of Lyn Hejinian and Arkadii Dragomoschenko’s alliance. The poets have hosted one another on numerous visits between home countries and have introduced each other’s translated work to correspondingly unfamiliar audiences, as discussed in my final chapter.

Hejinian met Dragomoschenko in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) in 1983 while travelling on a musical tour of the USSR and Poland with her husband, experimental saxophonist and composer Larry Ochs. Working alongside Ochs’s ROVA quartet, Larry Ochs’s sister Jacki Ochs made a documentary film of the trip called Jazz Summit, which became a precursor to the Neighbors project.¹⁴⁷ On Hejinian’s return to Berkeley, she and Dragomoschenko began a lengthy letter correspondence that precipitated frequent translations of one another’s work. Hejinian learnt Russian language during the exchange and by 1993 had collaborated with Russian-American librarian Elena Balashova to translate into English two full-length collections of

¹⁴⁶ Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 16 May 1988, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 3(U), “Clark Coolidge”].
Dragomoschenko’s poetry: *Description* (1990) and *Xenia* (1994). Dragomoschenko likewise created Russian translations of Hejinian’s “Strangeness” and *My Life*. The letters that formed a script for Ochs’s proposed film were written by Hejinian and Dragomoschenko between November 1987 and October 1991. The eventual film was released in 1998 by New Day Films and is called *Letters Not About Love*, a play on the title of an epistolary novel by Russian Formalist writer Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*. In the film, excerpts of letters by Hejinian and Dragomoschenko are read aloud and interspersed with musical improvisations and sound effects. Often-abstracted cinematographic landscapes from Leningrad-St. Petersburg and Northern California are interrupted periodically by newsreel footage and single words, co-ordinates for the poets’ letter exchange that appear in white on a black screen.

The phrase that heads this section is drawn from Hejinian and Balashova’s translation of *Xenia* by Arkadii Dragomoschenko. A sumptuously phenomenological and searingly detailed book-length poem, *Xenia* moves between prose sections and rarely named, serialised lyrics. “[T]he horizon, on which the guest will appear” accompanies a meditation on interactions between people and worldly things, abstractly narrativised via allusions to a man named Kondratii Teotokopulos:

*I’ve been standing at the crossroads for quite a long time. It’s as light as day. It is day — Kondratii Teotokopulos will later write in his notebook. — ....

But now it is later.

Now it’s 12:00. Still to come — cheese, Chianti, conversation. Still to come — the horizon, on which the guest will appear, from whose face all evidence of traits is washed away and only

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the first tongue-twister of shadow
on the threshold of night
makes it possible to distinguish him from a mirror
where the world cherishes

the creation of a sea gull. (89-90)

This fragment of Xenia anticipates a series of encounters and the responsibilities they engender in advance: waiting to meet, an offer of food, facing at a threshold, transactions in language. Tropes of meeting are given spatio-temporal context via the road, the horizon, and times of day and night. Dragomoschenko's language is especially liminal and foregrounds qualitative strangeness; in the figure of an awaited and possibly unknown guest whose "shadow on the threshold" is the only thing "distinguish[ing] him from a mirror" and, more generally, in a collocation of tropes including "evidence... washed away," "the threshold of night," and a somewhat timeless crossroads. Borders and foreignness are central conceits in Xenia, amplified by Dragomoschenko's knowledge that he was writing toward eventual translation by Hejinian — a fascinating skew that I will discuss in my final chapter. Alterity or otherness is embodied literally here by a guest "from whose face all evidence of traits / is washed away." Only a "tongue-twister of shadow" distinguishes the guest from "a mirror" of worldliness; and indeed from the host himself, who encounters his own "otherness" in the strangely reflective likeness of his guest.

When Lyn Hejinian returned to Leningrad in 1989 to gather material for her long poem Oxota: A Short Russian Novel and to work with Dragomoschenko on English translations of Xenia, she kept a daily "Soviet Diary" in which she records this observation:

I ask Arkadii about the word Xenia, and write, as if from dictation, what he says: the title is derived from many meanings of the word -- its Greek stem -- many roots as in gift, the short poem (shortness and longness are completely phenomenological entities), the difference in similarity (site, from a vocabulary of foreign words -- seeds and fruits which are distinguished from other seeds and fruits of the same plant, their colour, form, size, and other qualities), growing up at least in the meanings of each other and at the same time marriage: "the intersection swirls when the flower of one plant is swirled by the pollen of the flowers of another
plant of the same species. Cross pollination, and the power of unachieved meanings." And so forth. 153

Xenia is a term of "difference in similarity" that suggests the gift of a meeting between strangers. It also implies a marriage of different things whose meanings intersect, even if momentarily, while remaining powerfully "unachieved." Hejinian's description of Dragomoschenko's "definition" refers tautologically to translations that happen as Dragomoschenko "dictates" to Hejinian. The poets experience xenia, a meeting of host and guest who encounter "the power of unachieved meanings" within the strangely mutual context or neighbourhood of exchanged languages. "Differences... are what we all have in common, namely that we never have everything in common with anyone else," writes Hejinian in "Continuing Against Closure." "They keep things susceptible to events, they allow them to participate in what happens. Differences are evidence of incompleteness." 154 If difference means a rejection of closure, it also suggests regions between things in which particularity and commonality are available concurrently.

While Hejinian was translating Dragomoschenko's Xenia she began to connect its core trope with her own interest in borders as points of linkage, mutability and distinctness. The first book of Hejinian's A Border Comedy was begun in June of 1994, the year Xenia was published in translation. It features dozens of references to betweens, "vast differences," barbarism, gaps, and boundaries from which presence begins. 155 Borders — "[p]rospects, zones or situations" (20) — are explored in the poem as exemplary indicators of relationships in and as space. As touched upon earlier when considering George Oppen's use of vacillation as a poetic principle, Hejinian's essay "Barbarism" (1995) identifies xenia as a figure of barbarism and foreignness. 156 This idea is finessed in "Some Notes toward a Poetics" (1999) when Hejinian describes a kinship that can occur with every encounter:

At points of linkage, the possibility of a figure of contradiction arises: a figure we might call by a Greek name, xenos. Xenos means "stranger" or

“foreigner,” but more importantly, from xenos two English words with what seem like opposite meanings are derived: they are guest and host.

A guest/host relationship comes into existence solely in and as an occurrence, that of their meeting, an encounter, a mutual and reciprocal contextualization. The host is no host until she has met her guest, the guest is no guest until she meets her host. In Russian the word for “occurrence” captures the dynamic character of this encounter. The word for event in Russian is sobytie; so (with or co-) and bytie (being), “being with” or “with-being” or “co-existence.” Every encounter produces, even if for only the flash of an instant, a xenia -- the occurrence of co-existence which is also an event of strangeness or foreignness. A strange occurrence which, nonetheless, happens constantly -- we have no other experience of living but encounters. We have no other use for language than to have them.157

In language that could be taken directly from Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophies of community — being-with or the occurrence of co-existence — Hejinian emphasises both the strangeness and reciprocity of states of encounter (xenia). Guest/host encounters are literal events (sobytie) of commonality, brought about when things “happen” to coincide in a common space of appearance, or a mutual context.

In guest/host meetings, one thing gives presence to another by providing a boundary for its being. The host is no host until she meets her guest; the guest becomes a guest in presence of a host. In a moment of facing, host and guest share a co-ontological existence. Borders that appear during guest/host meetings remain open to contextual shifts that might accompany future encounters. Guest/host is thus a trope of contingency and spatiality, stressing the flexibility of subjectivities and presencing while acknowledging placement and terrain as constituent cogs of being. In A Border Comedy Hejinian explores provisional states of I and you that are a consequence of the guest/host interface:

But nothing’s certain, though I’d swear it was noon
Whether angel or puppet
We’ve all got our laws
Of encounter
Yours with me and mine with you
And if I am not-I and you are the other then we are the consequence (134-135)

And several pages later: “It encounters, links, and trades” (136) followed by “Drawn / Full / Fascinated / In the face of a face.” (137) Host and guest happen to each another in and as a shared “spacing of time” (Nancy) — a we, or a being in-common and in-context.\textsuperscript{158}

In other words, neither guest nor host claims prior significance in their always-exchanging relationship. They meet in a kind of mutual strangeness, “fascinated / in the face of a face.” This is not the static otherness of an Other-as-fetishised-object, implied by Cartesian discourses of subjectivity, but a radical and non-exhaustible otherness that questions the sufficiency of subject/object as an ontological paradigm. As Joan Retallack evocatively asks:

\textit{Can I write myself out of a package deal &/or a self-entrancing looking glass world of irony shrines, or the subjective plenum where horizon collapses into subject’s in-grown smile?... How to shift the purview of that philosophically exhausted \textit{gaze}?}\textsuperscript{159}

Retallack’s different view on a recuperated horizon is reminiscent of Dragomoschenko’s horizon of otherness “on which the guest will appear.” As beings we happen in place. We are spatially (inter)located, spatial interlocutors. “I have no experience of being except in position,” Hejinian writes. “All my observations are made from within the matrix of possibly infinite contingencies and contextualities.”\textsuperscript{160}

Within \textit{xenia} subjectivities form, disarrange and recohere. Imagined differently, they become engaged as a praxis of spatiality. This is not simply a matter of replacing one rhetorical binary (subject/object) with another (guest/host), but a chance to effect a regenerative epistemological and ethical swerve. The vertical slash is both a linking and distinguishing marker, a code for interactivity that occurs between.

Similar tropes of geospatial encounter appear in \textit{Strangers to Ourselves}, a work by philosopher and linguist Julia Kristeva that is cited in “The Numerous,” Lyn Hejinian’s extended exploration of Oppen’s poetics. Kristeva’s “Toccata and Fugue for the Foreigner” uses \textit{stranger} and \textit{foreigner} as figures for an otherness, an essential difference, that all people have in common:

\textsuperscript{158} Nancy, “Finite History,” 157.

\textsuperscript{159} Joan Retallack, “Blue Notes on the Know Ledge,” \textit{Poetics Journal} 10 (June 1998): 53.

\textsuperscript{160} Lyn Hejinian, “The Person and Description,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 202.
Meeting balances wandering. A crossroad of two othernesses, it welcomes the foreigner without tying him [sic] down, opening the host to his visitor without committing him. A mutual recognition, the meeting owes its success to its temporary nature.\(^\text{16}\)

We might view such temporary encounters as xenia, instances of mutual contextualisation that remain open to future meetings. Kristeva’s foreigner at the crossroads corresponds with Dragomoschenko’s stranger at the threshold and Hejinian’s barbarian at the border. In her introductory pages Kristeva writes: “the question arises again: no longer that of welcoming the foreigner within a system that obliterates him but of promoting the togetherness of those foreigners that we all recognize ourselves to be.” (2-3) The book concludes ironically by moving into a discourse of “universals” to speak of “a union of singularities” (132), and its final chapter is titled “Might Not Universality Be... Our Own Foreignness?” (169)

Kristeva’s account of the guest/host relation unfolds a possibility of regions where difference is not “obliterated” but recognised as a quality of necessarily strange commonality. Jean-Luc Nancy describes the same state in “Finite History” when writing: “The otherness of existence happens only as ‘togetherness.’"\(^\text{162}\)

“Paradoxically,” agrees philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, “it is qua alienus—foreigner and other—that man [sic] is not alienated.”\(^\text{163}\) In other words, community is an experience of mutual, reciprocal otherness. Kristeva echoes Levinas when asking: “Shall we be, intimately and subjectively, able to live with the others, to live as others, without ostracism but also without levelling?”\(^\text{164}\) Levinas puts it slightly differently: “What meaning can community take on in difference without reducing difference?” (154)

I have argued throughout my thesis the significance of these questions for Lyn Hejinian, tracing their exploration within her poetic of borders and encounters. After three decades of inquiry, Hejinian has arrived at “xenia” as the modus vivendi of her ethical poetic — a principle of reciprocity and difference in meeting that acknowledges contextual specificity and remains open to future change, while

\(^{162}\) Nancy, “Finite History,” 160.
\(^{163}\) Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 59.
\(^{164}\) Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves 2.
affirming communality at points of local interface. As chapters three and four will show, this reading gains special weight beside accounts of Hejinian’s participation in Language writing communities, and when we consider her long-standing commitment to collaborative textual forms and artistic methods. Before stepping toward those narratives, I want to examine neighbourliness, guest/host, hostage and facing as they appear in Emmanuel Levinas’s Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, written in 1974 and translated into English in the 1980s. These terms are pivotal to Hejinian’s syntax of xenia; and they combine in Levinas’s ethical ideal of being-the-one-for-the-other (74), an explicitly Judaic rendering of Jean-Luc Nancy’s being-with-one-another in worldly community.165 While Hejinian has not read Levinas in great detail, her extensive reading of late twentieth-century philosophies of community has effected a meeting of vocabularies and fields of engagement.

Ethical relations for Levinas reside in a principle of neighbourliness, where an “other as neighbour”166 orders another person into a relation of care and obligation even before their meeting is effected. Upon encounter, a “host” is already responsible for his or her “guest,” who in turn is responsible for many others in neighbourhood. Community is an event of “kinship outside of all biology,” writes Levinas:

The neighbour concerns me before all assumption.... He orders me before being recognized. Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, “against all logic.” It is not because the neighbour would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely other. The community with him begins in my obligation to him.... He has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbour. It is incumbent on me. It presses the neighbour up against me. (87-91)

Our obligation toward the other is “pre-original,” writes Levinas, and “older than any beginning.” (143) Responsibility toward a stranger exists in advance of the moment of xenia, in which one person arrives into shared context with an other. This responsibility extends in fact to multiple others in serial community: “My relationship with the other as neighbour gives meaning to my relations with all the others.” (159)

165 Nancy, Being Singular Plural 1.
166 Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 159.
"A subject is a hostage," argues Levinas (112) — a person whose obligations reside in host-age, or in hosting any number of "guests" to whom they owe in advance a duty of care. Much like Kristeva's "crossroad of two othernesses," Levinas's appraisal of proximate responsibility relies on radical exposure and recognition of shared strangeness.167 When we accept our responsibilities to others we engage in facing, in which all parties retain their unique and "precisely other" character while becoming conjoined in neighbourhood. Singularities are affirmed in the phenomenal proximity of encounter. "The neighbour concerns me before all assumption," including my own assumptions of subjective being. Put differently, "I" am always a function of my responsibilities to others. "I" am always in community.

Despite its emphasis on facing the singularity of the other, Levinas's ethical model depends upon a kind of substitution. In moments of intersubjective facing, I acknowledge the vulnerablity of my neighbour or guest (being-toward-the-other), and in accepting my obligations to that person I become one-for-the-other (14). I am for them, in the sense of being obliged to take upon myself responsibility for their condition. By Levinas's account, this relation is lopsided: "the substitution of the one for the other does not signify the other for the one. The relationship with the third party in an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at." (158) I might become the guest of another host who takes responsibility for me; but in the moment of facing my neighbour, the terms of being-one-for-the-other are not exchanged.

This seems complex, but is simply an indication of where Levinas sites the moment of recognition of obligation. Anyone can take responsibility for any number of others, and is obliged ethically to do so. Lyn Hejinian's analysis of guest/host relations is nuanced differently: "We tell in order to become guests and hosts to each other and to things — or to become guests and hosts to life."168 Hejinian implies that guest and host might enter equilibrium to become instead host and guest during the reciprocity of meeting, and this shifts the availability of subject-positions within their encounter. One can identify as a guest even as one recognises one's hostage of and to another. As

167 Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves 11.
I shall discuss in a moment, both Levinas’s and Hejinian’s ideas of ethical obligation rely upon the capacity to “say” as a specific indicator of an ability to take responsibility for others. This brings a dimension of sentience to their arguments, and complicates Hejinian’s use of the word “things” when speaking about guest/host relations.

Levinas’s notion of neighbourliness makes use of the gift, in which a giver relinquishes interested intention. The “for” in being-for-the-other is “a for of total gratuity, breaking with interest: for characteristic of the human fraternity outside of any pre-established system.”¹⁰⁹ Hejinian’s understanding of poetry as propriation — a telling that is a thanking of life — makes use of a similar relational economy.¹⁷⁰ Levinas’s human “fraternity” beyond pre-established systems is an ironic model for an ideal ethical community, in the sense of its built-in (linguistic) gender bias, and is indicative of awkward use of gendered tropes throughout Otherwise Than Being. Levinas’s key figure for “authentic” facing is, predictably, “maternity, a body suffering for another, the body as passivity and renouncement.” (79) While maternity might indeed provide an excellent model for intersubjective facing and care, Levinas’s relegation of maternity to “passivity and renouncement” and “abandon without return” (79) can be disputed. There are activity and pleasure in giving — such that maternal states might exceed passivity, and become more inclined toward the affirmative being-for-the-other that Levinas champions; a condition of both joy and “extraordinary everydayness.” (141)

The positive qualities of being-the-one-for-the-other are useful, however, in moving thinking beyond anthropomorphic ego and subject positions that often are valorised and masculinised in the same moment — as per the comparable (and potentially maternal) body of Christ that hovers at an unspoken margin of Levinas’s text. Signification or “saying” is the moment in which we declare our obligations toward an other, writes Levinas, and that state of facing can be powerfully extra-subjective:

Signification is the ethical deliverance of the self through substitution for the other.... There is deliverance into itself of an ego awakened from its

¹⁰⁹ Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 96-97.
¹⁷⁰ Hejinian, “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 238.
imperialist dream, its transcendent imperialism, awakened to itself, a patience as a subjection to everything.\textsuperscript{171}

In offering the gift of our obligation through \textit{saying}, we accept our responsibilities to community while realising our non-autonomous being. Or, as George Oppen writes, "we awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things."\textsuperscript{172} We also expose ourselves to the absence of "return" or acknowledgement, writes Levinas: "To communicate is indeed to open oneself, but the openness is not complete if it is on the watch for recognition." (119) For Levinas, intersubjective obligations effect "an abandon of the sovereign and active subjectivity" in favour of a residual "irreplaceable uniqueness," or intrinsic difference, that remains present even after the (Cartesian) subject has been "de-posed or de-situated." (47-48) In relations of being-for-the-other, subjectivity comes to mean "being subject to," or "being the subject of." This is an important sign of linkage. Levinas understands "being" as something that happens in and as relation, even while otherness — our collective status as foreigners or strangers — is maintained and embraced. In neighbourhood, we are returned to our own otherness, which moves us beyond liminal states of terror and unknowing that might be associated with a feared and capitalized Other.

Levinas's concept of neighbourly facing is both corporeal and attractively sensual, and implicitly critiques philosophical discourses that relegate "embodiment" and tactility to primarily feminine and "private" domains.\textsuperscript{173} In this respect, Levinas learns much from "maternity" as a figure of sensual exchange. "Signifyingness, the-one-for-the-other, exposedness of self to another, it is immediacy in caresses and in the contact of saying," writes Levinas. "It is the immediacy of a skin and a face, a skin which is always a modification of a face, a face that is weighed down with a skin."\textsuperscript{174} Such a state of being-for-the-other literally implies \textit{being-for-the-with}, or being in a condition of \textit{withness} that is always-already present in our interface with others. In \textit{The Inoperative Community}, Jean-Luc Nancy describes community in similar terms:

\textsuperscript{171} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise Than Being} 164.

\textsuperscript{172} Oppen, "The Materials," \textit{Collected Poems} 16.

\textsuperscript{173} For feminist critiques of embodiment, feminisation and the private sphere, see for example Elizabeth Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies} (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994) and Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity} (London, New York: Routledge, 1990).

\textsuperscript{174} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise Than Being} 85.
Community is given to us with being and as being, well in advance of all our projects, desires, and undertakings.... Community is given to us — or we are given and abandoned to the community: a gift to be renewed and communicated.²⁷⁵

Our communities are corporeal while they are epistemological, suggests Levinas, and the renewal of the gift of our obligation extends to bodily recognition and communication: "In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying." (94) Nancy’s distinction between community that “is given to us” and our being “given to the community” recalls a significant distinction that Lyn Hejinian makes in “A Common Sense” between the “chanciness” of natality, and our capacity to choose and take responsibility for the ethical condition of our lives.²⁷⁶ Hejinian swings her poem Happily on a similar axis of happiness and happenstance.

In A Border Comedy, Hejinian often explores (guest/host) encounters in terms that are comparable to Levinas’s syntax of sensual facing:

Intelligible skin
Its nipples, its nearness and creases, its follicles
In distance — it’s the skin that keeps us
In difference
You in yours, I in mine (34)

For Levinas, neighbourly facing is “a non-erotic openness”;²⁷⁷ but Hejinian often disrupts the neatness of such marshalled desiring relations. I will focus at a later point in my thesis upon the erotic potential of guest/host and intersubjective relations, especially in light of Hejinian’s exploration of border-zones between “properly” public and private realms. By embedding sensual encounters within a language of “nearness” and “distance” in the above excerpt, Hejinian also stresses spatiality and proximity as essential components of intersubjective facing. To conclude this chapter, I will remain focused upon spatial aspects of guest/host encounters as a way of thinking about objectivity, objectivist poetics and place.

²⁷⁵ Nancy, The Inoperative Community 35.
²⁷⁷ Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 177.
"This signification to the other occurs in proximity," writes Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*. "Proximity is different from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other.... To maintain that the relationship with a neighbour, incontestably set up in saying, is a responsibility for the neighbour, that saying is to respond to another, is to find no longer any limit or measure for this responsibility." (46-47) One of the most interesting elements of Levinas's principle of unlimited *facing* is its reliance upon spatial and geo-temporal vocabularies, comparable with Hejinian's focus upon "mutual and reciprocal contextualisation" — a phrase that suggests *habitus* and occupied space.178 Intersubjective (between-person) relations are always situated. They occur in continuum with material surroundings, our being in place and in time:

Are not you, too, somewhere naked?  
But that is my face  
Yes, and in us everywhere is face  
Visage  
Aspect179

In us, everywhere, is face or aspect. In a moment of facing we remain contextualised — our *being-in-common* is also a *being-in-context*. When discussing objectivities within Hejinian's poetic of encounters, I use the term "terrain" to suggest people's placement in time and space, now and here, among networks of things in relation.

In "Scale and the other: Levinas and Geography," Richard Howitt proposes that we broaden our discourses about human obligation and co-existential facing to include "scale" alongside considerations of spatiality.180 *Scale* is a term and event of interrelation, argues Howitt. It admits "facets of space, time, culture and environment" (306) that have become prominent in a recent "cultural turn" of contemporary geographical discourses (299), while providing ways of thinking beyond subject-object polarities and grid-like spatialities:

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But it is precisely the irreducibility of depth to its Cartesian simplification as a third dimension of spatial measurement that creates the need for a scale lexicon and a conceptualization of geographical scale. The co-location of mutually perceiving subjects in cultural landscapes, with their institutional, environmental, economic and social complexities, creates relationships that are always and complexly placed but are not place-bound. Intersubjective space, therefore, needs always to be contextualized as an ethical space, a moral and cultural landscape. And as the Dreaming ontology of indigenous Australians reminds us, sentient and animated landscapes are themselves embodiments of gendered, powerful forces. (302)

While demonstrating Howitt's specific field of scholarship, this last statement moves us into domains of spatiality and scale — Howitt calls them "landscapes" — that exceed Western and Cartesian logics of subjectivity. It also evokes exciting contributions to inquiries about objectivity and object-apprehension that might accompany guest/host thinking. When read for example beside Louis Zukofsky's Objectivist demand for a poem that is "the context based on a world" or an "object in process," a "lexicon of scale" that responds to "the co-location of mutually perceiving subjects" within complex geographies or terrains might offer something of great interest to an ethical poetics.181

Lyn Hejinian's insistence upon linkage as a measure of a poem's "ethical space" (Howitt, above) can be considered fruitfully in terms of poetical scale. The scale of a poem — or its horizon of interrelation — might include its means and site of production, circulation among specific audiences, and contemporaneity (or being-in-time-and-place). Barrett Watten would include these elements within the "total syntax" of a poem; a combination of its interior and exterior effects and cultural spaces.182 "[T]he emphasis in poetry is on the movement rather than on the places," writes Hejinian in her introduction to The Language of Inquiry. "It is at points of linkage — in contexts of encounter, at what André Breton called points sublimes — that one discovers the reality of being in time, of taking one's chance, of becoming another, all with the implicit understanding that this is happening." (3) The same principles of linkage and mobility are embodied within Levinas's spatially-oriented idea of proximate ethicality, in which the "reality of being in time" is encountered as a

function of multiple, fundamental responsibilities to many different others: "Proximity is not a state, a repose, but a restlessness." In other words, proximity is a term of mobile relation — a term of scale.

In a chapter of What is Philosophy? that carries the wonderful title "Geophilia," Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose "neighbourhood" as a conceptual motif for relations of particularity and linkage:

In short, philosophy does have a principle, but it is a synthetic and contingent principle — an encounter, a conjunction. It is not insufficient by itself but contingent in itself. Even in the concept, the principle depends on a connection of components that could have been different, with different neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood is not restricted to relations between people but suggests relations of spatial proximity and occurrence in general, imbued with care and obligation. As guests and hosts who are placed within a potentially infinite array of occurrences, we become neighbours to boundless others and things. Neighbourhood "is not paradigmatic but syntagmatic; not projective but connective; not hierarchical but linking," argue Deleuze and Guattari. (91) Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein had similar principles in mind when coining the ubiquitous poetical moniker L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, an iconographic expression of commonality in difference. The intersubjectivity relations suggested by "neighbourhood" correspond with Deleuze and Guattari’s earlier rhetorics of assemblage, also spatially-embedded. Changing arrangements of parts in an assemblage will generate new contexts for being, exerting upon things continual pressure toward re-presencing. Subjectivities will "happen" at points of encounter, in proximity to other beings and things or in community with them. Objectivities are open, by obvious extension, to similar mobility and inclusion within relations of neighbourhood.

This points to a fascinating field of inquiry that I am calling extra-subjective thinking, to suggest a place outside the lock of subject/object dualities. Given that Lyn Hejinian

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182 Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 82.
183 Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy? 93.
184 L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine was founded in New York by Andrews and Bernstein in 1976.
consistently includes "things" — "events, objects, ideas, creatures, conditions... anything that might be singled out for articulate address" — within her scope of ethical and guest/host relations, xenia seems to have extra-subjective potential.\(^{187}\) How can states of objectivity be involved in ethical thinking, and to what extent are "subjectivity" and "objectivity" limited terms of address? When space and place are included in an ethics, how might obligations and responsibilities begin to involve terrain? Recall this chapter's epigraph, also from Deleuze and Guattari's "Geophilosophy":

Subject and object give a poor approximation of thought. Thinking is neither a line drawn between subject and object nor a revolving of one around the other. Rather, thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth.\(^{188}\)

Perhaps ethics can inhabit zones of extra-subjective and inter-objective linkage, and be experienced primarily as a matter of locale (geo-). If "thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth," then community obligations might extend beyond anthropocentric relations and toward neighbourhoods of non-sentient matter. Guest/host links move serially, beyond singular couplings; guest and host can become host and guest to prolific others, participant bodies in a vast assemblage of meetings that may happen — within practical limits of context and proximity. As cited above, Levinas puts it this way: "My relationship with the other as neighbour gives meaning to my relations with all the others."\(^{189}\) Can these others be otherwise than human?

Hejinian recently has embraced a poetical ethic that might reside otherwise than being or beyond essence, to borrow Levinas's provocative title. In "Some Notes toward a Poetics," Hejinian includes worldly matter in general within her scope of address. The obligations of guest/host relations include people "and things of the world," she argues:

"Language lets people and things be there for us," [Heidegger] says; that is its proper effect, the effect of propriation.... As Goethe says (in lines quoted by Heidegger): "Only when it owns itself to thanking / Is life held in esteem." "To own" here is used in the sense also of "to own up," which is to give oneself over, to experience hospitality, xenia, the guest/host

\(^{187}\) Hejinian, "Lyn Hejinian / Andrew Schelling," 5.
\(^{188}\) Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy? 85.
\(^{189}\) Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 159.
relationship. And to enter the relationship of xenia is to accept its obligations....

This is intimately connected to uses of poetic language.... The word as symbol establishes a guest/host relationship between speaker and things of the world. We are strangers to the things of which we speak until we speak and become instead their guests or they become ours. This transformation of the relation in which two beings are strangers to each other into a relation in which they are guest-host to each other is appropriation. "Propriation is telling" [Heidegger] -- a speaking that matters. We tell in order to become guests and hosts to each other and to things -- or to become guests and hosts of life.190

We might recall George Oppen's similar engagement with ethical functions of poetical "telling," also filtered through a Heideggerean lens: "All things explain each other, but they do not explain themselves."191 Hejinian's idea of becoming "guests and hosts of life" demands close scrutiny, as does her implication that poetical "speaking" might involve things beyond human subjectivities in relations of obligation borne out of proximate facing. What does it mean for "things" to "experience hospitality" relations, as Hejinian writes, and are "beings" and "things" at all interchangeable? How can things "become our hosts" and we their guests, and how exactly does this relate to objectivity and volition? We are on risky ethical ground if attributing "responsibility" to non-human sentient creatures and non-sentient things. How to care for and with a material world? Oppen clearly wrestled with like ethical issues in developing "a substantial language" of poetry: "River of our substance / Flowing / With the rest. River of the substance / Of the earth's curve, river of the substance / Of the sunrise...//... a substantial language / Of clarity, and of respect."192

Levinas does not refer explicitly to extra-personal matters when discussing, in Otherwise Than Being, manners of facing in which the subject "breaks up." (184) On the other hand, his foundation concept of responsibility for "all the others" (159) in neighbourhood does not exclude "things" or "places" from narratives of obligation. Jean-Luc Nancy is more radical in The Inoperative Community when making room for non-human materials in relations of community:

190 Hejinian, "Some Notes toward a Poetics," 238.
191 George Oppen, Selected Letters 93.
192 George Oppen, "A Narrative," Collected Poems 140.
Yet it is precisely the immanence of man to man, or is it man, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community. A community presupposed as having to be one of human beings presupposes that it effect, or that it must effect, as such and integrally, its own essence, which is itself the accomplishment of the essence of humanness. (3)

In a space of thought beyond the “exclu[sive]... logic of the absolute-subject of metaphysics” in which twin concepts of “immanence” and essential “individualism” have been reified and prioritised, we might glimpse another kind of community, argues Nancy: “And so, Being ‘itself’ comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will — in any case this is what I am trying to argue — as community.”193 If community is understood in terms of proximate relation or scale rather than human volition, then terrain, earthly materials, creatures and worldly things might be imagined as sharing relations of co-existence. Community thus becomes a spatial phenomenon; a common spacing of care that might exceed human subjectivity, or a system of linkages not requiring “the accomplishment of the essence of humanness” for validity.194

This is what Deleuze and Guattari mean in proposing “geophilosophy” and “neighbourhood” as conceptual tools for contemplating being. It is also the sense in which Lyn Hejinian includes “things” within xenia relations. Hejinian wonders in Happily about non-anthropomorphic kinds of commonality:

The manner in which we are present at this time to and fro appears, we come to point of view before us
The matter is here
Can we share its kind of existence?195

Hejinian’s appraisals of context certainly prioritise “spatiality” rather than “humanity” per se as a key to understanding worldly interactions. Objectivity and objectivism — states of presence implying matters beyond subjectivity — have become pivotal in Hejinian’s recent accounts of her own project. “The person,” she wrote in 1988, “is a mobile (and mobilized) reference point, or, to put it another way, subjectivity is not an

193 Nancy, The Inoperative Community 4 and 6.
194 Nancy, The Inoperative Community 3.
entity but a dynamic.” Ten years later she balanced the issue on a different keel when writing about collaborative poietical practices: “[Collaboration] also changes the character of the image or object of that subjectivity’s regard. This may be one of the most interesting aspects of collaborative work.” Our encounters with “objectivities” have direct bearing upon our comprehension of subjectivity, and might even shape subjectivities in advance of their natality. In this objectivist version of Levinas’s neighbour principle, sentient beings are positioned as “guests to life,” to use Hejinian’s words.

Hejinian does not distinguish between “spatial interrelation” (proximity) and “volition” (human consciousness) in her writings about guest/host poetics; and I see this as a possible and necessary future inquiry. Can non-sentient things really be involved in reciprocal relations of responsibility? This is not strictly Levinas’s purpose, nor Hejinian’s when she describes “accepting the obligations” of xenia and “becoming guests and hosts of life.” We can be the “guests” of non-sentient things — environments, for example — by our shared ethical proximity, if not always at their express invitation. At some level, we “author” our own responsibilities by the singularity of our utterances. We engage subjectively with the world; in writing poetry, for example, whose poesis resides in some sense with the person who “tells” or “says.” But we are also objects in relation, as Oppen understood: “We want to be here. // The act of being, the act of being / More than oneself.” Language thematises these relations, but is not the sole ground for encounters between things. In guest/host relations, spatial linkages are prioritised, rather than human-subjective ordering of communications and responsibilities. In this sense, the terrain that we occupy might “host” us in a form of care (or host-age) that is beyond subjective consciousness.

If human consciousness per se is de-emphasised as the sole quality by which subjectivity, commonality and community are validated, we step into potentially radical landscapes of geophilosophical thinking, where proximity and placement become central to obligation and care. By this appraisal, the earth may indeed be

197 Lyn Hejinian, “Women and Narrative: Laura Hinton interviews Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino,” unpublished manuscript sent to the author by Hejinian in August 1998. Citation from page 9 of transcript; my emphasis.
198 Hejinian, “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 238.
hosting us as temporary guests, strangers who arrive with natality into worldly relation. “A notion of subjectivity independent of the adventure of cognition, and in which the corporeality of the subject is not separable from its subjectivity, is required if signification signifies otherwise than by the synchrony of being,” writes Levinas.\textsuperscript{200} An idea of subjectivities embodied in matter that is “independent of the advent of cognition” moves us into areas that are relegated often to “objective,” or external to consciousness. Perhaps objectivities are closer to subjectivities than we have imagined previously. Or perhaps, as Hejinian suggests, the boundary between terms is mutually contextualising, and a function of space and scale: “Between subject and object there is a kind of resilient reciprocity, and knowing only exists in the embeddedness of that relationship.”\textsuperscript{201}

Such concerns and possibilities surface at different moments within George Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous”:

> It is true the great mineral silence  
> Vibrates, hums, a process  
> Completing itself…

> The power of the mind, the  
> Power and weight  
> Of the mind which  
> Is not enough, it is nothing  
> And does nothing

> Against the natural world\textsuperscript{202}

What kind of obligations does the “mineral” world engender, Oppen wonders, and how do responsivity and responsibility intersect when we encounter our surrounds? “I should have written, not the rain // Of a nineteenth century day, but the motes // In the air, the dust // Here still. // What have we argued about? what have we done?”\textsuperscript{203} Lyn Hejinian’s Slowly, published in 2002 as a complement to Happily (2000), is equally undecided about boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity. It begins with a petition to natality as an entry into worldly co-existence: “I wake to the waking

\textsuperscript{200} Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 78.  
\textsuperscript{201} Hejinian, “Women and Narrative,” 3.  
\textsuperscript{203} Oppen, “Of Being Numerous,” Collected Poems 177.
shadow of the world / the waking have in common for one long visit slowly." The book’s cover image, a black and white photograph by Hejinian, shows an accumulation of discrete rocks that are threaded occasionally with strands of dying grass. The image refuses easy interpretation, while gesturing toward the contextual “fact” of our surroundings; Oppen’s “natural world” that “completes itself” without necessarily encountering “the power and weight of the mind.” Hejinian writes in the fifth section of Slowly: “An idea takes shape taking shapes such and such / The inability to see as if through an insect’s eye seeing numerous different images is not a true detriment / We shift position and fiddle with our subjectivity.” (14)

Another recent text by Hejinian provides interesting ground for considerations of extra-subjective ethical states. In “Figuring Out” (2002), Hejinian reads Leslie Scalapino’s Deer Night beside canonical texts of Mahayana Buddhism. A subject/object dualism gives way, in Hejinian’s appraisal, to considerations of interior and exterior worlds in context of terrain and placement:

[In] Scalapino’s view, it is extraordinarily difficult, perhaps even impossible, for a person either to find his or her place in the landscape or to separate from it. In this regard, Scalapino’s view is particularly radical. Existing occurs simultaneously both as what’s identifiable, distinct and separate, and as what is, by definition, non-separate (here Scalapino follows [Buddhist philosopher] Nagarjuna’s precept that nothing had inherent existence, there is no distinct independence). “People are everywhere but are part of the existing calm terrain.”

Hejinian describes this state of distinct yet conjoined worldliness in terms of the as effect — a maxim for things imagined in coexistence, in infinite combinations of guest/host meeting, such that particular bodies and materials depend for their meanings upon many others. Hejinian names the resultant networks “occurrence structures” after the full title of Scalapino’s work — As: All Occurrence in Structure, Unseen. (5) We could also call them neighbourhoods after Deleuze and Guattari, or communities after Nancy.

Lyn Hejinian’s “as effect” provides a clear line to George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky’s objectivist poetic; especially its insistence upon the poem as a material

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object that gains meaning in context, or as a function of linkage. Objectivism, in which subjectivities are re-evaluated in light of "the character of the image or object" (Hejinian), might teach us about proximity, interrelation, and mobile borders between ourselves and things.\(^{206}\) By Hejinian’s description, the boundaries between things and people and between subjectivities and objectivities are renegotiated with every guest/host encounter — a spatial configuration that matches George Oppen’s “arduous third path of appearances,” Leslie Scalapino’s “middle way” of occurrences, and Arkadii Dragomoschenko’s “xenia.” Levinas gives a comparable summary of his argument in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*:

In extracting signification from the theme in which it presents itself to the comprehension of a subject gifted with reason, it has not reduced it to a lived datum of consciousness. It claim[s] to describe a third condition or the unconditionality of an excluded middle.... Our philosophical discourse does not pass from one term to the other only by searching the "subjective" horizons of what shows itself, but embraces conjunctions of elements in which concepts subtended as presence or a subject break up. (183-184)

Signification — saying, or Hejinian’s poetic propriation as cited from Heidegger — is not reduced to “a lived datum of consciousness” in Levinas’s account, but can embrace an unconditionally relational third term: a conjunctive space between things in which exhausted tropes of presence-as-subjectivity might “break up” in favour of another kind of phenomenal facing based on “the immediacy of proximity.” (84) Moving his analysis of saying beyond “the comprehension of a subject gifted with reason” (183), Levinas effectively makes room for non-sentient materials within discourses of responsibility and facing.

We return thus to Deleuze and Guattari’s opening assertion in “Geophilosophy,” a starting point for this chapter: subject and object give a poor approximation of thought.\(^{207}\) When comprehending being and becoming in relation to matter and space, subject/object parameters are only one among many tools that have particular uses and historical weight. If for example we follow Kristeva and Levinas in imagining “being” as a function of neighbourhood and foreignness, we might allow a different set of variables into our ethical equations — including homelessness, indigeneity, land,


\(^{207}\) Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 85.
terrain, migration, and territory, all highly important terms in contemporary political and planetary discourses about community dissolution and formation.28 Lyn Hejinian has offered readers an ontological challenge in proposing guest/host and, more recently, exterior/interior as newly relevant ways of thinking about ethical relations. Both emphasise spatiality and scale, and admit potentially extra-subjective ethical locations. In saying and telling, and thus acknowledging its worldly cares and obligations, poetry might begin to navigate the unstable borders in which these issues appear, while appreciating its own strangeness in the face of a neighbour:

What kind of Plotinus aimlessly parades on the terraces
not yet visible in the torrent of leaves?

With what understanding
shall we offer them something to drink —
with “love”? “avarice”? “loathing”? “terror”? And what stumbling history shall we read (if we are freely
and easily
in control of each inflection of the voice) in each of them?
Or will they never return us
to what we might have become, having become what we already are?

Many questions.29

28 See for example Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves 193-195; Nancy, Being Singular Plural 101; Howitt, “Scale and the other,” 311. I gratefully borrow the word “planetary” from conversations with Peter Minter, who uses it to reintroduce ideas of material “earth” into predominantly economic discourses of “globalism.”
29 Dragomoschenko, Xenia 102.
Writing Language Writing: Hejinian’s “In”-Versions of Community

Chapter Three

Stephen Rodefer told me that when Barry [Watten] visited his class at San Francisco State, Barry said Language School Poetry was dead. Whether he said it or not (he probably did), the statement fills me with an exhilarating sense of possibility. (“Now we are grownups and the work begins.”) As you know, for me the conflict (or should I say “dialectic”) between solitude and community is always painful.

— Lyn Hejinian to Rae Armantrout, 1984

And the big question: what’s next? That’s what I’ve been talking about with everybody — Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, Carla Harryman, Michael Davidson, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, Rae Armantrout, Charles Bernstein — what’s next?... The challenge now is to make certain that it is not over.

— Lyn Hejinian to Craig Dworkin, 1996

But I hesitated, for fear of not encountering.

— Rosmarie Waldrop, The Reproduction of Profiles

This chapter offers a genealogical reading of Lyn Hejinian’s specific versions, inversions and “in”-versions of material community. It works in dialogue with broader narratives about the socio-cultural and literary constitution of avant-gardist groupings; more especially, the phenomenon denoted variously by the terms “Language writing,” “Language poetry,” “the Language School of poets,” “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing,” “the Language movement,” “Language” and “LangPo.” Critical accounts of Language writing often focus upon definitive textual “beginnings,” lists of names, political and economic discourses within key urban American locales, and catalogues of poetic techniques and intentions. To avoid collapsing specific differences into rhetorics of (group) sameness and “the search for origins,” in historian Michel Foucault’s words, this chapter takes a particular approach: I focus upon “community” and “Language writing” as they appear and are created within Lyn Hejinian’s

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1 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Rae Armantrout dated 5 January 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mancieli [74, 2, 1].
strategies of naming, editing, enacting and bordering. The backdrop for much of my discussion, consequently, will be the San Franciscan scene of Language writing in which Hejinian has played (and continues to occupy) a pivotal role; though I keep in mind a related cell of activity in New York City, and a less-recognised tendency toward Language-oriented experimentalism that occurred simultaneously in Washington DC. Genealogies acknowledge their own partiality and site-specific nature. In doing so they suggest the provisionality and contextual bias of all literary-historical narratives. As my introduction contends, Language writing "began" for Hejinian during the late 1970s when she returned to Berkeley in the Californian Bay Area. I am fascinated by Hejinian's role as an auto-archivist and as the inventor — and inventory genealogist — of her own history.

Chapters three and four work together, as cross-illustrative parts of a single argument. They provide formal articulation of a dynamic boundary: between Lyn Hejinian's inhabitation of "actual" communities, and her more singular expressions of a poetics of encounter and reciprocal facing, as performed in context of material friendships. Chapter three explores the historicisation of Language writing as an event of twentieth-century American experimentalism, and considers the writing of Language writing as an intertextual dialogue involving cultural reportage and criticism, academic practice, and explications by Language poets of Language methods and endeavours. Via readings of specific editorial and social practices, I focus on Lyn Hejinian's hosting and orchestration of different writing communities. Chapter four considers epistolary and collaborative realisations of Lyn Hejinian's communitarian philosophies and ways of being. Although they certainly attracted her to Language practice in the late 1970s, Hejinian's "personal" ethics of commonality were not generated solely within the auspices and orbits of "inter-personal" or material community. They exist in mutually contextualising relations with her experiences of Language writing. Neither has prior significance or value.

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5 Critic Ann Vickery has pointed consistently to this third and often neglected cell of Language-oriented activity. See for example Leaving Lines of Gender: a Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing (Hanover, New Hampshire and London: Wesleyan UP, 2000) 21-27.
What’s in a name by any other name? “Every name driven will be as another rivet in the machine of a universal flux,” writes Susan Howe in the opening lines of her exquisite “narrative in non-narrative” poem “Thurow.”6 “A name, I said, cannot go from mouth to mouth, a clear mirror unclouded by breath,” observes poet Rosmarie Waldrop in The Reproduction of Profiles.7 Writing to her mother Carolyn Andrews in April 1979, Lyn Hejinian describes the plans and praxes of a circle of writers with whom she has been meeting regularly, and marks their identification as a “grouping” by a local poetry magazine:

There is to be a special issue of a local literary newsletter on all of us; the “Language Writers” (not our term -- it is a terrible one).... Meanwhile, we’ve been meeting here (the so-called Language Writers) to form some sort of Writers’ Institute, offering readings, lectures, workshops, and other appropriate activities. It is in the formative stages, still -- not even named.8

Seven years later, San Franciscan “Language writer” Ron Silliman introduced his 1986 anthology of Language poetry and poetics, In the American Tree, by writing: “[T]his impulse to name confuses a moment with a movement.”9 Adroitly named after a line by William Carlos Williams and a subsequent poem by Kit Robinson, also a key participant in the San Franciscan scene of Language writing, Ron Silliman’s collection mimetically asserts its place in an aforescent lineage of American contemporary poetical innovation, while obliquely referencing a community event of the late 1970s. Begun in August 1978 and co-produced by Kit Robinson and Lyn Hejinian, “In the American Tree: New Writing by Poets” was a programme on San Franciscan radio KPFA94-FM. It featured interviews with, and readings by, experimental writers — and not only those who came to be associated with Language writing over the years 1979 to 1984.10 Bob Perelman, Ted Berrigan, Kathleen Fraser and Rae Aramantrout

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7 Waldrop, Reproduction of Profiles 53.
8 Hejinian is referring to San Francisco’s Poetry Flash magazine. Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 27 April 1979, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 11].
10 I take my temporal cues from the “naming” as such of Language Poetry in 1979, and Barrett Watten’s declaration in 1984 that “Language School Poetry is dead,” cited in this chapter’s epigraph.
were the first guests of the programme, while Joanne Kyger, Ron Silliman and Carla Harryman participated soon after.  

*Every name driven will be as another rivet in the machine of a universal flux.* I am talking "around" rather than "about" Language writing. I am observing particular moments of action, aggregation, differentiation and identification, and watching the way "proper names do and do not come into contact with each other," to borrow a phrase from critic Lytle Shaw. I am not marking origins but shifting among coordinates. *A name cannot go from mouth to mouth, a clear mirror unclouded by breath.* When Hejinian uses the collective pronoun "everybody" in an interview and segues immediately to a careful list of names — "Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, Carla Harryman, Michael Davidson, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, Rae Armantrout, Charles Bernstein" (epigraph, above) — a sense of anxious irony is generated. Hejinian's site-specific *everybody* is a strategic moment of boundary construction in which the complex partiality of community arrangements and the exhaustion of nomenclatures are acknowledged. It critiques the meaning-horizons of generic pronouns, while signaling territorial investments. This is Lyn Hejinian's own "everybody" — an abstract noun that is ghosted by dilemma and qualified restlessness about positioning: "As you know, for me the conflict (or should I say 'dialectic') between solitude and community is always painful."

Writing to her mother, Hejinian mentions "all of us; the 'Language Writers' (not our term -- it is a terrible one)." Not this. What then? If the Language School is a "so-called" phenomenon, a term without a term that champions its own desire to remain "not even named," then how might readers identify the "we" that clearly is *happening* within the formative commonality of Hejinian's deliberately bordered "everybody?"

At different times, within letters to friends and the more immediately public space of interviews, Lyn Hejinian has performed a kind of "roll call" of Language writing,
distinguishing a core circle of friendships, habitats and social interactions from broader tendencies and associations within American innovative poetry. “It was only when I finally met you, Ron, Bob, Barry, Carla, Kit, Steve, etc. that I was among brilliant people,” Hejinian assured Rae Armantrout in a letter of February 1991. ¹⁷ In conversation in 1998, Hejinian echoed this précis of a San Franciscan Language writing nucleus when organising other, proximate groups of contemporary poets — the “etc.” that she identifies to Armantrout — into slightly less immediate but “incredibly important” circles of involvement in San Francisco’s thriving, late 1970s poetry scene:

Although there is the group that one could call the Language writers — Barrett [Watten], Ron [Silliman], Bob Perelman, Carla Harryman, Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Kit Robinson — there’s a larger group which would include Michael Palmer, Leslie Scalapino, Jean Day, etcetera, who didn’t identify, weren’t sitting around this table arguing ideas, but were incredibly important and are still so. ¹⁸

While Hejinian commits herself to an “open community” with porous membranes, constituted by occurrences and events of interaction rather than categorical inclusions or exclusions, she displays nonetheless a fierce interest in scripting the terrain of “Language writing” and keeping a record; of specific names, publicly-private common locales (“sitting around this table”), and practices of engagement (“identifying” and “arguing ideas”). ¹⁹ This process is both affirmative and hesitant. An “exhilarating sense of possibility” accompanies Hejinian’s discovery of Watten’s public declaration of “the death of Language School Poetry” in 1984. Fifteen years later, Hejinian faces the “challenge” of “mak[ing] certain that it is not over.” ²⁰ What is it that she refers to — the capitalization of a loose series of happenings into literary-historical status, or the different actuality of close and critical friendships? What name can we assign? “I like everything at a / level below its name,” cautions The Cell. ²¹

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¹⁷ Lyn Hejinian, letter to Rae Armantrout dated 6 February 1991, Hejinian Papers, Maedeville [74, 1A(U), “Rae Armantrout”].
¹⁸ Lyn Hejinian, interview with the author, 3 August 1998.
¹⁹ Ann Vickery cites Hejinian’s phrase “open community” in Leaving Lines of Gender at 18.
Genealogical readings seek to disrupt “neat” versions of history by admitting places, actions and scripts that are overlooked as “submarginalia” — writer Susan Howe’s evocative term for material, social, epistolary and textual events that are “too disorderly to qualify as poetry” and that resist “sensible partitioning” or editing. The term genealogy is associated often in critical discourse with work by twentieth-century historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, whose words are a useful touchstone for archival undertakings:

Genealogy... must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history — in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles.... Genealogy, consequently, requires patience and a knowledge of details and it depends upon a vast accumulation of source material.... It rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for “origins.”

Genealogies defy reading methods that, in the course of constructing finite classes and definitions, reject context and the mess of plural histories. Ann Vickery contends that they aim to “contextualize poetry as both text and practice.” By scrutinising “the singularity of events” that occur “in the most unpromising places,” as Foucault writes — the minutiae of ordinary communications, for example — the pursuit of genealogy “makes room for a void.” “In that way,” argues late twentieth-century philosopher Michel de Certeau, “[genealogy] opens up clearings; it ‘allows’ a certain play within a system of defined places. It ‘authorizes’ the production of an area of free play on a checkerboard that analyzes and classifies identities. It makes places habitable.... On these grounds, I call such discourse a ‘local authority.’” (106) Within “stories about places,” de Certeau writes, “[t]hings extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order.”

(107)

23 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 139-140.
This chapter is about Lyn Hejinian’s *everybody*. Its foundation materials are twofold: Hejinian’s extensive collection of letters, unpublished works, editorial papers and memorabilia; and a series of written and spoken interviews, many published, in which Hejinian interprets her experiences within Language writing communities. Following de Certeau’s thinking, I am interpreting Hejinian’s archival papers and personal reflections as singular sites of *local authority* and *stories about places*. Archives are accumulations of “things extra and other,” the submarginalia that are boundary riders of artistic and life practice. As I will show, there exists a substantial body of critical work about the position of Language writing within late twentieth-century American poetics. My chapter performs a different and complementary function. By placing Lyn Hejinian’s writing of “Language” into the foreground, I hope to illuminate *provisionality, scale* and *site-specificity* as guiding principles in literary-historical accounts of community identification and formation. I also want to chart a path of acknowledgement through Hejinian’s meticulous, everyday detailing of significant sites for her own poetical praxis. I hope to denote *community* as an intrinsically partial story; a *being-in-common*, as Jean-Luc Nancy says, and a *being-in-context*, in Hejinian’s terms.

In “Reason,” Hejinian states: “We don’t — as writers or as persons — go beyond ‘all limitations’ and ‘all boundaries’ — we enter and inhabit them.” Boundaries permit openness and closure. They are neither *in* nor *out*, though they give presence to both conditions. During her writing career, Hejinian has navigated borders between public and private utterances and genres; ambition and anxiety; feminised and masculinised roles and discourses; naming and anti-nomenclature; professional conduct and intimate friendship; academic institutions and cultural “peripheries”; singularity and pluralism; and social capital and resistant “status.” These boundaries actively constitute Hejinian’s experience and understanding of community. In her writing of

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and as Language writing, Hejinian moves from *inner* to *outer* and *between* positions that boundaries might confer and guard. She experiments with oppositional locations that undo oppositions, invokes names in order to turn them aside, and retains an anxiously secure middle position in either/or discourses about group affiliations. In conversation she observed: "Occupying the gap, or realising its [presence], opens up the prospect of a very active and responsible poetics and ethics."²⁹

*New noises in new American rhythms* ³⁰

Lyn Hejinian repeatedly emphasises "friendship" as a leading trope when discussing her involvement in the San Franciscan and New York scenes of Language writing. As my previous chapter argued, Hejinian has embraced *neighbourhood* and *guest/host relations* as key refrains for her spatialising, intersubjective poetic. In 1991 she wrote:

The community, as the focus of literary activity, is more disparate now. I think that's appropriate. It's curious that a number of us are, however, working together now on collaborations.... Meanwhile the friendships — intellectual and emotional — are part of my daily life.³¹

When making retrospective assessments of the social-poetical network that she calls "my community," Hejinian is quick to acknowledge reciprocity and a consciously constructed "milieu for contextualised, unisolated thinking," while equally adamant that "there was no sacrifice of individuality, but rather a radicalizing of the possibilities of individualism."³² Spatial praxis (inhabiting and naming common locales, for example) and the status of subjectivities within collaborative scenes are at the forefront of Hejinian's accounts of "her" Language writing community. She keeps attentive record of scenarios that have allowed people to "partake of their otherness" *in common*, and to retain and radicalise their differences.³³

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²⁹ Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
³³ Nancy, "Finite History," 160-161.
In context of Hejinian’s pivotal placement within a San Franciscan Language scene, I want to give an account of the adventure and invention of the Language School as an avant-garde event. One leading point of reference for this discussion is the consolidation, during the 1990s, of Language writing as a “proper” category of academic and critical notice. I will address the naming of Language writing among Language writers themselves, and observe key circulation routes and publication sites that were operative in the Bay Area of San Francisco when Hejinian returned there in July 1977. These cells rapidly became, for her, an intimate circle of community action and participation.

Lyn Hejinian had founded Tuumba Press in April 1976 while living in rural Northern California, and by July 1977 had already produced the first dozen in a series of 50 chapbooks of experimental poetry, starting with her own A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking and Susan Howe’s The Western Borders. My introduction contains a lengthier account of the establishment of the press, and I will give only a skeletal account here. While the first eleven Tuumbas were printed at a local print shop, Hejinian soon bought her own non-electric letterpress and began hand-setting type, and from edition 12 onward took sole responsibility for printing all Tuumba Press booklets and materials. Each chapbook is distinguished by high production values and paper quality, and Hejinian traded on rarified status and a non-commodity aesthetic by hand-numbering the 450 or 475 copies of each edition. Running until 1984, the initial chapbook series showcased the work of 43 emerging experimental poets. The 15th Tuumba contained Hejinian’s Gesualdo (1978), an experiment with fragmentary “biographical” narrative that Hejinian wrote concurrently with A Mask of Motion (1977), which was published in chapbook form by Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop’s Burning Deck Press. Writing Is an Aid to Memory, a substantially longer work in which Hejinian began to crystallise her deployment of serial forms, was published in 1978 by The Figures in Massachusetts. Prior to Tuumba’s consolidation

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34 Tuumba flyer, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 1].
35 Hejinian was employed at Willits Printing during 1976; see letter from Lyn Hejinian to Carolyn Andrews dated 8 December 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8]. She mentions “finally” buying her own press in a letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 27 November 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8].
37 Lyn Hejinian, Writing Is an Aid to Memory (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: The Figures, 1978).
as a venue for Language-oriented work, Hejinian already had signalled herself as a serious experimentalist.

While becoming a selective barometer of American innovative poetic activity, Tuumba editions 16 through to 27 (1978-1980) marked a specific turn in Hejinian’s interests. Their authors are associated unequivocally with core social, publication and exchange sites of Language writing, mostly in San Francisco and New York: Tom Mandel, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten, Rae Armantrout, Carla Harryman, Ray Di Palma, Larry Eigner, Kit Robinson and Robert Grenier (in order of publication). Reviewing the press in 1986, critic Jed Rasula observed that Tuumbas 1 through to 14, by comparison, were more aesthetically and geographically diffuse. They reflect different horizons of innovation and personal investment in editing communities into being.

Tuumba Press implies a very particular “beginning” for my narrative about Language writing: Lyn Hejinian’s chronological, textual and geophysical entrée into a specific series of places and behaviours that we could call “community.” This is not an origin in the sense of a monolithic and irrefutable point of beginning, but one among many — a singular origin, after Nancy’s reading of the term:

“Origin” does not signify that from which the world comes, but rather the coming of each presence into the world, each time singular.

Such distinctions are important. Many of the key protagonists of the San Franciscan Language community have devoted time, ink and energy to analyses of precise origins for Language poetry — especially during the past decade in response to, or perhaps to help produce, the Language School’s escalating classification as a distinct avant-garde. “The literary history of the Language School... is just beginning to be written,” states Language poet Barrett Watten in “The Bride of the Assembly Line: from Material Text to Cultural Poetics” (1997), thus creating a premise for the essay’s subsequent arguments and ensuring his own position in future economies of textual

38 Tuumba flyer, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, I, 1].
40 Nancy, Being Singular Plural 15. Cid Corman’s Origin magazine, established in the early 1950s, was central to formative moments of the US Black Mountain “School” of poetry. Its title suggests an ironic play with newness and singularity while trading on notions of an identifiable break with prior histories.
exchange. The writing of "the literary history of the Language School" implicates key participants in diverse ways. — the phrase "Language School," for example, was coined by Watten in the late 1970s. Before following those threads, I want to present another contextualising grid of origins, and to contribute hence to the subjective piecing-together of Language histories. Why did Language writing happen at all? What kinds of cultural and economic conditions provoked the simultaneous constellation in different urban locales of a poetic practice that attracted enough notoriety to be "named" as a serious contender for distinct (and hotly-debated) avant-garde status within key cultural, poetic and critical discourses?

Many critics continue to problematize "Language writing" as a fixed term for an event marked by elastic boundaries and overlapping affinities, rather than defined "memberships," and whose participants are as notable for their divergent productions as for shared programmes. Jed Rasula in 1987 read Language writing "strictly as a historical marker" for a phase of circumstantially aligned social and textual activities that were similar yet different. Questions such as "why Language?" are figured best in terms of site-specific experiments with community-formation and the placement of "innovation" within American poetry during the early 1970s. In keeping with many critical accounts of the phenomenon, I think it is disingenuous to define single origins for Language poetry, or to make categorical lists of names and techniques; and more accurate to identify overlapping grids of socio-cultural indicators, independent publishing ventures, and the inhabitation of certain places — "the different scenes where they engaged in different roles," to cite again from Michel Foucault's account of genealogy.

By the late 1970s, the conditions for American poetic experimentalism were partly over-determined by a poetical culture (industry) geared toward individuated authorship; supported equally, as Jerome McGann argues, by major metropolitan

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44 Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 140.
publishers and flourishing chains of university creative writing programmes.45

"Language writing" was characterised by reciprocal reading practices among core participants; manifest in small press projects, local reading series and discussion nights, and the foundation of journals dedicated to experimental and critical poetry — most established in the 1970s, and modelled upon American little magazines of the 1950s and 1960s.46 The magazine and press scenes that buttressed Language writing demonstrate the success of key participants in creating alternative economies of self-publication and circulation among networked audiences.47 In the early years of critical "attention" to the Language phenomenon, Jed Rasula commented on "the registration of a shock in the ranks of disenfranchised poets across the land that here was a group, with a program, who had commandeered the technological resources of publication and distribution through grantsmanship."48 He argued later that regardless of its relatively small cultural scale, a sustained "alternative system of production and distribution within a capitalist society" is a noteworthy happening. "It's a singular phenomenon that poets should come together as active readers and conceptually adroit critics of one another's work," he observed, "rather than, as is the custom, mutual celebrants of poetry as initiatory cult."49 Hejinian brings a different economic interpretation to the "moment of enormous activity" that generated Language writing during the mid-to-late 1970s and early 1980s: "[P]eople could get by on part-time jobs, which gave everybody more time for hanging out. It was also easier to find money to publish magazines and books."50

During the early 1980s, New York "Language" poet Charles Bernstein referred to "the narrow and well-guarded gates of official verse culture" in an article called "The Academy in Peril."51 Soon after, he spoke about that culture's "valorization of the Poet

46 Antecedents included, in particular, the magazines associated with the Black Mountain and New York Schools. Discussion to follow.
48 Rasula, "Tuumba," 162.
50 Hejinian, "A Local Strangeness," 137.
who only writes Poetry.”52 For many poets who came to be associated with Language writing, American “official verse culture” of the 1970s demanded critique and resistance on numerous fronts: formal and aesthetic, political and ethical, and even economic, given the publication, grant and award structures that buttressed the mainstream US “Poetry” industry.53 Although I flag specific aesthetic, formal and methodological characteristics of Language writing at various points across this chapter, I have grouped much of that discussion into chapter five, which interprets The Cell — written between 1986 and 1988 — as Lyn Hejinian’s most developed response to the lessons and experiences of her involvement in nascent Language communities. That poem’s title tropes upon the scenes and methods situating Hejinian’s work, while encoding examinations of part/whole relations that were central to textual “theories” attending Language poetry from its outset. The Cell also deftly critiques the individualistic rhetoric underlying canonical (American) poetics, embodied in expressivist lyrics organised around “a stable authorial center or perceptible narrative ‘voice.’”54

Much early Language poetry and associated critical writing of the period interrogated relationships between texts and socio-cultural contexts, and between individual utterances and collective action. Well-rehearsed binaries came under intense scrutiny; including those between praxis and theory, poetical and critical texts, speech and writing, reader and writer, and content and form. Marjorie Perloff noted in 1985: “For here the attempt is not to articulate the curve of a particular experience but to create a formal linguistic construct that itself shapes our perception of the world around us.”55 For many poets who rode the first Language wave, such inquiries had direct political impetus. Those writers had been involved to different degrees in protest and activism within the American civil rights, feminist and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Within US social and political milieu dominated unequivocally by Cold War and post-Vietnam rhetoric, notions of otherness were being mobilised in specific and

divisive ways. In an essay called “Barbarism,” Hejinian explains her view that politically oppressive regimes, ideologies and scenarios were (and are) anchored in language that effected “fraudulent” naturalisation of universalising narratives. This language is reliant upon dangerous a-historicism, the containment of difference, and aversion to critique:

The pervasive hypocrisy of the 1950s and 1960s was operating in several strategic forms: as outright lies, as deceptive metaphors, and, finally, in the more subtle form of a complete failure to examine political language and indeed any language at all, this establishing the pretense that language is “natural” — that we speak this way because there is no other way to speak....

To counter such hypocritical strategies (which are no less than forms of fraud) requires now as it did then a comprehensive examination of language, one which challenges its “naturalness,” discloses the world view (and ideology) secreted not only in our vocabulary but at every linguistic level including the ways in which sentences are put together, and explores new ways of thinking by putting language (and hence perception) together in new ways.\(^5\)

If language is a primary site for the constitution of power and political meaning, then active resistance and critical engagement might occur in *poetry* — an artistic medium that scrutinises links between language, perception, description and knowledge. “My generation, shocked into awareness of atrocity by the Vietnam War, felt the urgency of seeing through the fraud endemic to the political culture of the times, and we believed — or perhaps at the time merely intuited — that poetry was the most available and best-prepared medium for undertaking the urgently required analysis and critique,” reflects Hejinian. “[It] was through poetry that a series of reinventions of language could be initiated.” (324) In “Barbarism,” Hejinian also identifies “Marxist and feminist theory” as being “of enormous importance, since they each provide a critique both of power and of meaning (and of the powers instantiated in the various notions of meaning).” (325) By Hejinian’s estimation, such theories help to develop a skeptical “social consciousness” in response to “long-term, far-reaching, and entrenched social and political hypocrisy and capitalist cruelty.” (323) They also place immense pressure upon notions of *subjectivity* and *individualism*, re-interpreting both as

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discursive and cultural constructions and abstractions rather than "irreducible, a-
historical, unmediated, singular" states of being.\footnote{57}

I am depicting these Language lines in broad brushstrokes, aware that they stem in
part from Hejinian’s own idealisms, chronologies of resistance, and narratives of
critical engagement. My introductory chapter identified \textit{contemporaneity} as a core
issue of concern for Language writers. In the words of American modernist William
Carlos Williams, how is one to make poetry that does not “attempt, at that time, to set
values on the word being used, according to presupposed measures, but [writes] down
\textit{that which happens at that time}?\footnote{58} For those Language poets interested in textual
theories and philosophies of language, what “happened” during the 1970s included
publication, in new English translation, of numerous key works of contemporary
French philosophy and linguistics: for example, post-structuralist works by Jacques
Derrida, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault; Ferdinand de Saussure’s influential
\textit{Structural Linguistics}, among other structuralist material; and feminist texts by Julia
Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.\footnote{59} Such events elicited response from poets
concerned with critical theory and the mechanics of referentiality.\footnote{60} During the late
1970s and early 1980s, Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten and Ron Silliman also studied
the work of early twentieth-century Russian Formalists — sometimes glossed as a
“theoretical wing” of the Russian Futurist poets — including, most notably, writings
by Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky that investigated social contexts in which
poetic language \textit{means}, and that calibrated formal techniques beside socio-political
effect.\footnote{61}

William Carlos Williams’s exhortations toward “contemporaneity,” a term much
lauded by Gertrude Stein, point to important twentieth-century antecedents for
Language writing that were grounded similarly in small press activities and

\footnote{57}Hejinian, “Barbarism,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 323. This is also Hejinian’s argument in “The Person and
Description,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 199-208.
\footnote{58}William Carlos Williams, “Spring and All,” \textit{Imaginations}, ed. Webster Schott (London: MacGibbon
& Kee, 1970) 120; my emphasis.
\footnote{59}Lyn Hejinian uses Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray in “The Rejection of Closure,” \textit{Language of
Inquiry} 54-55; and Ferdinand de Saussure in “Grammar and Landscape” in “Two Stein Talks,”
\textit{Language of Inquiry} 116-118. Ron Silliman makes extensive use of Jacques Derrida and Ferdinand de
\footnote{60}See Ron Silliman, “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” \textit{The New Sentence} 10.
\footnote{61}See for example Hejinian, “Materials,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 170; Ron Silliman, letter to Lyn Hejinian
dated 19 February 1977, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 7, 6].
collaborative praxes. As discussed in earlier chapters, certain Language writers styled themselves as “inheritors” or custodians of radical and innovative methods by Stein and the Objectivist poets, including Williams, while glancing over a collective shoulder toward key American avant-gardes of post-World War Two poetry; chiefly the New York and Black Mountain Schools, the latter constellating around enduring small press magazines such as Black Mountain Review and Cid Corman’s Origin.

“[L]est the political overshadow the literary nature of Language writing,” observes Lyn Hejinian, “I should emphasize that we all arrived at that historical moment with volumes of poetry in hand, and particularly Donald Allen’s anthology, The New American Poetry, 1945-1960, which made the experimental tradition in American poetry, with sources in [Ezra] Pound’s imagism and Stein’s realism, current.” Elsewhere, specific Language poets have singled out Surrealism (both in textual and artistic practice) as an important reference point for their own innovations. Against such a backdrop of social, conceptual and critical change, and within the context of avant-garde communities who stood as historicised precursors to neo-new inquiries and artistic forms, and who provided key models for small press production, Language writing was well primed to organise as a counter-cultural “happening.”

Language writing Language: some observations

I return now to the naming of “Language” among Language poets themselves. Language writing and the writing of Language Writing co-exist in contested terrain; and in some narratives, including retrospective appraisals of “the movement” by several core Language practitioners, they appear to occupy mutually constitutive

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places. In this section, I am interested in "community" as a dialogue between "real and imagined geographies," to cite a useful distinction made by Jane Jacobs and canvassed in my introduction. How might communities come into being as an event of textuality, alongside their evolution in differently "material" terms? If, as Marjorie Perloff argues, one "purpose" of Language writing was to "create a formal linguistic construct that itself shapes our perception of the world around us," how might this extend to the "formal and linguistic construction" of community itself? These questions are an important window onto Lyn Hejinian's compulsive engagement with textual forms that notably exteriorise acts of community, and that my next chapter explores in detail: letters and collaborations. In taking as a departure point Hejinian's hyper-invested relation to "writing-up" community, my purpose is not to position one subject as a synecdoche for a "whole" community; but to explore, through the lens of Hejinian's experiences, the writing of Language writing as a collection of locally scaled instances of community as it happens and appears to happen.

Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas are useful here. Community is not a thing to be validated only by positioning within institutional and critical discourses, but an ongoing event that accrues between subjects in a prolific range of local moments:

If being-with is the sharing of simultaneous space-time, then it involves a presentation of this space-time as such. In order to say "we," one must present the "here and now" of this "we." Or rather, saying "we" brings about the presentation of a "here and how," however it is determined: as a room, a region, a group of friends, an association, a "people." We can never simply be "the we," understood as a unique subject, or understood as an indistinct "we" that is like a diffuse generality.

By emphasising Language versions of Language community — the "presentation of a here and now" within the we of the work — I hope not to create "diffuse generalities" about Language practice, though some measure of simplification is unavoidable. I want rather to move in an antithetical direction: toward singularity, in the knowledge that Language writers' constructions of "Language" are primarily theirs. My intention is not insularity, but genealogical particularity. There is no generalisation that might

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be named the “true history” of Language writing: “We can never simply be ‘the we,’ understood as a unique subject.” When considering the critical “reception” of Language poetry, including terms and vocabularies in which it is discussed, it is useful to consider patterns of interference between practitioners’ desires to be read in particular ways, and critical categorisations that universalise and “objectify.” Both engage in the production of hierarchies of attention, though the terms of “facing” might be different.

This thesis chooses not to give detailed attention to the current state of Language debates within academic discourse. Much critical work already has mapped different urban expressions, poetical antecedents, and political contexts for Language projects as they occurred within San Francisco and New York during the 1970s and 1980s; while less attention has been given to cells of experimentalism that formed simultaneously within Washington DC, and to textual crossings that occurred between communities. My methodologies and readings are contextualised at all times by those discussions. I have not considered, either, subsequent generations and “groupings” of younger American and English-language poets for whom Language poetry has become simply an always-already, and whose responses to its theoretical and formal innovations are diverse: hybridised imitation, considered avoidance, initiation of complementary small press scenes, or productions that collage many disjunctive moments and styles from twentieth-century poetics.

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71 Although such lists have obvious limitations, “Post-Language” American poets might include Jennifer Moxley, Peter Gizzi, Lisa Jaront, Juliana Spahr, Jen Hofer, Brian Kim Stefans, Lee Ann Brown, Travis Ortiz, and Lytle Shaw, who have established magazines and presses including The Imprecipent Lecture Series (Moxley with Steve Evans, Shark (Shaw with Emilie Clark), Chain (Spahr with Jena Osman), Sub-Press Collective (Hofer et al.) and Tender Buttons Press (Brown). Useful “groupings” of post-1980s innovative American poets can be found in An Anthology of New (American) Poets, ed. Lisa Jaront, Leonard Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino (Jersey City, New Jersey: Talisman, 1998).
Such genealogical studies are just beginning. Cultural “effects” of certain Language writers’ emphases on social and political contexts for poetry are visible at different moments in contemporary discourse and dispute. One example can be found within a recent text entitled *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002) that emerged from a conference held at Barnard College in New York City (1999), at which eight leading American “lyric” and “language” poets gave poetics statements and readings alongside diverse critical panels. Where Lyn Hejinian began her statement with the obliquely political challenge “Poetics is not personal,” lyricist Lucy Brock-Broido began by observing pointedly: “My Logic of Lyric does not permit me to assign a Politic to Language.” New borders of reading, poetical practice and critique indicate future directions for comparative studies that might assess specific conceptual and formal responses, within contemporary poetry and poetics, to different Language-oriented writings. As Hejinian writes in “The Fatalist” (2002):

I’ve finished nothing. That, unless one answers in monosyllables, is a project all on its own and ominous. The upended headstanding woman on a potato is exactly what is needed to devise an elegant argument whereby the limiting condition known as ‘fate’ and the limiting condition known as ‘beginning’ merge to create an unfated ongoing incipience into which fate can accumulate without determining anything not even my mother’s age and intellectual curiosity which explains my presence, Samuel Johnson’s fear of ceaseless useless motion, and the characteristic heterogeneity of Language writing which is the history of its relationship to knowledge.

Why have Language writers argued so fiercely for the “heterogeneity” of their practices, and turned critical narratives away from “completion” at every juncture? Perhaps, alongside the particular (textual) constructions of community that such strategies entail, we are observing a more philosophical engagement with “the history

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of... relationships to knowledge" — including the circulation of proper names within literary-historical discourses. "One's fates are not taken from the encyclopedia," warns Hejinian, "not even from the entry on 'sunset.'"74 It seems comically and theoretically apt that early stages of Language writing were typified by its affiliates' intense resistance to naming — a strategy borne out by plethoric assignations given to this moment in US poetic history.75 Via structuralist and post-structuralist theory, Language writers paid acute attention to the arbitrary nature of referentiality. They often employed formal techniques that maximised slippage between "words" and "things," while testing the embedded nature of perception and knowing. Lyn Hejinian explains in "The Rejection of Closure" (1983):

The meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word's lateral reach, its contacts with its neighbors in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the outer world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference. The very idea of reference is spatial: over here is a word, over there is the thing, at which the word is shooting amiable love-arrows.76

If things and their names bear no intrinsic relationship but are implicated in infinite contextual matrices, how to locate a single label or origin for the spatialised "thing" that was and is Language writing?

Within this ambiguous rub of theory and praxis, various Language writers have resorted nonetheless, if somewhat anxiously, to rituals of origination and naming. In "The Bride of the Assembly Line" (1997), Language writer Barrett Watten contends:

The work of This [a poetry magazine that Watten established with Robert Grenier in 1971] stands at the beginning of the Language School because it is the first continuous, self-conscious, and self-reflexive literary venue of what "will have been" the Language School once it developed as it did, even if its formal characteristics could be assembled from other sources.77

In naming his own magazine as an initiatory venue for the "Language School," Watten responds in part to Language poet Bob Perelman's earlier observations in The Marginalization of Poetry (1994) that Language writing began with, or had as its

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74 Hejinian, "From The Fatalist," 151.
75 Earlier I listed Language writing, Language poetry, the Language School, LangPo, the Language movement, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and Language as existent "names" for this textual tendency.
77 Watten, "Bride of Assembly," 17.
“most influential moment,” poet Robert Grenier’s slogan-like (and written) observation “I HATE SPEECH” (1971). Grenier’s maxim has been interpreted as an historicised invective against a naturalised, speech-based poetics, in favour of focus upon textual materiality and the non-transparent, referential qualities of language; paradigms that are pivotal to Language poetry as a distinct conceptual and technical departure from “mainstream American poetics,” as that term was understood by many Language writers during the early 1970s.

Ron Silliman’s In The American Tree also names Grenier’s phrase as an originate rupture or “breach,” hence Barrett Watten’s return to that scripted moment in “The Bride of the Assembly Line.” Watten argues against “authorial origins” for the Language School in favour of “a sequence of ‘improvements’ within form[s] of organization that developed between writers in This.” (19) He identifies poetical methods, rather than singular personae, as the harbingers of a new moment in American poetry. He then, however, replaces Robert Grenier’s capitalized declaration (“I HATE SPEECH”) with a poem by Massachusetts-based writer Clark Coolidge — “Made Thought” — marking that poem as “one prototype of a series of innovations” that led to the coherence as Language writing of “a poetics substantially different from its predecessors.” (19) With this gesture of lineation, and in pointing to This magazine’s seminal publication of Coolidge’s exemplary poem, Watten effectively substitutes one name-based literary-historical approach for another; though partially averting its metropolitan bias.

Each a central Language player, Barrett Watten, Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman fretfully trade stories about first-born poems, legitimate publications and properly-named starting locales — an approach that New York Language poet Charles Bernstein gently satirised in 1999 when titling his new collection of writings My Way. Less overtly proprietorial accounts of the Language phenomenon seem to have come from Hejinian, Rae Armantrout and Carla Harryman, also core “members” of the San Franciscan scene. Rather than holding one originate text beside another or

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78 Perelman, Marginalization of Poetry 42-43.
79 Perelman, Marginalization of Poetry 43; Robert Grenier, “ON SPEECH,” In the American Tree 497. See also Perloff, Radical Artifice 35.
80 Watten, “Bride of Assembly.” 17; Silliman, “Language Realism Poetry,” In the American Tree xv.
prizing single publication events, these writers’ stories are based upon spatial contingencies, co-incidences, and interpersonal dealings. Armantrout recently described the Bay Area as “one of the origin points for what came to be known as ‘language poetry,’” emphasising the community’s plural nature and the provisionality of its naming and constitution: “This ‘group’ is as diverse as any poetic school you can think of.” Harryman has refused to archive her personal correspondence and papers and advocates “the poetry itself” as the sole material of relevance to readers, while remaining acutely alert to the dys/function of literary historical narratives: It is a story about the temptation to tell a story whose fate by the mere coincidence of time is to enter history.... [a] story about the story rather than the original story, which has disappeared into history along with the enemy. The original has been replaced with a story that functions as a critique. The critique holds its story up as an example.... Because I continue to avoid these absolutes like morning and then night, I can’t get back to the original statement. And yet I contradict myself, as these statements distribute themselves in their oblique reference.... I am already anticipating exhausting this subject.

It would be reductive to make fixed, gendered assignations based on rhetorical distinctions between narratives about plurality and deferral, and proprietorial discourses in which certain (male) names are traded and exchanged. This is not my intention in re-presenting various Language writers’ apparent squabbles over experimental family trees. Genealogies try to deconstruct stories of positionality and oligarchic transferences of status; and in making a problem out of the problem of origins — “a story about the story,” as Harryman writes — I am interested in styles of power and engagement with the stakes of literary history. Narratives that focus upon friendship, for example, might still be invested in specific kinds of capital that are associated with nominal and patronymic economies: social, cultural and literary capital, and even material resources. Their techniques for distribution, circulation and socialisation of that capital, however, might be more “obliquely referenced,” as Harryman puts it (above).

Lytle Shaw makes an excellent argument about different kinds of status that rhetorical naming might accrue in literary histories, and in poetry that takes partisan place within avant-garde communities. While Shaw makes many subtle distinctions between community and coterie in discussing the poetry of Frank O’Hara, I want to focus upon his recuperative “queering” of coterie naming. Shaw distinguishes “a research project with a fixed itinerary — sorting which names should enter, establishing clear hierarchies of attributes for those proper names included, producing ranked taxonomies” — from allegorical performances of coterie that “internalize a social theory of literary history” by “featur[ing] the obscure as experience itself, to canonize the unknown and to modify or disrupt the canonized.” (12) When Lyn Hejinian lists San Franciscan sites around which Language writing constellated in the late 1970s, or includes the proper names “Rae” and “Carla” within her poems, she hovers mid-way between these approaches. Shaw uses the provocative term “improper canonization” for the use of “proper names too obscure to have a family of attributes,” noting that they ask readers to “rethink both familial and literary historical models of kinship.” (9-10) Hejinian’s use of proper names disrupts “literary historical” kinships based around aborescent lineages, and the “name game.” More importantly perhaps, it charges readers to undermine the coherence of the assignation “Language writing,” and to question its elision of differences.

Rae Armantrout often receives scant attention within literary histories of Language writing, and Carla Harryman’s Qu journal is rarely mentioned; unlike Watten’s This, Silliman’s tottels, Perelman’s Hills, and Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews’s L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, which are given priority citation in most stories about Language enterprises. Qu is absent from Perelman’s The Marginalization of Poetry (1994) — a retrospective, critical study of Language writing that Perelman describes as a “loveletter to my friends” — while Michael Davidson’s entry on Language poetry in The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics names only Hejinian as a female participant in Language writing “history.” By contrast,
Hejinian includes Armantrout and Harryman in every account that she gives of Language writing, and scrupulously refers to events convened by them: Armantrout’s Grand Piano reading series (staged in collaboration with Perelman and Tom Mandel), Harryman’s *Qu*, and discussion evenings that Harryman curated at Small Press Distribution in 1988. Hejinian also includes Jean Day, Cindy Altman, Johanna Drucker, Leslie Scalapino, Laura Moriarty and Bernadette Mayer within descriptions of innovative communities constellating around Language practice in its first decade.

In *The Language of Inquiry* Hejinian describes these professional “defences” as expressions of neighbourhood and intellectual obligation:

> My thinking on the question of hierarchical structures was certainly informed by [Harryman's] many and profound critiques of (and challenges to) power structures of all kinds.

Hejinian’s strategy of naming plays in this case, according to Shaw’s analytical scheme, a “tactically progressive role” in reconceptualising “kinship or social linkage” along female-female lines, “instead of the would-be natural, symbolic relationships built out of the [patrilineal] family.” Hejinian places intimacy between herself and Harryman in critical opposition to “power structures of all kinds” — a premise also for the two writers’ explicitly erotic collaboration *The Wide Road*.

When Hejinian organises stories about her community under the sign of kinship or friendship, and determinedly obscures the terms of claim to forms of generational originality (“Was there a ‘movement’?”), she eschews a language of agonistic heredity in favour of discourses about transgressive intersubjectivity and reciprocal (reading) practices. These parameters are more fluid, though arguably no less strategic. Lytle Shaw argues:

> I mean kinship... in the sense that a coterie of friends produced through selection could come to supplant the naturalized bonds of the family. *Acts*

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of canonization contain a buried moment of kinship: they come out of families, they form and reform families. Whether what canonization forms is a natural family or a contingent community is of course always open to debate.96

In a Language context, a skewed reading of familial groupings and canons is available also: acts of kinship contain buried moments of performative canon-making — what Shaw refers to as “canoniz[ing] the unknown.” (12) In her long poem Slowly, Hejinian writes: “Shadows stir on the tile floor / Leslie Scalapino, Barrett Watten, Clark Coolidge, and Bernadette Mayer converse with fidelity that last minute details fill and define hours / Ours.”97 The same page carries the lines: “The camera is mounted and yields to what it sees a pregnant woman playing — a viola — this was Mozart’s favourite instrument — in Velazquez’s ineffable grays.” (28) The full names of several of Hejinian’s poetical contemporaries stand beside canonically proper surnames: Mozart, Velazquez. While accruing performative “rank” beside the names of famous artists, the names of Hejinian’s poet-friends disrupt niceties of canon-formation and demand highly particular attention. They cannot be incorporated into comfortably universal meanings for the poem; they exemplify singularity. Where Mozart and Velaquez are signified by iconic and generic attributes — an instrument, a colour — Hejinian’s band of relatively obscure poets “converse with fidelity” and are conjoined under the possessive pronoun “ours.” They are distinguished by their being-in-common, their place in community. Set into a domestic mise en scène, a moment of (textual) kinship becomes a code for Hejinian’s construction of a contingent anti-canonical.

In such instances, Hejinian’s comic play upsets “codes” of cultural-historical conduct that place canonic names and marginalised artistic enterprises into fixed oppositions, defined by “objective” borders. In 1990 Hejinian reflected:

A dominant narrative exists that is intended to give an account of literary tendencies. It identifies a mainstream and, in opposition to the mainstream, an alternative experimentalist tendency, an avant-garde. This narrative may account for a good deal, but it entirely leaves out the work of numerous productive aesthetic communities, and in particular those whose aesthetics are grounded in socio-political contexts.

96 Shaw, “On Coterie,” 7; my emphasis.
Language writing is indeed in opposition to the mainstream, but not exactly in the way that the dominant narrative can describe.  

Put differently, core/margin analyses fail to account for specific differences within multiple “core” and “marginal” zones of cultural production and power. Questions of scale become relevant in this context, where scale is understood as a term of specific relation and linkage, and where “Language writing” is imagined as a socio-cultural practice of spatiality rather than a “thing” with objectified edges. “Any locality (local scale space) is constituted not only by things that are directly manifested within the locality, but also by cross-scale relations,” writes cultural geographer Richard Howitt. “These relations operate not hierarchically or unidirectionally, but simultaneously; not just sequentially but also in different orders…. Scale, in other words, is simultaneously metaphor, experience, event, moment, relation and process.”  

Of course when Lyn Hejinian “names” a close community of friends, male and female, and refers to them as “the Language writers” — her everybody — her gesture can be interpreted as an oblique consolidation of centre/periphery models of literary historicising that place a handful of players at a hub of significance and credibility. This critique is levelled periodically at Language stories written by Language players. In response to Bob Perelman’s writing of “Language” in The Marginalization of Poetry, for example, Ann Lauterbach congenially congratulates Perelman on writing a “quasi-history” of his own moment “without blowing [his] horn or stepping on too many toes.” “I have a profound fear of gangs,” she writes, referring to “the us-them, in-out, inclusion-exclusion stuff.” The terms are contingent, however. How to categorise sensibly the us of a them, or the core of an undoubtedly marginal poetry grouping?  

Early protagonists of Language writing undoubtedly “marginalised” themselves in their outspoken (and written) opposition to the structural hierarchies, canonised forms and a-historical pretensions of American “official verse culture” — many of which

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were culturally and financially anchored by literary programmes of universities.\textsuperscript{101} Lyn Hejinian’s take on marginality is grounded in broader social contexts:

The Language movement is unusual in many respects. Perhaps its most notable departure from other tendencies, whether mainstream or experimental, is its insistence on the social — its insistence on recognizing and/or producing social contexts in and for poetry.... it has produced a challenging, strenuous, and sometimes anxious social milieu. In this sense (though perhaps not in any other), the Language community has less in common with modernist avant-garde movements than with aesthetic tendencies grounded in marginalized cultural communities — the cultures, for example, of the so-called (racial) “minorities” and of gay and lesbian communities.\textsuperscript{102}

“Movement” or “community?” Inheritors of established modernist tendencies and modes of aesthetically privileged social organisation, or an identified and politically motivated minority? Hejinian carefully qualifies her comparison of Language poetry to aesthetics evolving within certain “marginalized cultural communities.” Considering the predominantly white, middle-class and heterosexual orientation of early Language communities, and the educational and cultural capital available to many initial Language writers, these qualifications are obvious and important. In one light, Hejinian’s statements seem to trade on the oppositional “otherness” of various social sectors; contributing thus to ideological dialogues that critic Kate Lilley, after Ron Silliman, calls “the specificity of privileged oppression.”\textsuperscript{103} Bids for marginal status are meaningless without contextualisation, however, as Hejinian reminds us: “The marginal is all around. The transgressivity, sometimes overt, sometimes implicit, that motivates certain strategies in much current work, is meaningful only in liminal situations.”\textsuperscript{104} Hejinian’s purpose is not appropriative but redistributive. As part of her “insistence on recognizing and/or producing social contexts in and for poetry,” she scatters “the Margins” into a copious array of differently scaled meanings.\textsuperscript{105}

Strategic disruption of dualistic paradigms such as “canonised/marginalised” fortified Language poetry and poetics in its opening years. Those same dualisms, however, continue to implicate many Language writers in arguments about the “academic”

\textsuperscript{102} Hejinian, “Materials,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 171.
\textsuperscript{103} Lilley, “This L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,” 6.
\textsuperscript{104} Lyn Hejinian, “La Faustienne,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 234.
\textsuperscript{105} Hejinian, “Materials,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 171.
versus “extra-institutional” status of their work. Lyn Hejinian is situated comfortably within certain “dominant narratives” about “literary tendencies” that she identifies — albeit within a paradigm that positions the “alternative experimentalist tendency” of “Language writing” on one riverbank, and “the mainstream” on the other.106 In December 2000 Hejinian was the recipient of the 66th Academy Fellowship of the American Academy of Poets for “distinguished poetic achievement at mid-career,” and in 2001 she gained a tenured professorship at the University of California in Berkeley.107 By one reading, she can afford to play with extra-oppositional and boundary locations in the secure knowledge that her name is guaranteed a particular history and cultural return. “In the case of Language poetry,” argues Andrew Epstein in “Verse vs. Verse,” “the interval between outrage and institutionalization has been unusually short.”108

Such accord and placement have occurred for Hejinian in very recent years; and readings that explain away her poetical projects under a rubric of institutionalisation would obscure their historical singularities, political intentions, and material circumstances. Alan Golding surmises that the political project of Language writing had to situate itself within a fold of institutional advances and retreats. “More than any earlier avant-garde,” argues Golding, the Language protagonists now must “‘pound’ from within the gates of the ‘amazed castle,’” or occupy a provisionally complicit role within already-contingent narratives about knowledge production and canon formation.109 Steve Evans — who belongs to a “post-Language” wave of theoretically informed, innovative American poets — disagrees: “The enterprise of creating an alternative space in American culture bottomed out…. The Language poets intended to transform the institution, but the institution transformed them.”110 Andrew Epstein places Evans’s argument beside a counter-observation made by Marjorie Perloff: “Even the leading Language poets are ‘still virtually unrecognized’ by official verse

Ron Silliman also makes a plea for differential analyses that move beyond the simple terms of academic or non-academic positioning:

If you look at the close to three-hundred creative writing programs in the country, the number opened up to or interested in Language writing or employing Language poets would be twelve or less. It’s not like these people have taken over the academy! What about the other two-hundred and eighty-eight schools?¹¹²

These issues gained momentum for Language writing during the 1990s as the parameters of Language-related innovation began to broaden and shift, partly in the hands of subsequent generations of poets with different concerns and methods; and partly when several core practitioners accepted tenured chairs at noted American universities.¹¹³ What are the implications for “avant-gardism” of material and critical placement within academic institutions? Was Language writing “over” by the mid-1980s, as Barrett Watten and others surmised?¹¹⁴

Such questions are debated continually amongst readers, practitioners, observers and scholars of Language poetry. They attract no simple answers and, to my mind, are not the most compelling questions arising from Language poetry, though perhaps some of the most obvious, given their critical currency. If “academy vs. non-academy” is the sole axis by which the experimental significance of Language writing is judged, and if present academic positions of core practitioners attract only blanket dismissals of the ideational and oppositional qualities of the poetry itself, then narratives about Language practice will continue to elide the philosophical and spatial significance of very different sites and scales inhabited by relevant texts. Such frames of analysis also limit involvement in the event of Language — its imperatives, methodologies, different manifestations, and spatio-temporal histories — to a handful of writers who are marked as proselytising “main players.” Writing to Marjorie Perloff in 1987, Lyn Hejinian observed:

¹¹³ For example, Bob Perelman is Professor of Literature at the University of Pennsylvania; Charles Bernstein is David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York, Buffalo; and most recently, in late 2001, Lyn Hejinian has been appointed Professor of Literature at the University of California in Berkeley, California.
¹¹⁴ Lyn Hejinian, letter to Rae Armantrout dated 5 January 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 1].
I do find myself thinking about, and wonder if, as some of us have said from time to time, “language writing is dead.” When I have said that, it has mostly been intended as a means of shaking my work and any one else’s out of the web of perceived similarities, in order to emphasize what makes one work different from the next, and one writer’s work different from another’s.\textsuperscript{115}

Hejinian’s phrase “my work and any one else’s” attempts to wrest “community” out of a “web of perceived similarities” within literary-historical discourse. It rejects easy group identifications in favour of relational chains of difference, and notions of community grounded in a plurality of forms.

\textit{Hejinian hosting communities: Tuumba Press and Poetics Journal}

To close this chapter, I want to return briefly to the Tuumba Press project, and to consider the case of \textit{Poetics Journal} in light of the “critical” project of Language writing; especially as it consolidated during the mid-to-late 1980s. \textit{Poetics Journal} and Tuumba are useful cases of the different and specific scales of Lyn Hejinian’s enactments of community or being-with. Both enterprises offer material examples of the “guest/host” thinking explored in chapter two, while forming a bridge to Hejinian’s epistolary activities and collaborative texts, as featured in my next chapter. Hejinian established Tuumba Press while living in geographical and literary isolation, driven by an impetus toward broader community ethics and praxes — or as she puts it, “this process of inventing and constructing” the “contexts and conditions” for a writing life:\textsuperscript{116}

I thought of publishing as an extension of my writing and thinking about writing, as an expansion of the ground for aesthetic discovery. And I thought of it, too, as an extension of aesthetic responsibility. I had the sense that my poetics included other writing than my own, by definition. Part of the method was to include it.... \textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{115} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Marjorie Perloff dated 22 February 1987, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), “Marjorie Perloff”].

\textsuperscript{116} Hejinian, “Comments,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 181-182.

Either/or analyses are of limited explanatory assistance when charting ley-lines of power, gender and genre that situate Tuumba press. As it became increasingly "well articulated... as a distinctive series," and alongside its focus upon Language work, the Tuumba project allowed Hejinian to court the names and affiliations of a broad range of innovative writers and to experiment with community formations — both in practice and on paper — that exceed strictures of identifiable networks. Across Tuumba's pages, and in the discursive contexts surrounding it, various writers, readers, artists, ideas, texts and technologies were brought into encounter. In a similar vein, Hejinian has maintained letter correspondence during her career with over a hundred writers who cannot be categorised except in relation to the entirely particular (and locally-scaled) landscape of her own everyday activities, and singular devotion to epistolary forms and friendships.

Tuumba Press gave Hejinian critical agency and independence in guiding versions of community into being within a small press economy that depended largely, in Kate Lilley's view, upon "a benevolent masculinist stewardship which had always been proud of its solicitation of women poets." The press allowed Hejinian to occupy a middle zone somewhere between predominantly "masculinised" cultural roles as they stood in American bourgeois culture of the 1950s and 1960s — "intellectual, professional, capable," by Hejinian's assessment — and feminine politesse that accompanied "domestic and familial" spheres, coded by Hejinian's reference to her dining room table as a site of community constitution. "The conflict between the two [gendered roles] has given me endless difficulties and pain and identity problems," Hejinian wrote to Susan Howe in 1982. Another interpretation is available, however. Hejinian's deployment of such roles allowed her to operate in highly specific ways within various communities. By combining intellectual capabilities with great skill in facilitating friendships, which typically involved attentive letter-writing and resulted in sundry invitations to poets to visit her home in Berkeley, Hejinian herself became a "solicitor" of community news and a host par excellence to many different neighbours, according to her own assessments and tastes. "I would love to meet you,"

118 Charles Bernstein, letter to Lyn Hejinian dated 28 August 1979, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 10].
120 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Howe dated 7 April 1982, S. Howe Papers, Mandeville [201, 1, 8]; also Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
wrote Hejinian to Howe in 1976. “Your writing makes me want to go immediately to work. Because it is ambitious. And opens doors.”121 Via literal extensions of guest/host relations, and in a manner that helped finesse that philosophical and poetical paradigm, Hejinian gained important access to the ideas, proclivities and texts of many different artists.

As Linda Russo implies, Tuumba Press had feminist antecedents in American publishing ventures by Marianne Moore (The Dial) and Harriet Monroe (Poetry).122 Both Russo and Ann Vickery point also to editorial projects undertaken in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s by Daisy Aldan (Folder), Rosmarie Waldrop (Burning Deck Press), Anne Waldman (Angel Hair and St Marks Poetry Project), Bernadette Mayer (0 to 9, Unnatural Acts) and Barbara Barracks (Big Deal), to name a few.123 Russo observes in a parenthetical aside that many of these later projects were founded “with a husband or lover” (3); which creates a point of differentiation for Tuumba Press, notable for its completeness of editorial self-management. Although Hejinian collaborated with various local artists in designing covers for her chapbooks, she was the sole arbiter of its manuscripts and financial dealings, and remains so in a recent revival of the Tuumba imprint.124 While cultivating kinship networks and reading/writing audiences, Hejinian’s press depended in its first moments upon a crucial relation of matriarchal benefaction. Hejinian’s mother, Carolyn Andrews, provided capital assistance in Tuumba’s early stages and was a committed subscriber throughout the duration of its first series (1976-1984).125

Given that many of the early Language projects were dependent upon the material resources of attentive readers and like-minded practitioners, the role of self-managing capital circulation within Language communities is important. Publications, presses and reading series required audiences, money, and useable space to flourish. Poetics Journal offers an excellent example of strategic propagation of distribution networks, particularly amongst an audience of contributors who doubled as subscribing readers.

121 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Howe dated 5 July 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 4, 18].
123 Russo, “Wherefore Gender,” 2-3; Vickery, Leaving Lines of Gender 64.
124 Hejinian’s Slowly (2002) is the first in a new series of Tuumba chapbooks.
125 See for example Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 13 July 1976, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 8]; Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 27 November 1976 [74, 1, 8].
Co-founded by Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten in 1981, the publication quickly became one principal, critical "stage" for the development of a poesis within Language writing communities. Hejinian wrote to her mother in 1982:

Barry [Watten] and I have been working steadily on the first issue of POETICS JOURNAL. Subscriptions have been pouring in -- which I find very curious; it seems that people are more eager to read about poetry than to read the work itself. At least, we have more subscriptions to PJ than I do for Tuumba -- already.\textsuperscript{126}

Reading communities that clustered around Hejinian's Tuumba (established in 1976) and Watten’s This magazine (established in 1971) offered ground support to the poets' new venture. Hejinian also petitioned libraries, including those of universities, for crucial advance subscriptions — although copy for the journal was harder to obtain: "Collecting material for Poetics Journal has been more difficult than I anticipated. Many poets (and other artists as well) see creative work as so radically different from theoretical work as to preclude theoretical work altogether."\textsuperscript{127} The first edition of Poetics Journal in 1982 comprised photocopied stapled sheets, directed towards and indicating a very limited readership. By the following issue, the journal had become a bound volume with the potential of reaching a "wider and necessarily more diffuse audience."\textsuperscript{128} A phase of "language poetry as community building" was gradually giving way to, and becoming transformed by, recognition and distribution beyond the collaborative circles of participant writers.\textsuperscript{129}

Poetics Journal also built upon the programmes of antecedent Language journals, as Hejinian implied in a 1981 letter to poet Clark Coolidge:

I do want to make something useful and clear out of this journal -- \textsuperscript{130} [L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine], for all its virtues, is something of an example of what not to do for me. In the end, most of the stuff there was boring, or obfuscating, and my overriding sense of reading it is frustration.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{126} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 1982, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 14].
\textsuperscript{127} Hejinian, “Materials,” Language of Inquiry 175.
\textsuperscript{129} Silliman, “The Marginalization,” 2.
\textsuperscript{130} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 9 November 1981, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].
Coolidge agreed, remarking that any "manifesto aspect" of the magazine "became immediately faded in the confusion."\(^{131}\) Though not organised specifically around any "manifesto" of critical praxis, Poetics Journal inhabited a signature area of engagement for Language writing enterprises: a shake-up of oppositions between critical theory and poetry, academic work and art production. Disturbing these genres and suggesting their reciprocal nature was a core project in many of the "pedagogical" writings of Language-related poets. One goal of Poetics Journal was to remove "literary theory and criticism" from "the province of academics and professional critics," as Hejinian puts it, in order to "inter[weave] the process of developing critical theories and techniques with the process of developing creative ones."\(^{132}\) Poetics Journal was the first "Language" journal to orient itself chiefly toward critical poetics. "We wanted to provide a forum in which the theoretical work that was going on in the Language movement could develop further and involve a larger public," writes Hejinian, "and we wanted to provide a site in which poets and other artists could be the ones to define the terms in which their work was discussed."\(^{133}\)

The academic and theoretical seriousness of many Language writers remains one of their most distinctive and noted characteristics, while contributing substantially to Language poetry's icy reception among various quarters in its first stages and to its rejection as an "authentic avant-garde" by some critics. David Lehman for example opines that while the Language writers have "some of the classic traits of an avant-garde movement," their "ideological, Marxist and deconstructivist obsessions" make their work "dangerously" close to "a subsidiary branch of literary theory."\(^{134}\) Aside from failing to distinguish between the poems of specific writers, Lehman is incorrect in characterising all Language poetry as a "sever[ing of] the relation between language and communication."\(^{135}\) As Lyn Hejinian notes, it is impossible for words *not* to attract and generate sense, regardless of the context of their usage: "Every word, even every word-part, is screaming, calling out to its referent and grabbing as many referents as it

\(^{131}\) Clark Coolidge, letter to Lyn Hejinian dated 17 November 1981, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].


\(^{133}\) Hejinian, "Materials," *Language of Inquiry* 175.


\(^{135}\) Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde* 371-372.
can. You can’t make nonsense with words.” Or rather, “Language” writing encourages readers to scrutinise “sense” at the level of context and linkage, and to appreciate the role of site-specificity in making meanings for texts, lines, words, and paragraphs. A poetics of critical context and a poetics of communication are not mutually exclusive entities.

Taking as an exemplar the Russian Formalists’ insistence upon “publicising the critique,” Hejinian and Watten’s Poetics Journal developed a cultural model that Brian McHale interprets as “somewhat anomalous in America, though not so strange in Europe.” Poetics Journal also had some precedent in Language community initiatives such as Bob Perelman’s “Talks” series, begun in the Spring of 1977 at 544 Natoma Street in San Francisco, and operative until the mid-1980s. During the talks, poets gave papers and led informal discussions about forms, textualities, and language theories underpinning their work. Hejinian views the “Talks” series as “a kind of workshop for poetics and literary theory.” It eventually moved to the larger space of New Langton Arts in San Francisco, a move indicative of the series’ burgeoning audience and credibility.

A year before Poetics Journal was launched, Perelman edited a collection of writings transcribed from the Natoma Street talk series, publishing them in 1980 as “Talks” in volumes six and seven of his experimental language writing magazine Hills. A book called Writing/Talks, also assembled and edited by Perelman, followed in 1985. The first version of “Talks” was a small press production, similar in essence to the first issue of Poetics Journal. By comparison, the 1985 collection appeared with an established university press. Its preface refers to “a community of writers” who have an equal interest in “writing [as] an activity” and flags similar but divergent interests in matters of textuality, language and form: “The mode varies at times from formal essay to wide open conversation, but in all cases the talk was not for talk’s

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sake, but for the sake of writing.” (viii) Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews’s *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* was published in 1984 by the same university press, collating critical texts by dozens of writers from the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine’s first three volumes.¹⁴²

The metamorphosis of “Talks” into *Writing/Talks* (via *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*) marks an important literary-historical boundary. It implies the consolidation of “the Language writers” as a field of academic notice, and as a group who increasingly identified their cross-referenced activities in terms of “a community,” to cite Perelman’s estimation. To conclude this section of my discussion, I will look briefly at one essay that appeared in *Writing/Talks*. First presented as a Natoma Street lecture on 17 April 1983 and published subsequently in *Poetics Journal*, “The Rejection of Closure” by Lyn Hejinian has evolved from small-scale community event to canonic “prototype” of Language poetics. Tracing its critical progress is a useful way to observe the cohesion of Language writing as a studied phenomenon, in context of various Language poets’ success in “defining the terms in which their work [is] discussed,” as Hejinian puts it.¹⁴³ This is not an attempt to delimit the field of Language endeavours; but a means of showing how and where such fields are constituted.

Hejinian began drafting “some kind of ‘paper’ on the subject of Closure” in early 1983, calling it “Closure and Confusion.”¹⁴⁴ She wrote to her mother in January that year: “I want to address the conflict or contradiction between the perceived infinitude of possible human experience and understanding and the notion of poetic form and literary structure.”¹⁴⁵ Hejinian organised her ideas around “the gap between what one wants to say (or perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable)”; in other words, the difficult epistemological terrain of referentiality in an “actual” world of phenomenal occurrences.¹⁴⁶ “The gap does seem like the problem -- problem in a

positive sense," she wrote to Clark Coolidge. "I like to look into the gap." An unpublished draft of the paper contained the sentence: "How vast is the marginal zone?" "The Rejection of Closure" distinguishes between "open" and "closed" textual forms:

The "open text," by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The "open text" often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification.

This is a cogent summation of early Language philosophies and ambitions concerning reader/writer relations; especially regarding links between poetic form and ethical and political navigation.


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147 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 20 February 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].
148 Drafts for "The Rejection of Closure," unpublished manuscript, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 11(U), "Rejection of Closure"].
149 Lyn Hejinian, "Rejection of Closure," Language of Inquiry 43.
collection of poetical essays. Over a twenty-year period Hejinian’s essay has become, effectively, a critical model of the formal, theoretical and historical “intentions” of Language writing.

The publication trajectory of “The Rejection of Closure” emerges from mutually constructive dialogues between the framing of Language writing by Language writers, and scholarly work that mapped and responded to its arrival. In critical discourse, Marjorie Perloff pioneered identifications and positionings of Language writing as a distinct formal tendency in “The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry in the eighties” (1985), while a debate among critics Jerome McGann, Charles Altieri, David Bromwich and Jed Rasula concerning the political efficacy and resistant status of Language poetry appeared in Robert Von Hallberg’s *Politics and Poetic Value* in 1987.153 During that time, several small press journals including *Temblor* and *Sulfur* were running editorial “assemblages” and special editions devoted to the critical reception of Language writing.154 As Language poetry became recognized increasingly by audiences beyond its own participant circles, various Language writers entered critical debates in more studied fashions. Collections of poetry that were guest-edited by Language writers — such as Ron Silliman’s “Realism: an Anthology of Language Writing” in *Ironwood* (1982) and Charles Bernstein’s “Language Sampler” in *The Paris Review* (1982) — gave way to overarching assessments by practitioners of the “movement” as such.155 In 1988 a group of six San Franciscan Language poets published “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: a Manifesto” in the journal *Social Text*. Co-authored by Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Steve

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Benson, Barrett Watten and Bob Perelman, the piece is a collaborative polemic that studiously avoids reference to language poetry until its final paragraphs, though it often mentions a “group”: “If there has been one premise of our group that approaches the status of a first principle, it has been not the ‘self-sufficiency of language’ or the ‘materiality of the sign’ but the reciprocity of practice implied by a community of writers who read each other’s work.”156 To the writers’ chagrin and amusement, the label “manifesto” was added later by the journal’s editors.

During the mid-to-late 1980s, several male Language poets and affiliated writers published hefty works of theoretically weighted textual criticism. While following the Language imperative of “read[ing] each other’s work,” many of these texts also provided interpretive frames for their authors’ own poetry. In doing so, they garnered cultural capital and insurance against historical obscurity, while responding to burgeoning academic regard for Language writing. Barrett Watten’s Total Syntax appeared in 1985, followed by Steve McCaffery’s North of Intention: Critical Writings, 1973-1976 (1986), Charles Bernstein’s Content’s Dream: Essays 1975-1984 (1986), and Ron Silliman’s The New Sentence (1989). Bob Perelman’s The Marginalization of Poetry followed in 1994, marking something of an after-moment in the production of Language writing.157

Publication in December 2000 of The Language of Inquiry, Lyn Hejinian’s first collection of essays, stands on a different threshold. The book exists at a spatio-temporal and procedural distance from earlier “critical” Language works, while advocating strong links to their authors’ perspectives. The Language of Inquiry contains twenty elegant and detailed poetical essays. They are chronologically ordered, with one or two notable exceptions, and date from March 1976 to February 1999.158 Although the book spans Hejinian’s time in a San Franciscan Language writing community, its opening chapter (A Thought is the Bride of What Thinking) deliberately pre-dates that involvement.159 True to Lyn Hejinian’s community-oriented artistic sensibility, The Language of Inquiry carries a striking cover by New York

158 Written in 1995, “Barbarism” received substantial updates in 1998 and is placed subsequent to two essays that were both written during 1997. See Hejinian, “Barbarism,” Language of Inquiry 318.
artist Emilie Clark, with whom Hejinian has collaborated since 1999 to produce three creative works.¹⁶⁰ Each essay in the book is preceded by a short explanatory preface:

Where it felt necessary, I have attempted in the headnotes to “update” my thinking on certain topics. I chose to do this updating in headnotes rather than in revisions to the essays because the notion of “changing one’s mind” is extremely important in aesthetics as in ethics.... The headnotes, then, in addition to contextualizing the essays, are meant to assert their hermeneutic character and preserve the spirit of provisionality in which they were first written. (4)

Hejinian’s collected prefatory notes in The Language of Inquiry constitute a fragmentary but cohesive text in themselves, and are a distinct instance of Hejinian’s poetics — twenty linked plateaus composed between 1998 and early 1999. While re-contextualising three decades of expository writing, the notes also display Hejinian’s loyalties to remembrance and archival method. Each piece within The Language of Inquiry occurred first as a public talk or conference paper, or was written for a small press project. Put differently, each corresponds to a decision about how to be “in common,” and Hejinian is meticulous in recording these local sites and moments of community.¹⁶¹

As a linked series of post factum interpretations, the prefatory headnotes within The Language of Inquiry also perform a disruption of genre by partly transforming Hejinian’s text into a self-styling memoir; albeit an anti-sentimental and worldly one. “The spirit of provisionality” claimed for the notes (above) is challenged by an idea that they somehow set the record in place, correctly ordered. As letters to readers, they urge us to view the pieces in particular ways. They give “first-hand” and inevitably semi-authenticating accounts of Language writing as an event belonging to certain cultural locales. With some authority, one note reads: “We were espousing an admittedly utopian enterprise — one that was attached to a virtually explicit agenda underlying every poetry discussion at the time.”¹⁶² Lyn Hejinian’s readings of a Language “we” are paramount within the headnotes, alongside her own meanings for

¹⁶² Hejinian, Preface to “Who Is Speaking?,” Language of Inquiry 31; my emphasis.
community. Discussing her desire to write poetical essays alongside her poetry, Hejinian recently observed:

The essay is not ever thought of, or very rarely thought of, as a private act, but rather as an act for the public. I generally think that my best thinking occurs in poetry, but my more accessible thinking could happen in essays. So there was a public notion that motivated me to take on essay writing in the first place.¹⁶³

Hejinian’s concept of “accessibility” displays both anxieties about sociability and circulation, and dedication to poetry as a common (or public) space of exchange. As “an act for the public,” expository essays are way of thanking a reading audience in advance; an offering within phrase regimens suggested by non-privatised poetical discourse, and an acknowledgement that poetry occurs as and within social contexts.¹⁶⁴ This is a useful juncture at which to leave broader discussions of Language writing and the writing of Language, and to address “poetical” articulations of community that are particular to Lyn Hejinian.

Poetry as Co-appearance: Letters and Collaborations

Chapter Four

What is not together is in the no-time-no-place of non-Being. Co-appearance, then, must signify — because this is what is now at stake — that "appearing" (coming into the world and being in the world, or existence as such) is strictly inseparable, indiscernible from the cum or the with, which is not only its place, but also — and this is the same thing — its fundamental ontological structure.... Presence is impossible except as copresence.

— Jean-Luc Nancy

In terms of letter writing... there's already an acknowledgement of the other person's existence, which is the first major step towards loving them.

— Lyn Hejinian

Letters and collaborations are two formal manifestations of the reciprocal "facing" that guides Lyn Hejinian's sense of poetic obligation. Exhibiting a guest/host poetic, they foreground mutually constructive relations that exist between readers and writers, and between (co-ontological) subjects. Hejinian has been unique among the principal Language poets in her compulsive engagement with daily letter writing and fascination with epistolary genres. Over the past twenty-five years she has written thousands of letters, mostly to other writers and to her mother, Carolyn Andrews. Unlike journals, which display performative languages of singularity, privacy, and self-address, letters always imply another being: an addressee, whose absent (readerly) presence has bearing upon a writer's mode of communication and self-construction. Letter exchanges suggest reciprocity, intersubjectivity, and the gift of care. Although intimating different formal and publication horizons, collaborative projects share many of these characteristics. This chapter continues the work of chapter three by reading "community" as a series of localised instances, and in its use of genealogical practices in relation to archival materials: "Genealogy... must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising

2 Lyn Hejinian, interview with the author, 3 August 1998.
places, in what we tend to feel is without history — in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts.”

Most of Lyn Hejinian’s letters and literary effects are held in the Mandeville Special Collections Library (Archive for New Poetry) at the University of California, San Diego.⁵ Hejinian has an ongoing agreement to update the archive in ten-yearly increments. Why has Hejinian written letters in the thousands, and to whom? And what are her motivations for initiating and participating in dozens of artistic collaborations? In light of Hejinian’s location within the Language School, how might we link her compulsive, material “acting-out” of community to her more philosophical explorations of worldliness, commonality, being-in-context, and the space of appearance?

Within her collected poetical writings, especially those that hover in the margins of “proper” literary classification, Hejinian repeatedly hosts, orchestrates, fantasises and theorises particular versions of community into being. Letters and collaborative works are border texts. Like publicly accessible archives, personal correspondence attracts curiously “between” status as a textual form neither wholly public nor securely private. Collaborations live in a different but related fringe. They happen in strangely inter-subjective spaces and do not “belong” to a single author. Following Emmanuel Levinas, we might imagine both textual types as discrete instances of being-for-the-other, animated by reciprocal facing.⁶ Or we could think of them as encounters — manifestations of being-with, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, or literal events of being-in-common.⁷ Nancy writes:

The possibility of saying “our time” and the possibility of this making sense... is given by a reciprocity between “our” and “time.” This does not imply a collective property, as if first we exist, and then we possess a certain time. On the contrary, time gives us, by its spacing, the possibility of being we, or at least the possibility of saying “we” and “our.” In order to say “we,” we have to be in a certain common space of time... that is,

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⁵ Hejinian Papers (MS0074), Mandeville Special Collections Library (Archive for New Poetry), UCSD.
⁶ “Being-for-the-other” cited from Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 14.
the possibility of being in common, and of presenting and representing ourselves as a community — a community which shares or which partakes of the same space of time, for community itself it this space.⁸

Letters can provide mobile representations of community while refusing to make "collective property" of a contemporary moment. Giving placement and expression to experiences of shared time, they seek to "make sense" within neighbourhoods of others and otherness. Hejinian’s letters space the time — her saying of "our time" — and explore "the possibility of being in common." Along with collaborative ventures, letters allow Hejinian to occupy a critical border between community participation and individuated writerly subjectivity: “For me the conflict (or should I say ‘dialectic’) between solitude and community is always painful.”⁹ Perhaps being-for-the-other and being-for-the-self are mutually productive states within Hejinian’s guest/host poetic. Jean-Luc Nancy writes: “The otherness of existence happens only as ‘togetherness’.... Community is the community of others.”¹⁰ Developing this idea, we might imagine Hejinian’s community-oriented textual engagements as forms of being-for-the-other-for-the-self. In letters and collaborations, singularities are affirmed within forms whose principal condition is plurality.

This reading makes particular sense in context of Language scenes, where participants have eschewed group "labels" and vocabularies of "sameness" in a bid to emphasise local differences as a principal currency of artistic commonality. After philosopher Hannah Arendt, we might understand letters as spaces of appearance: commonplace "modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua [humans].”¹¹ Community comes into being in and as the spaces generated by collaborative and letter encounters. Letter exchanges are indeed a form of collaboration, which partly explains Hejinian’s reliance upon them as a vehicle for multi-authored work. A further concept from Jean-Luc Nancy is useful here. Letters and collaborations are literal forms of “co-appearance,” where “Being” is an intrinsically intersubjective state: “Presence is impossible except as copresence.”¹² As my opening chapters argued, Nancy’s ideas of being-in-common and Hejinian’s ideas

⁹ Lyn Hejinian, letter to Rae Armantrout dated 5 January 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 1].
¹⁰ Nancy, "Finite History," 160.
¹² Nancy, Being Singular Plural 62.
of being-in-context both hinge on singularities — differences — that are affirmed in common, or in the phenomenal presence of other beings and things. Transactions between subjects are critical: both Nancy and Hejinian stress movement as a guiding principal of *being singular plural.* “[I]n order to be together and to communicate,” writes Nancy, “a correlation of places *and* a transition of passages from one place to another is necessary.” This chapter positions letters and collaborations as a literal place of passage between situated subjects. In both textual forms, context is active and evident at all times.

A prepoetics of friendship

To further contextualise Lyn Hejinian’s much-desired involvement with letters and collaborative texts, I want to return to an idea canvassed briefly in the previous chapter, by deepening my considerations of “friendship” as a primary expression of Hejinian’s poetical philosophies. *The Language of Inquiry* gives readers a valuable clue to Lyn Hejinian’s high esteem for friendship as a leading condition of her artistic and life practice. Hejinian frames her critical essays as works of collaborative thought:

Their true context is a community — literary and pedagogical — in which challenges and encouragement, provocations and excitement, contention and insights have been generated over the years in a mode which I would define as *friendship of the most supreme kind.* The spaces in which meaning occurs are social spaces, ones in which human practice as well as artistic practice is at stake. These essays, then, are rooted in conversations and writings by a number of friends, mostly poets and particularly those either loosely or closely associated with Language writing. For over thirty years now, I have depended on the friendship and on the challenges they have offered.  

It should be noted, to echo a point made earlier, that *The Language of Inquiry* is not simply styling a poetics to mirror Hejinian’s experiences within a “real” community. Neither event has *a priori* status; the two are mutually producing. One is always encountering the other, along a boundary of becoming. When Hejinian includes

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"conversations" as a source for her poetics, she asks that readers appreciate the "social spaces" of poetry "in which meaning occurs," and which New Critical readings once relegated to insignificant or secondary status. There is a border politics, in other words, associated with genres and textual types rooted in social discursivity: letters, essays to friends, collaborative works. As manifest in the "poetics of encounter" discussed in chapter one, letters and collaborations embody the ontological intersubjectivity in which Hejinian's poetry finds its deepest and most ethically-engaged expression. "Friendship," then, is a sign for communitarianism taken as Hejinian's poetical reason.

In an essay called "Reason," Lyn Hejinian proposes an alternative term for reason, describing it as the "prepoetical" component of a poetics. This is highly relevant to configurations of friendship within her work. A prepoetics is a condition of thought neither "logically [n]or chronologically prior to the formation of a poetics" but "necessary and simultaneous to it — a current running through it." If "poetics is the site of poetry's reason," then a prepoetics is its enabling mechanism; a prepoetics has no life without a poetics, and vice versa. The terms exist in a dynamic of reciprocity similar to that which Hejinian ascribes to poetics and poetry. A prepoetics provides an envelope of reason for the occurrence of a poetics. Understood differently, reason is the prepoetical context in which a poetics comes into being. Jacques Derrida might call it "the place of that which takes place."

Lyn Hejinian sources the term prepoetical to Emilie Clark and Lytle Shaw, editors of Shark magazine. I want to make a further link — to What is Philosophy?, the

19 Lyn Hejinian wrote "Reason" for Shark magazine's inaugural issue (1998), which was dedicated to "Prepoetics." Shark is a journal of poetics, art and critical theory that operates out of New York City and the Bay Area.
collaborative textual finale of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari describe philosophy as the generation of concepts (knowing) into a "plane of immanence," an open boundary that gives placement and singularity to concepts as they collect. (35) The plane is distinct from knowing but intrinsic to it: "If philosophy begins with the creation of concepts, then the plane of immanence must be regarded as prephilosophical." (40) Guattari and Deleuze explain "prephilosophical" in terms that correspond exactly with Hejinian's reading of a prepoetics:

Prephilosophical does not mean something preexistent but rather something that does not exist outside philosophy, although philosophy presupposes it. These are its internal conditions.

*What is Philosophy?* is listed among Hejinian's sources for the last two books of *A Border Comedy* (2001), written concurrently with "Reason" — which may account for these striking terminological similarities. The Deleuzean plane matches Hejinian's idea of a milieu of encounter, a "shared context" that is a precondition for Hejinian's writing. What Hejinian describes as "a community of reason" does not exist outside a poetics, although a poetics presupposes it. Community, in other words, is the prepoetical context, the *reason*, for poetry.

I want to introduce another of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts, appropriate to the issue of Hejinian's prepoetic:

Simply, the time has come for us to ask what philosophy is.... the answer not only had to take note of the question, it had to determine its moment, its occasion and circumstances, its landscapes and personae, its conditions and unknowns. It had to be possible to ask the question "between friends".... [T]he friend who appears in philosophy no longer stands for an extrinsic persona, an example of an empirical circumstance, but rather for a presence that is intrinsic to thought, a condition of possibility of thought itself, a living category, a transcendental lived reality.

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21 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 41; italics included.
Deleuze and Guattari want philosophy to interrogate the social contexts of its production, and their method involves restoring to ideational processes a specific, embodied subject: the utterly implicated friend, a prephilosophical presence who is both "living category" and collaborative principal. Their own texts are written in a zone between subjects, and presuppose "the friend" who is neither preexistent nor extrinsic and who cannot be reduced to empirical example. The friend comes into being with thought while simultaneously making thinking possible; the friend gives reason, in a prephilosophical sense, to philosophical praxis.

A friend as "a condition of possibility of thought itself" has wonderful resonance with Lyn Hejinian's relationship to being-in-common as the occasion and circumstance of poetical practice.26 To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, commonality is Hejinian's way of asking "what poetry is." It is a "lived reality" brought into existence by acts of writing, so that poetry becomes a reciprocated context for community and the occasion of its happening. "We have no other experience of living than encounters," states Hejinian. "We have no other use for language than to have them."27 Friendships are a prephilosophical presence guiding Hejinian's use of (prepoetical) textual types that overtly demonstrate "a co-reality," as she describes it; intersubjective forms that include, intrinsically, both otherness and withness.28 By reading "friendship" as Hejinian's prepoetic, I am proposing that intersubjective activity — a form of "asking between friends," as Deleuze and Guattari write — can become the rationale for poetical praxis.29 Community itself then becomes a conceptual persona.

Writing to poet Clark Coolidge, Lyn Hejinian demonstrates her high regard for letter writing as an experience of "co-respondence" or intersubjective facing:

I got a long letter from Bernadette [Mayer] yesterday and think that at last she and I are co-responding, which makes me very happy. I like Midwinter Day very much.30

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26 "Being-in-common" originates with Jean-Luc Nancy, and is discussed at length in chapter one. See for example Nancy, "Finite History," 168.
29 Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy? 2.
30 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 20 February 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].
In an epistolary encounter with Mayer, Hejinian's sociable desires to be *toward-another* are realised "at last," and relayed to a third writer (Coolidge) with whom Hejinian also co-responds. These relations echo Emmanuel Levinas's principle of neighbourhood in which care and obligation toward otherness are linked inextricably: "The neighbour concerns me before all assumption.... Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, 'against all logic'.... The community with him begins in my obligation to him." Levinas stresses that a person's obligations extend to "all the others," implying a vast array of intersubjective cares. (159) Letters to many different recipients are one display of such multiple obligations and proximities. As implied by this chapter's epigraph, such concerns are uppermost for Hejinian: "In terms of letter writing, one rarely writes to people one doesn't want to speak to, and in some way, one likes something about the engagement with that person. So there's already an acknowledgement of the other person's existence, which is the first major step towards loving them." 

In the preface to *Sight*, a lengthy collaborative work written with Leslie Scalapino during the early to mid-1990s, Lyn Hejinian identifies "a flourishing friendship" as a condition intrinsic to the writing itself. In conversation in 1998, Hejinian made a similar link between collaborative textual practices and companionship:

> It's really a funny kind of expressivity where you say to somebody, or you respond "yes" when they say to you, let's do a collaboration, let's write a piece together — there's this kind of joy that a friendship has been declared, in essence.

Hejinian has published at least nine substantial collaborative poems or books. Most are dual-authored; and almost all employed letters, at some stage, as a formal vehicle for writing procedure and exchange. One unpublished experiment takes letter writing as its form, medium *and* content, and involves interpolations to exchanged letters. Such collaborations can be imagined as site-specific responses to a question posed by

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31 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 87.
32 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
34 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
Deleuze and Guattari: "What does friend mean when it becomes a conceptual persona, or a condition for the exercise of thought?"36

While Deleuze and Guattari's prephilosophical "friend" and Hejinian's prepoetical "community" can be made to align productively in epistemological and rhetorical terms, a deepening of the term friend is necessary. One core project of What is Philosophy? is genealogical. The book seeks to "deteritorialize" narratives that give static geocultural origins to philosophy ("the discipline that involves creating concepts"), while removing from philosophy any aura of elevated status as a human activity.37 Deleuze and Guattari do however link the "friend" to the ancient Greek city or polis, citing that city's scripted political culture as a source for a particular portrayal of philosophers: "those who seek wisdom but do not formally possess it." (3) An antithetical body of personae, recurrent in Western post-enlightenment philosophical narratives, might be those thinking (owning) subjects who exercise implicit knowing mastery and a kind of proximate authority over fields of concepts and things. Deleuze and Guattari want their "friend" to perform a radical turn away from proprietorial conceptual models:

Wisdom has changed a great deal. It is even more difficult to know what friend signifies, even and especially among the Greeks.... The diversity of conceptual personae must be understood without being reduced to the already complex unity of the Greek philosopher. The philosopher is the concept's friend. (5)

Lyn Hejinian's phrase "the shape of unknowing" suggests a similar line of inquiry: to know without possession or reduction, in a common space of appearance (or polis) that is subject to continual change.38

By describing the friend as both an ubiquitous "condition for the exercise of thought" and a persona grata beyond reduction, Deleuze and Guattari imply a corrective to various categorical exclusions of the Greek city-state; and by extension, to discourses

36 Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy? 3-4.
37 Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy? 5.
that continue to replicate equivalent omissions.\textsuperscript{39} Women of the ancient Greek state, of course, were not considered to be "the concept's friend," and could not participate as philosopher-citizens; and women and men in servitude were placed as outsiders to the "rivalry of free men" that constituted philosophical activity in the public sphere or polis. (4) Deleuze and Guattari's minimally identified "friend" provides interpretive scope for extending participation in Western philosophy to an infinite assembly of previously excluded bodies. At one point in \textit{What is Philosophy?} a specific gesture is made toward gendered horizons: "And what happens if the woman herself becomes philosopher?" (71) This is not answered. The text's conceptual architectures do suggest room for critique, however — encoded obliquely in the words "wisdom has changed a great deal."\textsuperscript{40}

Epistolary exchanges and collaborative undertakings perform specific work in context of a prepoetics of friendship. For Lyn Hejinian, letters and collaborations are a community-oriented yet singular means of determining her poetical moment — "its occasions and circumstances, its landscape and personae, its conditions and unknowns," to cite again from Deleuze and Guattari.\textsuperscript{41} In the following readings, my intention is not to make community operate only "as an example of an empirical circumstance," by materialising its limits, but to give additional texture to the way \textit{being-in-common} might work as a condition of possibility for Hejinian's poetry, and her thinking about poetry.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{In co-response: reading Hejinian's letter archives}

"What is the nature of epistolary enthusiasm?"

Susan Howe asks this in \textit{The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history}, while exploring historicity and erasure, female antinomianism, and

\textsuperscript{39} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{What is Philosophy?} 4.
\textsuperscript{40} For excellent feminist critiques and uses of Deleuzean philosophy, see for example Elizabeth Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies} (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994); and Elspeth Probyn, \textit{Outside Belongings} (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).
\textsuperscript{41} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{What is Philosophy?} 2.
\textsuperscript{42} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{What is Philosophy?} 3.
Her words are a provocative mark from which to consider Lyn Hejinian’s copious letter archive, currently held in the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego. Alongside unpublished drafts and sundry papers, the archive holds detailed correspondence with over a hundred writers, publishers, family members and friends, meticulously organised by Hejinian into folders spanning ten-year time periods. While her well-regarded capacity as editor of Tuumba Press created an initial condition for correspondence with many poets during the late 1970s, Hejinian’s letter writing impetus shifted in focus during subsequent decades; especially after a visit to Russia in 1983, which led to lengthy translation projects undertaken by letter. During the early 1980s, a period Ron Silliman has termed “the community-building phase” of Language writing, Hejinian wrote letters almost every day. One letter mentions writing fifty in three days.

Augmenting Susan Howe’s query, I want to ask: what might be the nature of Lyn Hejinian’s epistolary enthusiasm? How do letters enable Hejinian to occupy and move within a series of contradictions, and how might lettering copia work as a figure for Hejinian’s textually realised and imagined concept of community? What does it mean to write “of and in one’s own time,” or out of the day, and how does Hejinian explore a poetics of critical co-responsiveness across a fractured, repetitive and accumulative writing genre?

Writing to her mother Carolyn Andrews on 22 October 1983, Hejinian recounts how she has posted illicit experimental works to various Russian writers. Her story is drawn partly from a letter sent to her by Leningrad poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko. “All the poets in Leningrad were devouring it,” she writes about a copy of William Carlos Williams’s Spring and All, “and discovered there... the first clue to the solution

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44 In 1986, Hejinian’s letters from 1975-1984 were purchased by the Mandeville Special Collections Library in San Diego. Letters from 1985-1994 were added to the archive in 1998, along with publisher’s materials from Tuumba Press.
45 These relationships and translations are discussed in detail in chapter six.
47 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 26 February 1982, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 14].
of formal and poetic issues — how to write of and in one’s own time.” Two months later in a letter to Clark Coolidge, Hejinian remarked:

I find the whole dilemma of the conflict between shared and unshared, or private and public, or individualist and communal, painfully difficult. My political beliefs (and certainly my upbringing as a middle class girl with all the concomitant sense of social responsibility) would support the shared, communal, social, etc. But the real truth is that I long to be free of every distraction, every responsibility, that drains away my time and my attention, every thing that diffuses intensity, in order always to be writing: not always words on paper, of course -- but to be perpetually in a condition of writing.

But, enough of that. My correspondence -- or the world created by my correspondence -- with the Russian writers (but, in particular, with Arkadii Dragomoschenko) -- is one in which the condition of writing is the only condition. It has put letter-writing into a new and major place in my literary life, and it is there that I have begun to be able to articulate (and even to discover) what might begin to be my own “poetics.”

Hejinian’s accumulated letters can be understood as an active boundary; or more accurately, an active series of boundaries. They engage a zone between public texts, with attendant pressures exerted by publication economies upon “finished” work, and private spheres of remembrance and singular practice. Letters comprise a substantial part of Hejinian’s literary oeuvre and are a complex site for articulating and working through ethical, poetical, political and social problematics — “what might begin to be [Hejinian’s] own poetics.”

Epistolarity is characterised often as a domestic and feminised genre, and carries a measure of literary weight as a “proper” female undertaking. Hejinian’s deployment of letter writing, however, permits more transgressive readings. Letters allow Hejinian some freedom of self-construction in moving between gendered subjectivities and different styles of power. While exemplifying good relations in a New England “feminine” manner, letters also engage Hejinian in roles that she once described as

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48 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated October 22 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 15]; my emphasis.  
49 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 15 December 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].  
50 See for example Rosalind Ballaster, Seductive Forms: Women’s Amatory Fiction From 1684 to 1740 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 42-66; also Janet Gurkin Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982).
"masculine": intellectual, professional, capable, with a built-in brusque personality." They are a "publicly-private" place in which Hejinian orchestrates and evinces loyalties to a publicly engaged community, while protecting her private (familial) interests and intimacies. As a scene of address to multiple parties, letters allow Hejinian to experiment with configurations of productive desire and care that exceed binary codings of gender and hetero-normative familiarities. They also encode rhetorics of productive endlessness; their dailiness suggests ongoing communication within a mess of "actuality" that never ends. By writing letters to secure conditions of friendship and being-in-common, Hejinian adopts a powerful role in forestalling the closure of community, especially among her Language colleagues: "The challenge now is to make certain that it is not over."52

Earlier discussions about Lyn Hejinian’s embrace of "context" gain new relevance beside letters. For a poetics to include an ethical dimension, Hejinian writes, it must admit the context of its utterance; the moment and situation of its happening. Hejinian’s often-repeated phrase "along comes something — launched in context" gives form to such acknowledgement.53 Things "arrive" within the scope of a subject’s perception to become a new context for sense. They bring numerous prior contexts — their histories — so that encounters between subjects, or between subjects and objects, are embedded in vastly differentiated scales of knowing. In her marvellous essay "The Poethical Wager," Joan Retallack writes:

When complex life on earth begins for you, then you need a poetics which foregrounds all of the arts as, rather than about, forms of engaged living in medias mess.54

An ethical poetics will foreground poetry "as rather than about" the contextualising presence of everyday happenings. Following Retallack’s scheme, letters would seem an ideal textual form in which to "foreground... engaged living" in the daily mess of things: ideas, objects, perceptions, others — whatever comes along, launched in

51 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Howe dated 7 April 1982, S. Howe Papers, Mandeville [201, 1, 8].
52 Lyn Hejinian, "Roughly Stapled: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian by Craig Dworkin," Hejinian author pages at Electronic Poetry Centre, 1996. Available at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/hejinian/interview-backup.html>. Citation from page 6 of transcript.
context. Letters might be a way of perpetuating an ethical “condition of writing,” in Hejinian’s terms.\textsuperscript{55} As a means of writing “in and of one’s own time,” they invite critical context into poetic practice.\textsuperscript{56}

“We are \textit{in} context,” writes Hejinian, “which is to say, in thought (in theory and with critique) and in history.”\textsuperscript{57} Letters embody Hejinian’s stated responsibilities toward historical acknowledgement. They perform work as \textit{submarginalia}, as Susan Howe writes — “threaded filaments of letters [that are] too disorderly to qualify as poetry,” resistant to “sensible partitioning” or editing.\textsuperscript{58} “Maybe margins shelter the inapprehensible Imaginary of poetry,” suggests Howe. (29) The inapprehensible in letters might be a current of responsiveness, a filament-like trace of encounters with one’s time, recoverable by genealogical readings. Or following Hejinian’s analysis, it might be a \textit{prepoetics}: a state of writing neither “logically [n]or chronologically prior to the formation of a poetics but... necessary and simultaneous to it.”\textsuperscript{59} In a letter to poet Charles Bernstein dated 3 August 1986, Hejinian asks:

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\text{T}he context for acknowledging and supporting and discussing each other’s almost day-to-day work is missing.... What are you working on now? What are the things that are compelling you to work on it — what issues, problems, worries, interests, insights, aspirations — and so forth.\textsuperscript{60}
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This is an invitation to historicise praxis; to make prepoetical sketches, or to stage in letters the ideas that are a critical response to, and therefore an ethics about, living. Hejinian’s words suggest an optimistic trust in letter writing as a mode of formalising specific scenes of community. In letters, \textit{context} and \textit{communality} become mutually aligned, partly due to genre-specific attributes of an epistolary form: while admitting the mess of dailiness, letters also literalise inter-subjective generosity.

Since letters space the time of quotidian experience, the prepoetic of epistolarity is grounded in the commonplace. “The commonplace is a totality,” Hejinian writes, “a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated December 15 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].
\item \textsuperscript{56} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 26 February 1982, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 14].
\item \textsuperscript{57} Hejinian, “Reason,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 346.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Howe, \textit{The Birth-mark} 28 and 8.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Hejinian, “Reason,” \textit{Language of Inquiry} 340.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Charles Bernstein dated 3 August 1986, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2(U), “Charles Bernstein”].
\end{itemize}
place, physical or mental, we (things that exist) hold in common with each other. It is the totality of our commonality; it is meaningful as that, as the place where we know each other and know we are together.\textsuperscript{61} This is a version of Hannah Arendt’s communitarian space of appearance “in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua [humans].\textsuperscript{62} During a recent discussion, Hejinian compared letters with journals and diaries — each genre of the commonplace — and observed that letters have replaced most forms of journal writing in her poetical career. She gave several reasons, including the contextualising nature of letters, and the other person who creates a complex precondition for writing:

At an early stage I lost virtually all interest in journals and diaries.... I got more and more interested in letters as a way of speaking out from a day, and the context of the day’s events, to a particular person. And the way that the person to whom it was addressed becomes a major factor, but not completely; that you find yourself forgetting whom it is you’re writing, and then having to remind yourself.... So it actually brings more day in, instead of seeing the day as a finished item which now needs only to be described and interpreted. In fact the act of writing a letter is an event of the day, so it’s an event about the event, and that really interests me.\textsuperscript{63}

In letters, a writing I is in continual dialogue with the semi-absent presence of an other. Slippages of subjectivity occur as the writer writes herself into (and out of) the day, and becomes transported by her own forays into description: “you find yourself forgetting whom it is you’re writing.” Put differently, letters exteriorise the provisional and contextually bound nature of subjectivities. “This sense of contingency is intrinsic to my experience of the self as a relationship rather than an essence,” writes Hejinian in “The Person and Description.” “It is here that the epistemological nightmare of the solipsistic self breaks down, and the essentialist yearning after truth and origin can be discarded in favour of the experience of experience. The person, in this view, is a mobile (and mobilized) reference point, or, to put it another way, subjectivity is not an entity but a dynamic.”\textsuperscript{64} Following earlier arguments, we might imagine letters as a strange and exemplary space of encounter and with-ness, where singularities are in perpetual dialogue with commonalities, transacted across a border of difference.

\textsuperscript{62} Arendt, Human Condition 176.
\textsuperscript{63} Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
\textsuperscript{64} Lyn Hejinian, “The Person and Description,” Language of Inquiry 202-203.
While letters possess “luscious” potential (in Hejinian’s words) for exploring intersubjective states that exceed the strictures of “the solipsistic self,” they also perform teleological disruptions.\textsuperscript{65} The end of a letter does not necessarily mean resolution, or a halt to phenomenological occurrences. A consummate serial form, letters perpetually anticipate another day’s events or a next letter. Hejinian’s missives are full of such excessive temporal markers: “Tonight Delys is reading with Ron at Intersection. Will report next letter (I hope I remember).”\textsuperscript{66} In other letters, incomplete and ghostly textual “drafts” are invoked and turned aside — missing texts or objects that find no subject:

Dearest Mom and Ken,

I’ve tried to write you 3 letters before this today -- or, I should say, 3 times I’ve tried to write you today. I suppose I feel remarkably stupid -- not a one seemed of any interest, and all 3 lie crumpled in my wastebasket (a very large one).\textsuperscript{67}

This letter becomes “an event about the event” of writing itself, as Hejinian puts it; an occurrence that constructs the day while emerging from it.\textsuperscript{68} In their contingent dailiness, letters resist commodity aesthetics that accompany more “public” textual forms. They are not written to finish, and remain largely unrecuperated by publishing economies.\textsuperscript{69} While Hejinian grants letters a “major place in my literary life,”\textsuperscript{70} she also embraces the submarginal characteristics that keep them beyond production logics: “[I]t isn’t a ‘product’ that I’m interested in having evolve from my work. Nor is it a commodity or emblem or set of image equivalents. It is itself -- that’s the sole basis for calling it real.”\textsuperscript{71} While performing a “diversion of daily life into critique,” Hejinian’s letters belong to an economy of superfluous gifting that circulates community resources while affirming particular loyalties.\textsuperscript{72} They include thanks,

\textsuperscript{65} Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.

\textsuperscript{66} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Cindy Altman dated 22 February 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 4].

\textsuperscript{67} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 18 May 1979, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 11].

\textsuperscript{68} Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.

\textsuperscript{69} This is complicated, obviously, where letters are “excerpted” or “selected” into published editions.

\textsuperscript{70} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 15 December 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].

\textsuperscript{71} Lyn Hejinian, “Women and Narrative: Laura Hinton Interviews Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino,” draft manuscript posted to the author by Lyn Hejinian, August 1998. Citation from pages 5-6 of manuscript.

poems, invitations to events, incomplete manuscripts, anecdotes, advice, shared critiques of writing by friends, fall-outs, editorial administrations, declarations of love.

A useful mode of thinking about links between archives, publication, and writing genres that engage “dailiness” is suggested by Michel de Certeau’s analysis of daily walking rituals in cities, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Walking ways are infinitesimal operations performed with innumerable difference by humans navigating urban lives and spaces. While a map might mark out a certain walking route in “a totalizing and reversible line,” it consigns to absence the process or detail itself — the “act of passing by.”⁷² Cartographical fixations “constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice.” (35) In letters, Lyn Hejinian preserves from absence accumulations of details that constitute her own act of “passing by” a life. Writing to me in August 1998, she noted:

One of the values of the epistolary is that it... very often represents the existence of remembrance.⁷⁴

Letters are the mess of bypass, a paratactical series of rememberings that exceed the limits of book ends, archives, and commodified publication chronologies. Susan Howe might call them “a sheaf of measure against what slips.”⁷⁵ Letters admit location and on-going process, the *everyday practice* of a poetics. It is significant that Hejinian is still generating material that might later augment her archive. A letter to Carolyn Andrews observes: “[The] concept of completeness is absolutely without substance in the world -- the world is perpetually incomplete.”⁷⁶

Letters create accretive rather than linear histories, by serialising local moments across a repeating form. Readers of Hejinian’s archive experience chronology in spatialised fragments, due to Hejinian’s pre-archival arrangement of letters into single-recipient groups. Moving between folders, one returns to the same events and ideas over and

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over, as particular days are "written-up" to different people. One event might be explained in four different ways with new emphasis each time. The experience is Steinian: everything repeats, but nothing is ever the same.\textsuperscript{77} A is not A, but an instance of becoming-other, or becoming-else. Such shifts in subjectivity give Hejinian "a notion of less fixity of personality than a normal description of personality would warrant."\textsuperscript{78} They also deflect her anxiety about the compulsive nature of her letter writing; her impulse to \textit{get everything down} or record traces of a life as it is happening. "It's a Heideggerean fascination, that the thing that makes a human human is his or her ability to record the appearing of the world," Hejinian comments. "I think that compulsion was intuitive or a peculiarity of personality, and I worried about it periodically, because it would seem to place 'me,' whatever 'me' means in this, at the centre of a world, as the inhabitant of a panopticon that looks around and sees all these things unfold."\textsuperscript{79} By rewriting the same event differently to different people, and allowing herself to be influenced anew by the subjective regard of each correspondent, Hejinian admits the changeable and collaborative nature of her "historicising" letter scripts.

Letters allow Hejinian to occupy boundaries between writing and reading subjectivities, while navigating dilemmas of publicity. As early as 1979 Hejinian acknowledged public dimensions of her private letters, referring to conversations she wanted to have outside of letters as "unwritten, off the record."\textsuperscript{80} In April 1983, Lyn Hejinian wrote to her mother:

\begin{quote}
I do think art is made with an audience in mind -- not an audience to market the art to but the other half of the dialogue -- in the way that you are the audience to whom this letter is directed. So an artist's sense of his or her audience very much conditions the connotations of the artwork -- structures it socially, somehow.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Imagined audiences beyond recipients are a complex precondition for Hejinian's letters. Although this extract positions Carolyn Andrews as the single other participant


\textsuperscript{78} Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.

\textsuperscript{79} Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.

\textsuperscript{80} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 7 August 1979, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 11].

\textsuperscript{81} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 1 April 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 15].

218
in a dialogue, reading relations and the “sense of... audience” are ambiguous rather than foreclosed. A 1983 letter from Hejinian to Andrews flags their correspondence as potentially publishable, “part of something rather than a bit of random flotsam.”

Hejinian re-stages a familial and private exchange — a copious mother-daughter letter trade — as a public or strangely circulated affair.

Lyn Hejinian’s epistolary relationship with her mother is fascinating in another important sense. Although Hejinian has sustained lengthy letter exchanges with many writers and artists, her correspondence with Carolyn Andrews has been remarkable in its prolific regularity and candid attention to particulars. While this is due largely to the intimacy and strength of the women’s relationship, it provokes interesting speculations about the inside-outside role of Andrews as an addressee and “audience” for Hejinian’s observations and chronicles; especially those concerning Hejinian’s immediate Language community. Writing to her mother, Hejinian felt free to observe community engagements in great and quotidian detail — often resulting in lengthy lists of participants at readings and discussions, or depictions of specific interactions between named writers, or subjective reflections on the significance of certain moments. Where letters to colleagues frequently involve discussions of textual forms, specific projects, and philosophical engagements, letters to Carolyn Andrews contain additional, everyday notes about how communities are being orchestrated and effected. Andrews becomes a kind of custodian or “neutral” witness for frame-by-frame records of community-in-practice, as Hejinian wants to remember it. Writing to Andrews, Hejinian is comparatively less reticent about historical minutiae, knowing that any observation will be read appreciatively. While allowing a certain liberation of self-construction, this means she can be extremely specific in her choices to record the “happenings” or key events of community, according to her own desires and interpretations.

George Minkoff approached Hejinian in 1986 and offered to facilitate a contract between Hejinian and the Mandeville Special Collections Library. A wry letter from Hejinian to her mother written that year reads: “But I shouldn’t gossip on paper, since

82 Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 1 April 1983 [74, 1, 15].
now any given piece of paper on which I write is potential Archive.” When Rae Armantrout wrote to Lyn Hejinian in June 1988 however, suggesting that “archive deal[s]... may change what gets said in letters,” Hejinian replied: “I don’t think auto-archivism has changed how I write letters or what I say in them at all, by the way. Somehow I find myself quite uninhibited when I write letters.” One reading of these extracts makes Hejinian a writer whose letters always have been a self-conscious navigation between private and public utterances. If nothing has changed with archiving, it is because Hejinian was already cannily negotiating a space between public and private terms, somewhere beyond an implied epistolary binary of self and receiving other. A letter to Carolyn Andrews reads: “The line between public and private for poets is always indistinct, so that inviting a few people over to talk about poetry can be construed as a public event.” By public event, Hejinian also means community occurrence: an utterance that might become publicly available in some form, while negotiating the boundaries of collective experience. A comment made by Hejinian in “Reason,” cited earlier, is relevant here: “We don’t — as writers or as persons — go beyond ‘all limitations’ and ‘all boundaries’ — we enter and inhabit them.”

Lyn Hejinian uses letters to construct, respond to and provoke multiple versions of community, and consequently, to move beyond individuating or privatised one-to-one relations. “I no longer feel that my first loyalties are to... my self. But rather to various communities -- my family, the poetry community, and, most thrillingly, to Poetry,” she wrote to Susan Howe in September 1985. Imagined groups of subsequent readers are a sometimes-desired inclusion. I return here to my previous description of Hejinian’s letters as “an active series of boundaries,” via two textual fragments — the first from Hejinian’s “La Faustienne,” printed initially in Poetics Journal, and the second from philosopher Henri Bergson’s text Matter and Memory:

84 Rae Armantrout, letter to Lyn Hejinian dating from June 1988, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1A(U), “Rae Armantrout”]; Lyn Hejinian, letter to Rae Armantrout dated 12 June 1988, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1A(U), “Rae Armantrout”].
87 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Howe dated 20 September 1985, S.Howe Papers, Mandeville [201, 1, 8].
The question of boundaries, of possible shifts or displacements along them, and the question of what is being bounded (or unbounded) are preeminent ones. If we are indeed in a liminal period, then the border is not out there somewhere at the edge of the frame but rather it is here, at zero degree, where the x and y coordinates meet. It is a site of encounter, a point of transition.88

My body is, then, in the aggregate of the material world, an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back movement, with, perhaps, this difference only, that my body appears to choose, within certain limits, the manner in which it shall restore what it receives.... This special image which persists in the midst of the others... is then the place of passage of the movements received and thrown back, a hyphen, a connecting link between the things which act upon me and the things upon which I act.89

I do not mean to imply an often-rehearsed nexus between a writer's letters and her corporeality. I want rather to borrow Bergson’s trope about passing, and make a play between the place of passage and Hejinian’s liminal period. In light of Hejinian’s situation within a writing community who, for over twenty years, have produced an assemblage of discrete but inter-referenced social and literary texts, posted letters gain literal weight as a place of passage, a moving “link between the things which act upon [Hejinian] and the things upon which [she] acts.”

Lyn Hejinian’s letters are a radical site for reimagining dualisms; not “the x and y coordinates” themselves, but the zero degree, the gap between that is often fetishised as static or impassable in binary modes of knowing.90 Hejinian rewrites that gap as a zone of maximal transit, a place of passage. Here again is Hejinian writing to Clark Coolidge: “I find the whole dilemma of the conflict between shared and unshared, or private and public, or individualist and communal, painfully difficult.”91 Via epistolary negotiation, Hejinian actively occupies dilemma or contradiction — the gap itself — as a productive writing strategy.92 Hejinian’s archival papers, and especially her numerous letters, provide fascinating examples of boundary navigation and fabrication

90 Probyn, Outside Belongings 43.
91 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated December 15 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].
— not the least being an ambiguous gap between "real" occurrences and "literary" constructions and narratives, as implied by Hejinian in a recent letter:

As for Arkadii’s letters to me (and my translations and/or mistranslations of them), I think they must be in the storage unit I rent for storing the boxes and boxes of paper that keep accumulating. I looked for them here at home and didn’t find them and have a vague recollection of piling them into a box marked HOLD, meaning that it isn’t to go to the San Diego archives yet. As for the meaning of my holding them back — I guess it is because I treasure them more than most of my papers, perhaps because they constitute a paper life — a real life, but one that took place on paper. 93

Collaborations, or the quality of being “we”

Collaborations enjoy a rich history that often remains unacknowledged due to the central status of single-author productions within literary narratives. Fictive conditions of authorial “isolation” have been buttressed by proprietorial and taxonomic rituals of Western post-enlightenment thinking, described by historian and philosopher Michel Foucault as “the procedures that constitute the individual as effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge.” 94 While predating twentieth-century poetic experimentalism by many centuries, collaborative projects have been a particular and self-conscious feature of American modernist and post-modernist poetic innovation. 95 They have significant precedence as the most illegitimate of texts, as Lyn Hejinian noted in conversation:

The lack of respect or credence, validity, that’s allotted to collaboration I think is very problematic. Only translation is disdained more, or given less respect. But people tend not to like a collaboration because it’s not “really” by either person, it becomes debased. It’s very odd. So it interests me to challenge that, as a kind of political thing. 96

93 Lyn Hejinian, letter to the author dated 11 November 2001; my emphasis. Hejinian is referring to Leningrad poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko.
96 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
Collaborations are hybrids — neither this nor that — falling outside the domestic space of an ancestral tree that is predicated upon sole authorship and possessive individualism. While engaging their authors in different perceptual and ontological dilemmas, collaborative writings share many of the intersubjective and communitarian properties of letter exchanges. Like letters, collaborations are a literal place of passage between writing subjects and locations. They emerge from and fortify both community and coterie arrangements, while literalising relations of neighbourhood under the sign of friendship.

By positioning authors as readers who write through each other’s texts, and who traffic in one another’s forms and vocabularies, collaborations exteriorise a literal co-responsivity in which social and desiring relations are paramount. While discussing Sight, a dual-authored collaboration with Leslie Scalapino that investigates perceptual processes in context of “the act of friendship and apprehension,” Lyn Hejinian observed:

In collaborating, we surrender power, forget our autonomous selfhood, and are free from narcissistic inhibitions. We are we — which is a great relief when one is so frequently an “I” and is bullied or supervised as such.... The “we” of collaborations is not the “we” of a gang; instead it can be the we of supervision, the we of surprise.97

Carey Kaplan and Ellen Rose describe an analogous ideal of subjectivity and sexually politicised subversion when explaining their own practice of (academic) collaboration: “We’ emerges from the space between our individual, different voices, its meaning elusive, dispersed, always deferred, never unitary.”98 By these readings, collaborations do not inscribe an event of “community” that is tangible or definitive. They rather explore a being-in-common that inhabits a space of active strangeness or alterity, where the inter-face with another (or others) helps to adjust subjective perceptions of individuation and difference.

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Lyn Hejinian’s writing career is notably full of collaborative ventures. During the late 1970s Hejinian worked with Eileen Corder and Nick Robinson’s Poets’ Theater group, participating in productions such as Louis and Celia Zukofsky’s A-24 and Language writer Carla Harryman’s play Third Man. Hejinian and Harryman have been collaborating for over a decade on The Wide Road, an erotic pun upon Japanese poet Matsuo Basho’s The Narrow Road to the Deep North. Begun in 1992, Hejinian and Scalapino’s book-length Sight appeared in 1999. Since 1983, Hejinian and Leningrad poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko have collaborated to produce reciprocal translations of each other’s writing, and have shared in writing a film and a theatre piece. In 1989 Hejinian worked with Californian poets Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten and Michael Davidson to write Leningrad, a four-way prose collaboration emerging from their participation in a radical conference on poetics, the first to be held in Russia since the 1920s.

Hejinian has co-written poetry with Tom Mandel, Bob Perelman, Jack Collom, Ray Di Palma, Joan Retallack, and Travis Ortiz. The Cell, an ostensibly single-author work, began as a collaborative experiment with Kit Robinson, as my next chapter shows. Poetics Journal, Tuumba Press and Atelos Press — a new press co-edited by Hejinian and Ortiz — are all collaborative ventures; as are numerous published letter exchanges that Hejinian has undertaken with other writers. Hejinian has joined forces with experimental musician John Zorn, writing poetry that Zorn has transformed into sound works. More recently, Hejinian has embarked upon a series of stunning collaborations with New York painter Emilie Clark, in which Hejinian’s texts are

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99 Tape #260, Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives, San Francisco State University. Chapter two gives further discussion of the Poets Theater group.
101 These texts and undertakings are detailed in chapter six.
layered in fragments into Clark’s illustrations. Although many of these projects took root within Language scenes, as many — especially in recent years — are independent of group affiliations, and are a product of Hejinian’s specific dedication to intersubjective poetical practices, and to an ethical poetic that views “reality” as an experience of ongoing encounter.

Collaborative work certainly features in the aesthetic and formal experiments of many Language poets; and Lyn Hejinian’s first collaborations were enabled, in a sense, by participation in the San Franciscan Language community. Before addressing Hejinian’s specific use of collaborative methods, and the ontological states she explores while collaborating, I want to flag several Language contexts. The style of intertextuality promulgated within Language writing communities, and especially by Hejinian, signals a challenge to literary histories ordered around hierarchies of authorial inheritance. Self-situation along a family line — “I inherit this legacy” — defers to an openly-acknowledged yet closely-bordered “making use” of one another’s materials and names. Rather than being marshalled into sequence, textual moments accumulate and resonate in paratactical series that confound chronology. Genealogies about texts rather than authors emerge, worked across collaborative cross-referencing.

In context of a networked writing scene whose more polemical (and utopian) projections for poetry have extended well beyond a limited circle of involved participants, collaborative ventures also play a different role. Collaborations formally inhabit a dilemma of relations between reader and writer, by staging an exemplary moment of textual theory in practice. The writing responds to its own anticipation of future readings, while collecting immediate (and potentially narcissistic) returns as security against insularity: the dilemma of theoretically infinite textualities being delivered into a materially finite or community-bound space. Although Hejinian extols the relinquishing of “autonomous selfhood” and “surrender [of] power” that occur in

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collaborative projects, I think that collaborations exist in more complicated terrain: where risky (and potentially glamourised) departures from subjective stability are balanced against a desire for "authorisation" by an other, who is positioned as the ideal reader.

During the early Language years, critical writings that rejected dualities between theory/practice and reader/writer gave strong support to calls for a poetics that acknowledged both reader participation in reconceptualising community, and readers’ active production of textual meanings. In an *Open Letter* symposium on “The Politics of the Referent” printed in 1977, Bruce Andrews (co-editor of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine) wrote:

Language work resembles a creation of a community and of a world-view by a once-divided-but-now-fused Reader and Writer.... Not duality. Readers do the rewriting. Sometimes they do enough to give a social force to the absences they are first given.\(^\text{109}\)

Andrews’s ideas are echoed in “The Rejection of Closure” when Hejinian writes: “The ‘open text,’ by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies.... Reader and writer engage in a collaboration from which ideas and meanings are permitted to evolve. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive.”\(^\text{110}\) While Andrews lectures about a new “world-view” in which reader and writer become non-differentially “fused,” Hejinian prefers the potentially anti-authoritative and differentiating trope of “collaboration.”

Juliana Spahr recently has argued a need to distinguish between specific textual strategies and their different effects, charging critics to complicate “the model of the reader as a producer of the work” and, by implication, neat reader/writer dualities and limited categorisation of texts as open or closed.\(^\text{111}\) Readers’ responses cannot be

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glossed under “sameness,” just as apparently “open” texts cannot be grouped uncritically as making equal room for reader constructions. Spahr demands an evaluation of how texts are differently generative, according to “which [forms] activate the reader (and how they do so) and which ones don’t.” (6). In Spahr’s words, “some works present more egalitarian textualities than others.” (3)

During early years of Language writing, collaborations perhaps formalised an anxious response to the participatory limits of Andrews’s “world-view,” by enacting both the theory and practice of “readers who do the re-writing” (above). Community experiments in open textualities could be put to immediate test in collaborations, and thus legitimised as working models of non-authoritative forms. While evincing Language poet Ron Silliman’s vision of “literature as communitas,” collaborations such as Legend — a five-way project published in 1980 by Silliman, Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray Di Palma and Steve McCaffery  — attempted to explore a poesis, the embodied production of poetry by situated subjects; in this case, all male.112 A number of texts were posted amongst participants and augmented in stages, with contributions remaining individually authored. Silliman reads Legend in primarily formal terms:

Collaboration exteriorises the multiplicity of intentions that always already lurk behind every articulation. Depending on the procedures agreed upon by the poets, the seams of the final product will be more or less visible.113

A poem that “makes visible the seams” points to its own constructedness; or as Bernstein writes, “reveals the conditions of its occurrence,” including cultural, sexual and historical matrices shaping the subjectivities of its producer/s.114 Following the Russian Futurists’ call to “lay bare the device,” many Language writers have emphasised ideological implications of certain formal choices, often by foregrounding

procedural aspects of their poetry to frame each poem as a made thing. Issues of textual control — over meanings, ideas, print technologies, modes of production — are not absent from a collaborative text. Rather, as Silliman suggests, “control becomes an explicit dimension and dynamic” available to readers. Orders of control become seams that show.

In the case of Legend, where five male writers navigated but mostly avoided the difficult issue of social and textual exchanges between men, desiring relations became an obvious “order of control” — though perhaps not acknowledged explicitly at the time. Carla Harryman has observed about Legend:

You could easily argue that Legend was motivated by collaborations that preceded it, and that it was almost a reaction to the more open-ended interrogations of the period — as if it wanted to foreclose on the possibility of on-going collaborative experimentalism by constructing [a work] so definitively masculinist. Legend was one of the least interesting manifestations of collaboration vis-à-vis its process to me: that’s because of its monolithic (homosocial) affect, i.e., its intention seemed to create a monolithic edifice.

Barrett Watten describes Legend as “a wild and transgressive critique of the homosocial basis of culture, from Plato to Harold Bloom.” He also acknowledges the “monolithic” effects of its “exclusively masculine” intertextuality — a style and syntax promoting the “homosocial wish” of “an imaginary community of male bonding.” Wayne Koestenbaum theorises homosexual and homosocial collaborative projects in Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration: “Bluntly stated, men who collaborate engage in a metaphorical sexual intercourse, and... the text they balance between them is alternately the child of their sexual union, and a shared woman.” Ron Silliman’s deliberately sexualised contributions to Legend perhaps support such rhetorical readings: “Phallus is the first division (I want a poem as real as a lemon) & is the origin of instinct of which (this) writing is an acting out or

objectification.... That coming together of which orgasm is the figure is the full word.” Kostenbaum’s thesis contradicts Carla Harryman’s proposals about “foreclos[ure] on the possibility of on-going” textual/sexual production, by positioning the text itself as the perverse offspring of a homosocial tryst; generative in the sense of meanings made by future readers.

I find Koestenbaum’s “blunt” summary of male-male collaborations reductive, in the sense of biologically fixed roles that it assigns to male subjectivities. It is, however, highly provocative in the kinds of polymorphic states and experiences that it asks us to imagine. These are useful when we turn to Lyn Hejinian’s collaborative ventures; works occurring between women, and between women and men, that explore a differentiated range of sociological and psychosexual constructions and experiences of sex and gender. For the remainder of this discussion, I will focus upon Hejinian’s deployment of collaboration as an explorative medium of intersubjectivity and desire. My primary interests lie with local effects produced within collaborations themselves, at the site and scene of mutual facing. Collaborative works demand that participant authors become guest and host to one another, by engaging them in appropriation; a Heideggerean term that Hejinian interprets as a state of reciprocal affirmation and care — “to grant, to acknowledge, to own up, to love, to thank, to make a hospitality bond with.”

Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino began Sight in December 1992. They structured their lengthy serial poem around increments of “two” and ideas of “stereoptical perceiving,” embodied in the dual-authored nature of the experiment. Hejinian writes: “We agreed... that we would write about things seen, and that each ‘poem’ or ‘installment’ or ‘response’ or ‘section’ would consist of twos — two paragraphs, a paragraph and a stanza, two stanzas, two words, two pages, two sentences, two ‘takes’ (to use film vocabulary), or any other conceivable manifestation of bi-ocular (binocular) and stereoptical perceiving.” The “use of twos” allowed a border play between dualities of all kinds, including perceptual and descriptive links between subjects and objects, as Hejinian observes: “we are trying to peer at both thing and

122 Hejinian, “Some Notes toward a Poetics,” 238.
word, with the double point of view implicit in that, with perceptions simultaneously immediate and mediate.”124 Within multiply authored works, the embedded or “mediate” (contextualised) nature of a writing subject is under continual scrutiny; both sighted and sited. Collaborative texts become an engagement of context, a spacing of “double” or common time that happens in between. “Are they in the middle / or on the border?” asks Hejinian in *Sight*.125

A collaborator must move within a grid of multiple contexts; the most obvious provided by the other writer, or writers, with whom literal relations of intersubjective facing and neighbourhood are shared. Textual *knowing*, a form of phenomenological perceiving, correspondingly becomes a function of movement within a series of localised borders. Hejinian and Scalapino emphasise this mobility:

*LH*: Working with Leslie, I find that I am not writing as myself, nor in imitation of Leslie, but in another way, responsive to our project and independent of the constraints of particular previous familiar self-states. In a strange way, being speculative together has become spectral.

*LS*: Yes, because we’re “required” to be moved off of where we are at any one time, even swept into a chameleon stream where trying to hold to one’s own nature is also positive.126

“Moving off” literalises a double shift — within the grid constituting a person’s subjectivity, and into a spectral between space; a space out of subjective “control,” “neither myself nor Leslie.” Obvious erotics of collaboration are suggested here, charged by repeated moment-to-moment displacements, consonant with Scalapino’s multiple “moving off.” Hejinian describes such shifts as “a turmoil involving identity,” where desire comes from “a sense of warped priorities” and “being unbounded” rather than any specular or bifurcated mode of subject/object relations.127

At one point in *The Cell*, Hejinian provocatively characterises this desiring sphere as “the soft world,” writing:

125 Hejinian in Hejinian and Scalapino, *Sight* 102.
The soft world is between
rocks
The person of which I
speak is between clocks.128

Between clocks — places, temporalities, letters, corporealties — opens a third, or fourth or fifth space; a zone of alterities that we might compare to Jean-Luc Nancy’s “being singular plural,” or his togetherness in otherness.129 “The like is not the same,” writes Nancy in The Inoperative Community. “I do not rediscover myself, nor do I recognize myself in the other: I experience the other’s alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that ‘in me’ sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits it. Community is that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike: that is to say, in the sharing of identity. The passion that is unleashed is nothing other than the passion of and for community.”130 Hejinian again: “Working with Leslie, I find that I am not writing as myself, nor in imitation of Leslie, but in another way, responsive to our project and independent of the constraints of particular previous familiar self-states.”131

Volatile erotics of collaboration are the premise for one of Lyn Hejinian’s lengthiest collaborative ventures, as yet unpublished. Since the late 1980s, Hejinian and fellow Language writer Carla Harryman have been writing The Wide Road, a “picaresque novel about contemporary sex life.”132 Sensuous apprehension of being-toward-another — “a passion of and for community,” as Nancy puts it — is central to The Wide Road; and Hejinian and Harryman develop this idea by exploring the sex of co-ontological writing states. Though dual authored, The Wide Road carries no marks of individuated authorship. Its principal narrative voice is a “we” whose desiring identity might be understood best in terms of polysexuality, rather than hetero- or homosexual desiring economies. “Signature” slips between the lines of the writing itself. In contrast, Sight includes authorial initials beside each increment of the work, marking a different scale of authorial procedure and dialogue. Hejinian and Harryman chose a

131 Hejinian, “Women and Narrative” 10; my emphasis.

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combined “voice” for *The Wide Road* to maximise states of encounter between subjectivities and sexualities:

We found ourselves agreeing that, because language is active, anything in language could be erotically charged.... The casual shifting between poetry and prose provided us with rhythm for our erotic exploits, and the geographical fluidity of the picaresque genre provided us with necessary narrative mobility.

The writers double their formal engagement with polymorphic play; firstly by collaborating, and secondly, by choosing a genre (“picaresque”) and parent text — Basho’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* — that permit a wandering, layered mix of “set-piece” prose descriptions and inset fragments of poetry.133

Harryman and Hejinian signal their deployment of “we” as a subversive engagement with gendered couplings, in terms that recall Lytle Shaw’s description of Frank O’Hara’s *coterie* poetic as “a meta-communal” allegory based upon “appropriated, superimposed, chosen and seemingly ‘arbitrary’ structures of relationship instead of the would-be natural, symbolic relationships built out of the family.”134 The women observe:

We were “we,” meanwhile, for several reasons. First, it allowed us to have more than the usual number of body parts. Second, we were determined to adventure across normal boundaries, or to blur them in the very least. The identification as “we” allowed us easily to include each other in the work all the time and to identify with each other continuously. This provided us with unusual liberty and power. Often, if not always, the quality of being “we” has been more important than gender. The body with its knowledge, as distinct from knowledge of the body (language), is gendered in its thought, though the body can be an instrument for celebrating the power of being gendered.... And writing as “we,” we are able to embody/sex even more than we might if we were only traveling through a land of singularly defined difference.135

Harryman and Hejinian write the “multiple” within the strange coupling of their sexually libertine we. Difference becomes differences; a series of encounters, rather

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133 See for example Basho, *The Narrow Road* 51-64.
135 Hejinian, “Comment on the Wide Road,” 83.
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\(^{133}\) See for example Basho, *The Narrow Road* 51-64.


\(^{135}\) Hejinian, "Comment on the Wide Road," 83.
than a singular state over-determined by binary dyads such as male/female, hetero/homosexual, or natural/cultural.

"Knowledge" of all kinds is scrutinised in this collaborative scheme; especially its place-specific qualities and corporeal manifestations. "Adventur[ing] across normal boundaries" includes, for Hejinian and Harryman, an exploration of language as place — sexualised, acculturating, and pleasurably mobile. The results are sharp, phenomenologically attuned, and fantastically provocative:

Suddenly, an idea grew on us. Our limbs spread. Our sexual orifices filled with birds of paradise and sprays of daisies.... We are in a transitional zone here, unpossessed and unpossessing.

There are certain places — inhabited sites, populated locations — that can be mobilized, transported in lives, and reestablished — Italy to Little Italy, Russia to Little Russia — but empty places remain where they are. Wyoming, for example, can't be moved. And it's a place where it's hard to garden.

But we arouse flowers....

We could see this would lead to cycles.

We know cycles. We also know ripples and topples. Each in its place, we say.

We have romantic and real desires. These are logical eroticisms.

We can merge more than we already have.136

As an exercise in communitarian thinking — an exploration of "the quality of being 'we,'" as Hejinian and Harryman write — The Wide Road refigures being-with and being-in-common in timely and stimulating terms of gender and desire, while replacing bodies, and especially sexualised bodies, into epistemic and ontological discourses.

This is useful work. We might return here to Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, in which Emmanuel Levinas comprehends human "being" as "being-for-the other"; a communitarian state of phenomenal facing that is always-already, or intrinsic to worldly relations. "Saying" is an expression of responsibility toward one's neighbours, argues Levinas:

Signifyingness, the-one-for-the-other, exposedness of self to another, it is immediacy in caresses and in the contact of saying. It is the immediacy of a skin and a face, a skin which is always a modification of a face, a face that is weighed down with a skin.\textsuperscript{137}

Despite the overt sensuality of his language, Levinas later writes: “This is a non-erotic openness.” (177) Collaborative states of knowing explored by Hejinian and Harryman extend Levinas’s notion of being “one-for-the-other.” They suggest necessary acknowledgements of, and points of embarkation into, complex terrains of gendered and desiring relations, often elided in Levinas’s text or relegated to “normalised” binaries of gender.\textsuperscript{138} The Wide Road enacts a sexual politics of community, while asking readers to reevaluate skin meanings — “the body with its knowledge, as distinct from knowledge of the body,” as Hejinian and Harryman write.\textsuperscript{139} Perhaps The Wide Road expresses it best: “We are in a transitional zone here, unpossessed and unpossessing.”

Lyn Hejinian’s studies and embodiments of communitarian ethics and philosophies are anchored in material experiences, while ranging their borders in dispute of “singularly defined difference” and identification. For Hejinian, collaborations and letter exchanges respond to, and help choreograph, the literary and Language communities that bring ongoing friendship and intellectual camaraderie. They also manifest Hejinian’s independent desires, proclivities, and very particular interpretations of commonality. Hejinian suggests that readers recurrently “topple” the boundaries of individuation and collective practice, in favour of something transversally between — multiply differentiated “spaces in which a self discovers itself as an object among others”.\textsuperscript{140}

There may be no animal boundary — just the stream and the pleasure that lies in it
Flowing forms outside of us
Blazing energetic span\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{137} Levinas, Otherwise than Being 85.
\textsuperscript{138} My second chapter critiques Levinas’s use of “motherhood” as an authentic, “non-erotic” model of suffering. Feminist readings and use of Levinas can be found in Cathryn Vasselcu, Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Trinaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
\textsuperscript{139} Hejinian and Harryman, “From ‘The Wide Road,’” 90.
\textsuperscript{141} Hejinian, in Hejinian and Scalapino, Sight 9.
The Cell in Shifts, The Cell in Drifts

Chapter Five

In October I began a long work or work-series that has finally provided me with a form that accommodates the method I have always been proposing. I'm not sure the new poems read much different from my other writing, but the moment of composition feels different -- feels great, to tell you the truth.

— Lyn Hejinian to Charles Bernstein, December 1986

Only fragments are accurate. Break them up and charge them to combination.

— Lyn Hejinian, My Life

Emerging from sentences: looking for The Cell

Chapters five and six close this thesis in tandem, and mark something of a break from previous chapters. They offer readings of two lengthy serial works by Lyn Hejinian: The Cell (1992) and Oxota: A Short Russian Novel (1991). Published within months of one another, these books were completed during a remarkably productive time of Hejinian’s writing career, when the “community-building” phase of Language poetry began to disperse into a range of independent yet connected inquiries — intrinsically related to, but differently articulated from, the Language projects of the 1970s to mid-1980s. Written between October 1986 and January 1989, The Cell comprises 150 separately dated poems of similar length and form, arranged in chronological succession. Oxota: A Short Russian Novel was written over the period December 1989 to February 1991, and comprises 270 poems in a 14-line stanza pattern that Hejinian sources to the iconic verse novel Evgeny Onegin by Alexander Pushkin.

The Cell and Oxota are, in a sense, reciprocally addressed works. The Cell is a reaction to and within Hejinian’s immediate Language writing community: a point of departure, and a newly-confident and fascinating response to some of the principal

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4 See for example Hejinian, The Cell 7 and 217.
structural and conceptual “tools” of Language practice. It effects a defamiliarisation of familiar forms, territories and discourses. *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* meanwhile marks a practical “turning out” of Hejinian’s local writing situation toward a different, stranger experience. In the face of literal otherness and phenomenological althery, and under the rubric of *xenia* (as discussed in chapter two), *Oxota* effects a skewed familiarisation of strange encounters, languages and locales. Lyn Hejinian has characterised her close relationship with Russia as “a second life” relevant to her local poetry scene but utterly separate from it. In 1983 she made her first visit to Leningrad and befriended avant-garde poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko. In the decade subsequent to their initial encounter, the two poets undertook various collaborative projects, including lengthy translations that impacted significantly upon their independent working processes.

Lyn Hejinian understands *poetics* and *poetry* to be “mutually constitutive and reciprocally transformative” textual practices. I imagine my readings of *The Cell* and *Oxota* to exist similarly; in reciprocally constituting dialogue with the poetics of encounters, phenomenal acknowledgement, and “guest/host” relations that earlier chapters have attributed to Hejinian’s writings. My concluding chapters are not merely *ex post facto* case studies that exemplify pre-determining or structurally “previous” theories about community and *being-with*. “Theory asks what practice does and in asking, it sees the connections that practice makes,” writes Hejinian. “Neither in practice nor in theory is thinking separate or separating; it is precisely the opposite, a mode of nonseparation, of conjunction.” *The Cell* and *Oxota* might be imagined as the practice of Hejinian’s theoretically attuned, philosophical thinking; necessarily “prior” to a poetics, but reciprocally implicated and at least partially subsequent.

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8 Chapter six offers detailed discussion of these texts and relationships. See for example Arkadii Dragomoschenko, *Description*, trans. Lyn Hejinian and Elena Balashova (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1990); and Arkadii Dragomoschenko, *Xenia*, trans. Lyn Hejinian and Elena Balashova (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994).


Hejinian observes: “I think The Cell was maybe, for the moment, the last of my attempts at writing a poetry in which consciousness of consciousness was the thing that was at stake.”12 The Cell explores links between perceptual processes and descriptive language; and thus, ways in which a perceiving subject might respond to, and constitute in language, a world of phenomenal occurrences. Attention in the poem is focused upon cognitive and re-cognitive methods. Objects and events are placed in relation to their “encounter” with a perceiver’s apprehension, and vice versa: “She lowered her head and / saw the grass, which had / been almost under her feet / growing far below her — clearly / reflected in it / i.e., introspected on subjective grounds, / not just by being near.” (144) The relation is complicated by description: “Part object, part subject — these / are the intimates of the / description.” (174) Hejinian’s reference to “introspection” comes from her readings of early twentieth-century psychologist and philosopher William James, whose scientific, observational techniques were given descriptive force in Gertrude Stein’s innovative writings.13 This chapter explores The Cell’s evolution of a Steinian poetics of perceptual description, alongside Hejinian’s singular use of key formal “tenets” of Language writing. I also consider the structural and philosophical significance of The Cell’s collaborative beginnings, and argue that the poem is a work of singular plurality.14

Before discussing The Cell, I want to turn and give a concise appraisal of key issues from previous chapters — a story performed on a tangent — to help establish reading contexts and writing conditions for both The Cell and Oxota.15 At the outset of my thesis I read the long poem Happily (2000) as an exemplary instance of the poetics of worldly affirmation refined by Lyn Hejinian during the 1990s.16 Happily is a work of context that preserves the particularity of discrete phenomenological happenings, while linking them together and observing transitions between. Chapter one drew parallels between Hejinian’s desire to understand “the most complex of experiential situations, that of being ‘in context,’” and philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s descriptions

14 See for example Nancy, Being Singular Plural 37.
15 “A story performed on a tangent” cited from Lyn Hejinian, A Border Comedy (New York: Granary, 2001) 69.
of community as a "being in common," or a common spacing of time that happens between subjects, objects, occurrences and conditions.\textsuperscript{17} I proposed the phrase \textit{commonality in difference} as a description for Hejinian’s guest/host poetic, likening this to Nancy’s idea of \textit{being singular plural}, and considered the ethical implications of a poetic of encounters in which different things enter, or are placed into, mutually transformative contextual relations with one another.

Citing philosopher Hannah Arendt, Lyn Hejinian interprets poetry as a “space of appearance,” a common place in which people become visible to one another in and as a function of their differences.\textsuperscript{18} “Differences then are essential,” writes Hejinian in “Continuing Against Closure.” “They are what we all have in common, namely that we never have everything in common with anyone else.”\textsuperscript{19} Hejinian’s recent, close attentions to twentieth-century philosophies of community are related intrinsically to her experiences within the San Franciscan Language writing community. Neither event, however, has prior status, and Hejinian has not simply styled a poetic of commonalities and contexts to reflect this single aspect of her material and experiential situation. I am arguing that “commonality” might be imagined as a \textit{prepoetic} in Hejinian’s work, a condition neither “logically [n]or chronologically prior to the formulation of a poetics” but “necessary and simultaneous to it” — the writing’s ontological and epistemic “reason.”\textsuperscript{20} My thesis so far has contemplated different manifestations of a \textit{prepoetics of community} within Hejinian’s poetry and poetical essays: encounters, ethical poetics, guest/host relations, neighbourhood, common sense, and friendship.

My opening chapters also focused upon worldliness and an “actual present” as core tropes for Lyn Hejinian’s poetic. Descriptive sincerity toward a kind of \textit{realism} is instrumental to Hejinian’s idea of the philosophical possibilities for poetry. “In my opinion there is nothing else to think about. The term ‘reality’ embraces everything;


reality is all there is," Hejinian observes in a somewhat Steinian fashion.21 These fields of inquiry are central to The Cell — a work that tries to develop "a theory of a language of the description of knowledge," as Hejinian puts it.22 "The ontological and epistemological problem of our knowledge of experience is, to my mind, inseparable from the problem of description," she writes in "Strangeness" (1988), an essay contemporaneous to The Cell. "An evolving poetics of description is simultaneously and synonymously a poetics of scrutiny. It is description that raises scrutiny to consciousness."23 I have suggested the term epistemolexical to signify something of this constant vacillation between thinking and language; between "knowing" and the inscriptions we make in order to "know." Epistemolexical poetry "takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience," to cite Hejinian. It is poetry "in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of perceiving."24

By 1983, the year that she first travelled to Russia, Lyn Hejinian was looking for a compositional technique that would support the weight and depth of sustained inquiries into links between perception and description. During the most intense phase of Language activity in the San Franciscan Bay Area, Hejinian composed numerous discrete works — mostly employing serial forms, and usually 20 to 40 pages long; with the exception of My Life (1980), a book-length prose poem that makes exploratory disruptions of the terms of "autobiographical" writing,25 A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking (1976), A Mask of Motion (1977), Writing Is an Aid to Memory (1978) and Gesualdo (1978) were all published as short chapbooks.26 Other poems of the period — including "Ground," "The Flying Statue," "Punctual," and "The Green" — were excerpted in journals, and remained unpublished in full until Hejinian's first "collected" edition, The Cold of Poetry (1994).27 During the years 1980 to 1983, Hejinian was occupied intensively with community-affiliated publishing ventures such as Tuumba Press and Poetics Journal. She remarks frequently in letters

26 Lyn Hejinian, A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking (Willits, California: Tuumba, 1976); Lyn Hejinian, A Mask of Motion (Providence: Burning Deck, 1977); Lyn Hejinian, Writing Is an Aid to Memory (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: The Figures, 1978); Lyn Hejinian, Gesualdo (Berkeley, California: Tuumba, 1978).
of the period that she cannot find enough time for her own poetry projects, many of them in an undeveloped and fragmentary state. "The conflict between 'individualism' and social responsibility continues to interest and disturb me," she wrote to Ron Silliman in 1982.28 Several years later she admitted to Clark Coolidge:

I feel torn between several standards of integrity. One, toward which my heart yearns, is an integrity of work, maintained within isolation (never answer the phone, stop going to readings, move to an island). Another, toward which my sense of intellectual responsibility responds, is an integrity of poetics (but that isn't the right word), maintained with persistent and insistent defining of the grounds and context (i.e. political and social involvement).29

These narratives illuminate a key methodological question. Prior to The Cell, Lyn Hejinian had been writing relatively compact poems, employing a disciplined range of formal and conceptual motifs. The Cell by comparison is a sustained work of over 200 pages. Several months after completing it, Hejinian began Oxota: A Short Russian Novel and once again wrote a book of almost 300 pages. What happened during the years 1983 to 1986 to effect such notable evolutions of prior compositional methods, resulting in fewer shorter pieces in favour of more developed, book-length works? Although Hejinian intensely resists readings that prioritise "the book" over more inclusive contexts, such shifts in form and publication impetus are noteworthy.

I have alluded to one changing circumstance: the dispersal of formative, concentrated, San Franciscan Language "scenes" into a series of discrete yet interrelated poetry projects (and eventual books), many of which offered differently nuanced interpretations of early Language experiments and philosophies. Hejinian's story must be read also in terms of her own formal preoccupations. By the end of 1982 Hejinian had encountered a certain compositional "stuckness," and had begun to redraft compulsively to achieve balance and reciprocity between conceptual parameters and superimposed, structural devices that propelled her work. In February 1983 Hejinian wrote to Susan Howe:

Meanwhile, I have been, since November [1982], working on a long poem (happily I've written a few shorter poems during that time also, or

28 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Ron Silliman dated 13 April 1982, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 7.6].
otherwise I’d be ashamed to tell you that the “long poem” is only 3 pages long, despite having spent almost three months on it now). I am writing it in two forms -- one is rather like Apollinaire’s “Zone” -- each line is a sentence (unpunctuated -- or, rather, no periods).... I embarked on this parallel text business because I couldn’t decide what form to use -- and perhaps I will use neither of these.30

The long poem was “The Guard,” which in 1984 became the last Tuumba chapbook in Hejinian’s first series of fifty.31 At the time of writing to Susan Howe, Hejinian had made at least twelve different drafts of these “parallel” versions of “The Guard.” She had chosen the arbitrary and comfortably expansive task of writing 999 single sentences (later abandoned), and was seeking a way of formally integrating them.32

This proved difficult. Hejinian redrafted dozens of times — first adding full stops to marshal sentences into stanzas, and then removing them to allow a “blank” style that minimised “run-on” between lines and brought isolated sentences to the foreground.

One version began:

Can one take captives by writing
“Humans repeat themselves”
The full moon falls on the first
I “whatever interrupts”
Weather and air drawn to us
The open mouths of people are yellow and red -- of pupils
Cannot be taught and therefore cannot be
As a political leading article would offer to its illustrator 33

Another draft reorders the same material into six-line stanzas, and changes the punctuation:

The full moon falls on the first. I
“whatever interrupts.” Weather and air
are drawn to us. The open mouths of people
are yellow and red -- of pupils.
Cannot be taught and therefore cannot be.
As a political leading article would offer

30 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Susan Howe dated 4 February 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 4, 18].
to its illustrator. Can one take captives
by writing. “Humans repeat themselves.”

Another formal experiment was discarded quite quickly:

Can one take captives by writing
“Humans repeat themselves”
The full moon falls on the first
I “whatever interrupts”
Weather and air drawn to us
The open mouths of people are yellow & red -- of pupils
Cannot be taught and therefore cannot be
As a political leading article would offer to its
illustrator

Hejinian’s painstaking drafts demonstrate a method that has remained, for twenty
years, a foundation for her technique: assembling collections of discrete “sentences”
and rearranging them to observe transformations and effects that occur between
syntactical units. By April 1983 “The Guard” was trapped in a structural dilemma,
though the poem’s raw material remained largely unchanged. Early stanzas are
scattered with self-reflexive gestures that stress the drafting process: “Humans repeat
themselves” / “Whatever interrupts” / “Introspection, cancellation, the concentric
session” / “Repetition in copying seems to mean to say ‘I, too.’”

Within her dozens of “Guard” drafts, Hejinian’s undecided relationship to full stops is
significant. In the early 1980s Language writer Ron Silliman coined the term “the new
sentence” to identify a kind of prose-oriented poem that was occurring, by his
estimation, “more or less exclusively in the prose of the Bay Area,” and that had as its
forerunner syntactical experiments by nineteenth-century French symbolists and
twentieth-century innovations by Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. In an
essay called “The New Sentence,” Silliman argued that new sentences embodied a
dialectics between “interior poetic structure” and “interior ordinary grammatical
structure,” or poetic and everyday language. (90) Silliman identified formative

36 Discussion to follow. In her most recent works, Happily (2000) and Slowly (2002), Hejinian is still
trying to “develop and amplify sentences.” See Lyn Hejinian, Preface to “Happily,” Language of
Inquiry 385; also Lyn Hejinian, Slowly (Berkeley, California, California: Tuumba, 2002).
Language poems by Bob Perelman (a.k.a.), Carla Harryman (For She), and Barrett Watten (Decay) as exemplars of the "new sentence" at work. (88-93) New sentence texts produced both meaning and resistance to authoritarian modes of signification in the spaces between seemingly disparate sentences, argued Silliman. These were juxtaposed against one another with apparently minimal attention to over-arching narrative logics. (91) Lyn Hejinian’s My Life offers one interpretation of "new sentence" work:

It seemed that we had hardly begun and we were already there. Memory is the money of my class. What a vast! what a business! The lowly cabbage strives and the turnip in the garden yearns to be a person. You know, things like that. Systems betray, or are, as in a "made place," made betrayals. I was organized by addition and addiction. I found a penny in a calla lily.39

In new sentence poems, the full stop carried an enormous amount of politically affective weight. It differentiated between discrete units of perceptual response, while theoretically allowing maximum reader involvement in creating meanings for a poetic text; an issue that I address later when reading The Cell. "The new sentence is the first prose technique to identify the signifier (even that of the blank space) as the locus of literary meaning," asserted Silliman. (93) "The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader’s attention at or very close to the level of language…. [A]ny attempt to explicate the work as a whole according to some ‘higher order’ of meaning, such as narrative or character, is doomed to sophistry, if not overt incoherence."40 By resisting the closures of "higher orders of meaning," new sentence poems — at their most utopian — allowed readers to shake each signifier free from language usages that normalised particular ideologies and authoritative hierarchies, and to engage in a free play of cognitive possibilities.

While it displays the juxtapositional method of Ron Silliman’s "new sentence" model, My Life contains narrative logics that differ from Silliman’s dismissal of "higher orders of meaning." Each section, for example, corresponds roughly with a year of Lyn Hejinian’s life, a narrative scheme that conjoins and distinguishes individual


increments of the poem, and moves readers’ attention along both horizontal and vertical planes of significance. “Higher orders of meaning” are subverted by the poem’s play with repetition and narrative fracturing, and its repeated deflections of “autobiographical” plot-lines and expectations:

There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know ‘what really happened.’ The pair of ancient, stunted apricot trees yielded ancient, stunted apricots. What was the meaning hung from that depend. The sweet aftertaste of artichokes. The lobes of autobiography.\(^41\)

*My Life* exemplifies Hejinian’s technique of accumulating discrete sentences and re-arranging them to maximise shifts in context and meaning, and to explore linkages that happen in borders between “lobes” of perception — the “meanings hung from that depend.” The poem formally exteriorises its method: it was written originally in 37 sections of 37 sentences, corresponding with 37 years of Hejinian’s life. A second edition added 8 sentences to existing sections, and 8 new sections of 45 sentences; and Hejinian continues periodically to “update” and expand the work.\(^42\) Drafts show Hejinian returning to her first draft and dispersing whole new sentences throughout existing sections, moving them for effect if needed.\(^43\)

In 1988 while composing *The Cell*, Hejinian wrote a short piece called “Line,” in which she described poetical line as “an act of observation... completed by recognition of the thought it achieves there.”\(^44\) She recently observed of that piece:

After a prolonged period of working with sentences, I was eager suddenly to disrupt their integrity, to escape their confines. For me, the “new sentence” had taken on declarative properties so pronounced that they were (as [Robert] Grenier pointed out one day in conversation) beginning to sound like imperatives; to me they had become claustrophobic, oppressive.\(^45\)

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Many texts written by Hejinian between 1976 and 1983 depend, indeed, upon punctuated sentences and their juxtaposition — including *Gesualdo*, “The Green,” “Redo,” and of course, *My Life.* By the time of her first visit to Russia in 1983, Hejinian had become frustrated by compositional limits of “new sentences” and was looking for different modes of syntactical innovation, in keeping with key philosophical inquiries that she longed to develop. Encountering the densely phenomenological writings of Arkadii Dragomoschenko and other Russian poets helped to provoke changes within Hejinian’s poetic: a turn toward “the metaphysical issues” of her work, as she saw them, and a renewed interest in the *line* rather than the sentence as a poem’s “primary unit of observation and... measure of felt thought.” In June 1985 when writing an exegetical essay on “The Guard,” Hejinian commented: “The dynamic of the line is different from that of the sentence, and the interplay between the two produces countercurrents, eddies, backwaters, and swirls.”

One month later, having returned to Russia for a brief visit with Arkadii and Zina Dragomoschenko, Hejinian wrote to her mother:

[I]t was interesting talking to [Russian] poets and writers, because they very often talked “shop” in terms of the metaphysical position they wrote from, whereas I’m more used to talking shop in terms of technical problems -- structures in particular. For example, a typical response to the question, “What are you working on right now?” among my U.S. colleagues would be something like “A long work in 5 line stanzas and 5 sentence paragraphs”; a response to the same questions in Leningrad or Moscow might be “The immortality of the subject” (someone actually said that) or (this too was said) “Death.” I have attempted to write down some of the metaphysical issues of my work as a result.... fear of death, anxiety, aesthetic delight, love, lust, etc.

The first phases of Language poetry were characterised, undoubtedly, by structural and technical preoccupations and skepticism regarding certain “metaphysical” elements of poetic discourse. Many of these had been naturalised within American mainstream poetical culture as core tropes of expressivist lyricism, as I shall discuss later alongside readings of *The Cell*. Following an intense period of working from

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within the San Franciscan Language community, Hejinian found her encounters in Russia to be “estranging” in several ways. While returning phenomenological inquiries to a core of her project, they engaged Hejinian in new dilemmas of descriptive language — stimulated partly by her translations of Arkadii Dragomoschenko’s letters and poems, for which she taught herself Russian. In translations nothing could be “known” with any certainty, and everything existed in a state of perpetual, perceptual pressure; an epistemological mobility compounded by the doubleness of translating Cyrillic into Latinate alphabets. Upon visiting Leningrad, Hejinian also found that many Russian poets did not have access to work by the Russian Formalist writers of the early twentieth century — innovative, formal texts that to some extent had been lionised by writers of the West Coast Language scene.50

“The Guard” flourished after Lyn Hejinian returned from her first trip to Russia, and quickly grew to an eight-part work. Many of its later lines — including most of section six — are cited directly from Dragomoschenko’s poems and letters.51 In 1991 Hejinian gave a retrospective appraisal of “The Guard” that expresses palpable relief at new horizons: “The poem is the result of my first encounter with the Russian language and also with the disorientation and longing associated with all my now numerous trips to Russia.... It was in ‘The Guard’ that I first made the analogy between the Russian realm I was experiencing and the realm of the words for things.”52 Hejinian’s first, repetitive drafts of “The Guard” actually occurred in the six months prior to visiting Russia in May 1983; yet while her version of timing is inaccurate, it emphasises important strands of thinking that cohered in the poem. Earlier, epistemolexical inquiries finessed by Hejinian in “The Rejection of Closure” (1983) found new and literal scope in a Russian context:

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a

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50 Ron Silliman first alerted Hejinian to Russian Formalism and Futurism during 1977, referring to the Russian Futurists as “the first poets to use invented language extensively.” Barrett Watten and Bob Perelman were also reading texts by Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky. See Ron Silliman, letter to Lyn Hejinian dated 19 February 1977, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 7, 6]; also the first section of “Roughly Stapled: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian by Craig Dworkin,” Hejinian author pages at Electronic Poetry Centre, 1996. Available at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/hejinian/interview-backup.html>. Discussion to follow.


collaboration and a desertion.... we long to join words to the world — to close the gap between ourselves and things.\textsuperscript{55}

Hejinian began increasingly to write about perception itself, and the mobility of a "knowing" (perceiving) subject in relation to "gaps" in the process of signification — for which translation provided a literal model. "The Guard," especially in its later half, began to literalise this gap via repeated use of ellipses. These deflected the intensity of punctuated sentences and opened whole stanzas to incompletion and provisionality: "Thanatos is loosely the equivalent of...where the sea soaked through...attempted love-object...a spattered radio...and plays to the painters working from ladders next door...the same as a failure of the urge to listen...what skies it built yesterday?"\textsuperscript{54} Such fracturing punctuation is a feature of "The Guard" and rarely occurs elsewhere in Hejinian's work. While "disrupting the integrity" of sentences and "escaping their confines,"\textsuperscript{55} it internalises a theory of description that continually deflects closure, in favour of a series of mobile, networked (whole) fragments. As this chapter's epigraph states: "Only fragments are accurate. Break them up and charge them to combination."\textsuperscript{56}

Following publication of "The Guard" in September 1984, Lyn Hejinian began looking for a poetic form that would provide both the epistemological reach that she desired (how do we know, and how can we say?); and a means of exploring interactions between writing subjects and perceived objects, and between language and things (\textit{words and the world}). Toward the close of 1984, Hejinian was asked to write a series of lectures that proved instrumental to \textit{The Cell}. While preparing "Two Stein Talks" for a residency at the Californian New College, Hejinian studied psychologist and philosopher William James's theories on perception and cognition, and began to trace in Gertrude Stein's work a language of realism in which \textit{perception of perceiving} provides the core animating impetus.\textsuperscript{57} Eventually published in 1986, the Stein talks primed the evolution of two things within Hejinian's own poetry: a descriptive method with phenomenological capacities, and a poetic form that allowed sustained observation of perceptual processes while admitting the ongoing mess of

\textsuperscript{55} Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," \textit{Language of Inquiry} 56.
\textsuperscript{54} Hejinian, "The Guard," \textit{Cold of Poetry} 29.
\textsuperscript{55} Hejinian, Preface to "Line," \textit{Language of Inquiry} 131.
\textsuperscript{56} Hejinian, \textit{My Life} 55.
\textsuperscript{57} Hejinian, "Strangeness," \textit{Language of Inquiry} 143.
Sourced in Stein’s *continuous present* and James’s experimental techniques of *radical introspection*, Hejinian’s “poetics of description” aimed to explore a “consciousness of the consciousness of perception.”\(^{59}\) It sought a writing procedure “equivalent to perception” that remained “open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what happens.” In Hejinian’s words, such description would involve “a marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange.”\(^{60}\) As a poetic method, Hejinian’s “local strangeness” gave voice to the alterities of her encounter with Russian language.\(^{61}\) It also reflected key “Language” techniques borrowed from the Russian Formalist and American Objectivist writers, discussed later in this chapter: defamiliarisation, estrangement or *ostranenie*, and descriptive objectification.\(^{62}\)

*The Cell* remains unparalleled in Hejinian’s *oeuvre* as a work about the consciousness of consciousness. Ideation itself is scrutinised throughout the poem:

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Hourly intimately shifting blades with
total veracity as I describe
an idea
That is, in my language
a cup, the very grass
and encounter\(^{63}\)
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Hejinian surveys everyday objects — cups and grass, for example — and removes them from ordinary contexts, while maintaining quasi-scientific “veracity” toward phenomenal observation and the intimate, “shifting blades” of description. In the first of her Stein lectures, Hejinian draws a parallel between the realism of nineteenth-

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58 Lyn Hejinian, “Two Stein Talks,” *Language of Inquiry* 83-130. The lectures were published first in 1986 in volume three of *Temblor* magazine.


63 Hejinian, *The Cell* 82.
century European novels and a descriptive method that applies "research, experimentation, persistence... and the passionate force of discipline" to the surveillance of consciousness.64 Hejinian explains Stein's "analytical" realism in terms of scientific methods:

The intention was to treat the real rather than the ideal, the everyday rather than the unusual, the common rather than the exceptional. ...The technique was to be based on models from science. "The chain of reasoning will be very simple," said Zola; "if the experimental method has been capable of extension from chemistry and physics to physiology and medicine, then it can be carried from physiology to the naturalist novel."65

*The Cell* employs a serial, cellular form to scrutinise phenomenological perception and chart the "results." Grounded in repetition, Hejinian's compositional technique — "the experimental method" — makes a series of prolonged inquiries into links existing between everyday consciousness and language, or sense and description. *The Cell*'s eighth poem reads: "Zukofsky says, 'Emphasize detail 130 / times over or there will / be no poetic...’" (17) In 1935, Gertrude Stein observed in related terms: "The question of repetition is very important. It is important because there is no such thing as repetition.... Everybody is telling the story in the same way. But if you listen carefully, you will see that not all the story is the same. There is always a slight variation."66 The Cell is a concerted development of methods proposed by Zukofsky, Stein, and the Russian Formalists. It also charts Lyn Hejinian’s own, singular response to community-oriented Language innovations — always with "a slight variation."

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64 Hejinian, "Language and Realism" in "Two Stein Talks," *Language of Inquiry* 91.
A compositional breakthrough

Before moving to close readings of *The Cell*, I want to give another context for the poem’s production. *The Cell*’s collaborative beginnings often are overlooked; yet they provided a major, formal complement to conceptual advances made by Hejinian during 1984 and 1985, concerning the metaphysics of a language of cognition. Late in 1986, Lyn Hejinian wrote to fellow San Franciscan Language poet Kit Robinson:

Dear Kit,

Here are my first three, written before I read the two poems you sent, so that it is purely coincidental that questions of vision and grass appear in both. …

It has been great doing this. First, I’ve been very grateful for your advice, which I could have given myself, but without authority. …

These were written relatively quickly.
I will continue.
I just reread them -- I hardly recognize them.67

Hejinian and Robinson had been invited to give a poetry reading on 8 December 1986 at a local venue. They chose to undertake a collaboration directed toward the event. Kit Robinson suggested a form that was a cornerstone of his own practice: each writer would make one or more rapid 12-line sketches first thing in the morning, immediately posting them to the other to elicit response.

The sketches were to emerge in the shadow of dreams from previous nights, however recalled — states of discontinuous consciousness that could be examined as a specific “problem of reportage,” as Hejinian later phrased it, in which a curiously “objective” detachment could be mobilised in the face of seemingly random and incommensurate detail.68 “That gap between dream and day has been making me feel sick,” Hejinian wrote to Robinson, articulating a sense of radical estrangement that both writers wanted to explore.69 Hejinian approached dreaming as a problem of description,

memory, and observational method. Within the “data” of dream consciousness, and regardless of their strangeness, particularities could be noted and juxtaposed alongside one another. Dreams offered not psychological truths or metaphors, but “specific writing problems” in Hejinian’s view — a starting point from which to “introspect,” after William James’s experiments in cognitive perception, and hence radicalise one’s consciousness of consciousness in language.\textsuperscript{70} A fortnight after beginning the sketches, Hejinian commented to Robinson: “I never know what’s going to turn up. I have been trying not to ‘intend’ anything, though I’ve been thinking about teaching a course next year called ‘The Language of Inquiry’ and I find myself thinking of these poems as that.”\textsuperscript{71}

While maintaining rough correlation, crossing poems often moved out of numerical synchronicity. Sometimes the poets would make exegetical and exact use of phrases or perceptions from each other’s work. At other points, their conceptual inquiries — and the extent to which they referenced one another’s texts — diverged markedly. Both writers stuck to the 12-line format, though their line lengths varied. “I continue to look at your poems before and as I write,” noted Robinson on 28 November 1986. “I’m less conscious than before though about one-for-one correspondences. Sometimes I think I take ideas from more than one of yours, or take them out of order.”\textsuperscript{72} Exchanged poems acted as mutual provocation rather than delimiting scenes or patterns of response. “You certainly don’t need to feel limited to an orderly response or to subject, style, tone that comes out of my parts of the correspondence,” wrote Hejinian as the collaboration progressed. “I shift all over the place in writing my parts, sometimes just read a poem of yours and then ‘forget’ all about it (only to discover often that I have echoed something, even a lot, though maybe it is only vowel sounds, or a dream image).”\textsuperscript{73}

At the poetry reading on 8 December 1986, Hejinian and Robinson read separately from their own work and together from the collaboration. One week later Hejinian wrote to Robinson:

\textsuperscript{70} Hejinian, “Strangeness,” Language of Inquiry 139-143.
\textsuperscript{71} Hejinian, letter to Robinson, 25 October 1986 [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson Oct ’86 – June ’88”].
\textsuperscript{72} Kit Robinson, letter to Lyn Hejinian dated 28 November 1986, Hejinian papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson Oct ’86 – June ’88”].
\textsuperscript{73} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Kit Robinson dated 21 February 1987, Hejinian papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson 1987”].
Over the phone this evening... I meant that for each of us this project might not necessarily be circumscribed or defined by reference to the other. I don’t think of it as a collaboration in the conventional sense (if there is one) because I don’t want our work to be commodified as such.  

Despite geographical and literary closeness, Hejinian and Robinson seemed determined to preserve authorial particularity. “Although we live in the same city, I feel as if I am writing you from the other end of the universe. Our lives are so different,” wrote Robinson in January of 1987. Hejinian wanted the project to refuse commodity aesthetics that privileged textual completion. Even within the open-endedness of collaboration, she saw certain gestural “closures” as anathema: “I’m getting really irritated by the problem of last lines -- does it have to do with writing short poems, that they seem so relentlessly inclined to wrap themselves up?”

Lyn Hejinian’s desire for singularity, however, partly exceeded rejections of “conventional” or “commodified” literary practices. The work-series had provided Hejinian with a compositional breakthrough. Having found at Robinson’s suggestion “a form that accommodates the method I have always been proposing,” Hejinian ceased all compulsive redrafting and began to write more loosely. She associated this new ease of descriptive invention with potential artistic longevity — which made her somewhat protective of her processes. “Really these poems continue the lines of inquiry that I am trying to follow [already],” she advised Robinson in March 1987. At another point she suggested: “we might diverge from reference to each other’s poems for a while and then return.”

While collaborative methods lessened a certain “product-orientation” that had “becom[e] a problem” for Lyn Hejinian, they also allowed her to investigate the effect of otherness upon writerly subjectivity:

76 Hejinian, letter to Robinson, 21 February 1987 [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson 1987”].
77 Hejinian, letter to Bernstein, 6 December 1986 [74, 2(U), “Charles Bernstein”].
78 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Kit Robinson dated 14 March 1987, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson 1987”].

252
I may, in the end, absorb the whole of it into ‘The Person,’ since, as a process, it is very close to what I wanted from that poem. An unfolding other with whom to correspond.  

Hejinian had begun “The Person” in 1985, intending to write “a poem which was to its language what a person is to its landscape.” Such a poem “would not be about a person but... would be like a person,” placed within a mobile context (language) that affects the “phenomenological status” of things. In the face of “unfolding otherness,” Hejinian sought to explore borders between description, subjectivity, and object-apprehension: “Description, whether it is intentional or the result of ambient ideology, bounds a person’s life... Introspection newly delineates and constantly shifts the boundary between subject and object. It establishes the relationship between self and other, between body and mind, and then transgresses the borders it has established.”

During the latter half of the 1980s, the collaborative venture with Robinson surpassed “The Person” as Hejinian’s primary writing focus, although parts of both projects became implicated within each other. Twelve-line poems written by Hejinian between January 1987 and January 1988 employ a trope of “the person” at least 20 times, moving that refrain through numerous different perceptual and descriptive “landscapes” and repeatedly dispersing its borders: “A wider, obdurate drop between / a person and a rock / or a person’s life / It always moves / The sound of a person / passing by moves the eyes / Everything gripped by the world, / or by a small part / of it.”

Excited by the volume of poetry that their correspondence provoked, Hejinian and Robinson continued to swap letters and 12-line sketches over a two-year period. In November 1987 they decided upon an arbitrary limit of 150 poems each; and by May 1988 both had written 100. Later that year, a selection from the first 60 or so

81 Lyn Hejinian, “The Person and Description,” Language of Inquiry 203 and 207.
83 Sentences as they appear in Hejinian, The Cell 89.
84 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Kit Robinson dated 2 November 1987, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson 1987”]. Hejinian explains in this letter that she was going to stop at 137 poems but thought the number “too cute,” and that “the context for it is utterly irrelevant (the 1/137 from physics -- unification theory).” She continues: “What about 150? 150 doesn’t require justification and needs no
exchanged was published by Chax Press, arranged chronologically under the title *Individuals* and bearing this inscription:

A book of twenty-four poems written individually in the Fall of 1986 by Lyn Hejinian and Kit Robinson.  

The edition comprised 150 hand made copies — a pun upon the poets’ chosen numerical limit. Many of the copies were sent to friends. Complex binding, paper quality and design, and close-circuit distribution place *Individuals* beyond commodity-oriented marketing economies, consonant with Hejinian’s desires. In context of both poets’ central situation with the Language writing community, however, the book garners value as a different kind of contemporary fetish: a rarefied, elaborately antiquarian, coterie text.

The movement of Lyn Hejinian and Kit Robinson’s collaborative poem series across various publication and performance sites suggests a cellular, communitarian model, generating — and shaped by — a poetics of differentiated intertextuality. While working in common, the writers stressed their differences; and both began increasingly to conceptualise their halves of the correspondence as separate texts. By March 1987 Hejinian was using the working name “The Cell” for her set of poems. In late 1987 Robinson offered a selection of his poems, dedicated to Hejinian, for publication in a poetry anthology. Robinson entitled his poems “Up Early,” and the anthology eventually took the title *Up Late*. The following year Hejinian began a thorough revision of her earlier poems. She retained the momentum of a 12-line short form, the shape and rhythm of specific pieces, and a cumulative everyday writing procedure, while elaborating on philosophical, perceptual, and descriptive inquiries sketched in the incipient work series. Emerging from a cluster of interlinked nuclei, *The Cell* was complete by 1990 and published by Sun & Moon Press in 1992. Its rationale — it’s just a round number like 10.” Later in this chapter I discuss Hejinian’s use of arbitrary, formal constraints.

86 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Kit Robinson dated 14 March 1987, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson 1987”]. It is interesting to note that Hejinian’s mother sent her a book called *Lives of a Cell* in 1975, which Hejinian read and “loved.” Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 17 August 1975, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 7].
dedication reads: “for Kit Robinson in correspondence.”88 These literary intimacies between Hejinian and Robinson give The Cell a profound, contextualising dimension. The poem is irrefutably a work of community, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense of the word:

[T]here is nothing to possess here, and what communication writes, what writing communicates, is in no way a truth possessed, appropriated or transmitted — even though it is, absolutely, the truth of being-in-common. There is community, there is sharing, and there is the exposition of this limit.89

The Cell is one “exposition of the limit” of community as experienced by Lyn Hejinian. Its title tropes on formal inquiries, open textualities, and contingent subject boundaries, while commenting on the collaborative milieu from which the work emerged; and more broadly, upon Language “cells” that provide critical context for Hejinian’s writing.

Kit Robinson’s 12-line “sketches” helped Lyn Hejinian to resolve a dilemma of constant redrafting toward perfectibility.90 Hejinian amplified Robinson’s short lines, looking for a way to unpack links between perception and descriptive language. Midway through the poets’ correspondence, Hejinian’s lengthier lines began to effect reciprocal shifts in Robinson’s lines. His first poems for the collaboration contained characteristically clipped lines:

    sky dark and
    would you enter
    tentatively relays
    the slip
    a truck engine churns
    lights through blinds91

Robinson’s later poems, such as this 54th instalment, began to echo the weight and observational steadiness of Hejinian’s conceptual and descriptive methods:

90 Hejinian discusses her use of “improvisational models” in “A Local Strangeness: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian,” commenting at 143: “Responding to that has been a big release, because otherwise I would tend to rewrite forever, trying to make something perfect.”
91 Kit Robinson, from unpublished m/s of 32 poems sent to Lyn Hejinian and later used for Individuals, poem dated 8 October 1986, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), “Kit Robinson Oct ’86–June ’88”].

255
a line of thought goes straight to the heart of matter
extension prevails on essence to flesh out a form
rain glances off dots that divide the lanes
that contain the flow that issues from consummate waking92

Robinson is conversing directly with Hejinian’s 56th poem:

Transit divides the vines and the waste of music that is love
The cleft contains the flow that issues from consummate waking93

These archaeologies of encounter, echo and trace are fascinating. I provide here only a
taste of the complexities. Much further, compelling work could be done “to flesh out a
form,” as Robinson writes (above), and to compare Hejinian’s and Robinson’s “parts”
of the collaboration. The poets’ chosen compositional methods allowed them to stay
with community, in the sense of mutual support for one another’s work, while
departing from limits reached in their “Language” practice; including, in Hejinian’s
case, the constraint of certain “sentence” paradigms. Unlike almost all of Hejinian’s
prior works, The Cell contains no full stops. While this may seem a small observation,
it marks a significant maturation in Hejinian’s examination of (spatio-temporal) links
and differences between lines and sentences, in light of the ongoing and discontinuous
nature of perception.94 Compared to dense, threaded sentences in My Life, the “open”
lines of The Cell — while anchored at first in similar foundational “sentences” —
suggest different aesthetic and philosophical functions, as I shall discuss later.

From another angle The Cell is an exemplary work of Language-influenced
innovation. Its collaborative footings certainly place it into well-trodden Language
terrain; while the cumulative methods favoured by Hejinian and Robinson are
archetypal in other ways, concerning the exploration of differences within a common
milieu. Rather than persevering with a comparative study of Hejinian’s and
Robinson’s texts, I have decided to focus on formal aspects of The Cell that match a
thematically explored throughout this thesis: commonality in difference. Rhetorics of

92 Kit Robinson, poem number 54 in letter to Lyn Hejinian dated 6 March 1987, Hejinian Papers,
Mandeville [74. 8(U), “Kit Robinson 1986-9”].
93 Hejinian, The Cell 81. At times during the collaboration it is impossible to know whose lines or ideas
came “first,” which was one purpose of the poets’ method.
94 Hejinian was prompted partly by Robinson’s use of open lines in his initial 12-line sketches.
Although a short poem by Hejinian called “Punctual” contains no full stops and dates from the late
1970s, this approach was abandoned until the “Cell” sketches in 1986. Hejinian, “Punctual,” Cold of
Poetry 79-88.
“community” that emphasise part/whole relations are especially appropriate to The Cell — such as those canvassed by Jean-Luc Nancy in *Being Singular Plural*:

The very meaning of the word “together,” just like the meaning of the word “with,” seems to oscillate indefinitely between two meanings, without ever coming to a point of equilibrium: it is either the “together” of juxtaposition *partes extra partes*, isolated and unrelated parts, or the “together” of gathering *totum intra totum*, a unified totality [*unitotalité*].… [T]he resources found in the term [*unitotalité*] are situated precisely on the point of equilibrium *between* the two meanings: “together” is neither extra nor intra."95

*The Cell*’s 150 parts are aggregated into a larger “whole.” Each poem or cell — a constituent unit of matter — is a site of local coherence, proximate to many others while keeping its particularity. To borrow Nancy’s analogy, the “resources” of *The Cell*, including its conceptual strength and formal sense, can be located on a cusp *between* part and whole. This dynamic is central to the poem’s inquiries: “I don’t know of cells / without full world.”96

**Assembling the relatives: “open” forms and bare devices**97

As demonstrated in chapter three, the San Franciscan Language writing scene had a modular “design.” Its meanings were contingent at any moment upon the movements of separate, component cogs: writers, readers, texts, venues, and small presses. One of the group’s most distinctive monikers, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, encodes a similar interrogation of part/whole relations.98 Each letter is equivalent yet different to those alongside it. To complement my earlier accounts of Lyn Hejinian’s role in Language communities, I want to read formal properties of *The Cell* beside key tenets of Language practice, while foregrounding Hejinian’s singular (and signature) application of these tenets. I also will compare *The Cell* to a different, philosophical trope: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “assemblage,” a cellular or rhizomic model

96 Hejinian, *The Cell* 91.
97 “Assembling the relatives” adapted from Hejinian, *My Life* 11.
98 The influential New York Language magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is discussed in chapter three.
of thinking developed collaboratively in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). My chapter closes by returning to Hejinian’s evolution of a Steinian perceptual and descriptive method — where, as I cited earlier, “consciousness of consciousness is the thing that is at stake.”

During formative years of Language experimentalism, the question of “generative versus manipulative forms” was raised often in context of ideological orders implicit in language, and as a way of examining readers’ relationships to texts. Lyn Hejinian proposed a scheme for “open” and “closed” texts in “The Rejection of Closure.” A closed text directs “all elements of the work... toward a single reading,” while an open text “is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies.” In chapter three I complicated this binary, arguing for differential scales of analysis that examine how particular texts are “generative,” and that interrogate “the model of the reader as a producer of the work,” to cite Juliana Spahr. Rather than re-entering that debate, I want to look at Hejinian’s practical applications, in *The Cell*, of her own Language-inspired formulae for open textualities.

“The ‘open text’ often foregrounds or emphasizes process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers,” states Hejinian. “[It] thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification.” As an example of resistance to closure, Hejinian cites poetic forms that seem to bear capricious or haphazard links to “the materials of the work” — such as her own decision, when she was thirty-seven, to write a work of 37 paragraphs each comprising 37 sentences (My

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100 Hejinian, “The Poetics of Exploration,” 2.


Life). A superimposed form cheats the artifice of poetic resolution. “One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes,” writes Hejinian, “and not because there is a necessary point of origin or terminus, a first or last moment.” By her account, arbitrary devices allow a kind of textual infinity, while short-circuiting lyrical tendencies toward last-line epiphanies. A reader can imagine the poem and its matter extending well beyond page limits or “endings” — which prevents foreclosure of phenomenological and epistemic possibilities. The most arbitrary form might thus produce the most open-ended and unstable text, advises Hejinian. She embodies this principle in a succinct maxim: *form is not a fixture but an activity.* “The Rejection of Closure” asks:

Can form make chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plentitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of form in art. Form is not a fixture but an activity.

Deliberate emphasis on procedural mechanics is one way of stressing a poet’s hand in choosing every aspect of a poem. By implication, self-consciously “process-oriented” poems also point to a writer’s (subjective) placement within historic, cultural, aesthetic and linguistic contexts. Rather than operating as mere conduits for content, compositional choices make meaning — a fairly common Language argument. Perhaps this no longer sounds radical, or simply reiterates principles that have been standards of twentieth-century art practice. But in light of canonical American poetics of the 1970s, where poet Denise Levertov’s injunctions toward “finding one’s own voice” and “bringing it to speech” held sway, many Language writers saw a need to revitalise and politicise discussions about “authentic” language and “natural” forms, and to question a-historical generalities about spontaneous, “undisguised” lyricism in

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108 Hejinian, “Rejection of Closure,” *Language of Inquiry* 47. Hejinian substantially altered this passage from her original 1983 text, in which the link between formal “certainty” and generative “uncertainty” was stressed differently.
poetry."^90  "There is no natural look or sound to a poem," wrote Charles Bernstein in "Stray Straws and Straw Men." "Every element is intended, chosen."^10

Although Kit Robinson's 12-liners gave The Cell its basic structure, Hejinian applied a further formal constraint to the poem in 1989 when revising her early sketches. Each line of The Cell runs to a maximum of five words and then spills onto a second or third (or n^th) line of five, until the original sentence "completes." Here are several lines from Hejinian's initial draft of her 64^th poem:

The perpetual green and yellow take shape in different and combined tips of light
Like a moth in an episode
There are no words closer to the intimate resemblance than these
Of whose method in our work we can create

In The Cell these become:

The perpetual green and yellow
take shape in different and combined tips of light
Like a moth in an episode
There are no words closer to the intimate resemblance than these
Of whose method in our work we can create

"Different and combined," "episode," and "method" all hint at Hejinian's use of formal superstructures that distinguish between individual lines and poems while combining their materials, "the perpetual green and yellow," into serial, non-narrative narrations. During revisions for The Cell, poems received varying degrees of content change alongside their organisation into elegant, five-word lines. The new form

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^90 This argument comes from Marjorie Perloff, Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age Of Media (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1991) 35 and 41. Perloff cites American poet Denise Levertov's 1965 essay "Some Notes on Organic Form," sourcing such a poetics to a modernist "simulation of natural speech" (29) as advocated by T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, and contrasting this with a poetics of "radical artifice" (29-53). Discussion to follow.


^11 Lyn Hejinian, poem number 64 dated 3 August 1987, in letter to Kit Robinson dated 15 August 1987, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), "Kit Robinson 1987"].

^12 Hejinian, The Cell 90.
redistributes horizontal and vertical scales of meaning, while subjecting individual words to very different spatio-temporal and reading pressures.

Lyn Hejinian borrowed Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky’s frequent use of five-word lines — across the epic “A” for example, especially A-21, A-22 and A-23, and in 80 Flowers, which comprises 81 poems of eight, five-word lines. While Hejinian has not acknowledged expressly The Cell’s “application” of Zukofsky’s form, she gives a clue in a written interview from 1991, when speaking more generally about artifice within her work:

One of the benefits of formal devices is that they increase the palpability, the perceptibility of the work. And another is that they can be used to increase a work’s semantic possibilities. Kit Robinson’s writing provides great (and for me influential) examples of both. So too does the writing of Louis Zukofsky. His five-word lines often leave very odd words at the end of a line, producing lines with no resolution, no way to stop, but the logic slides, the lines merge. It’s beautiful.

Enjambment is arbitrary across The Cell due to the five-word pattern, which intensifies a sense of “irresolution” and “sliding logic.” The work as a “whole” employs similar, paradoxical openness. It ends after 150 increments, and “not because a conclusion has been reached nor ‘everything’ said.”

Other works by Hejinian apply equally arbitrary formal constraints. The unpaginated serial poem Writing Is an Aid to Memory uses the alphabet as a compositional guide, printing the first letter of each line to correspond with its place in the alphabet:

summer honey nor chew
when it respects to prose
‘that sort of stuff’ and ‘you know’
I suppose a dictionary with a rhythmic base
an impulse of remembering
could show what I could

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Oxota: A Short Russian Novel comprises 270 stanzas of 14 lines — each numbered as a “chapter” — and an 11-line “Coda.” Similar devices occur in the work of many of Hejinian’s contemporaries. Bernadette Mayer’s Midwinter Day chooses a temporal framework: all that can be written in a day. Ron Silliman wrote an “Alphabet” series for over a decade, in which each book-length poem corresponds to a letter of the alphabet. Marjorie Perloff notes that such experiments have antecedent not only in works by Zukofsky, but in projects by artists such as composer John Cage, whose aleatory techniques tried literally to relinquish control over key elements of textual generation, and hence to “break with ego” and formal “habit.”

Silliman makes a different point about superimposed forms when reflecting upon opposition to genres that dominated American poetry during Language writing’s incipient moments — especially forms prioritising the “natural voice” of a reflective (white, masculine) “I,” or depicting “the Poet” as a shamanistic figure, who could claim privileged insight into phenomenological truths. Lyn Hejinian dismisses such poems as “the replication of epiphanous moments in which details of the world match or coincide with the poet’s expectation or desire for meaning.” They make the world meaningful “not for and to itself... [but] because perceiving it makes the poet special.” Smooth-surface logics of narrative “progression” give an impetus of closure to such a poetics. Silliman observes:

The problem which confronts any writer, once they have broken with the received tradition of a writing that presumes and imposes a stable “voice,” is how literally to proceed. Without persona, narrative or argument (however implicit or associational), what motivates the next line, the next sentence, the next paragraph or stanza?

The form of The Cell gave Lyn Hejinian at least three technical and literal ways of proceeding beyond the “resolution” and artifice of a “stable” lyrical “voice.” As

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117 Hejinian, Oxota 292.
119 See for example Ron Silliman, X-ing (Buffalo: Mcow, 1996) which corresponds to the letter X. Begun in the mid-1980s, Silliman’s “epic” is now complete.
120 John Cage cited in Perloff, Radical Artifice, 150. Radical Artifice offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of these poietical aesthetics.
123 Silliman, “Interview,” 34.
suggested in chapter four, collaborations give flexible borders to a writing subject, in the face of an other who partly guides the project's scope and direction. Writing *The Cell*, Hejinian allowed her "next stanza" to be motivated by Robinson's poems and letters — literal *others* to her poetical *I*. The 12-line stanza limit relinquished imperatives toward "natural" lyrical exposition, while an arbitrary choice of 150 poems allowed the writing to unfold beyond the confines of thematic completion or narrative sense.

Poetic artifice and form were preeminent concerns for the Russian Formalist writers of the early twentieth-century, whose work lent vital models to Language experiments. Russian Formalism conjoined two strands of immediately pre- and post-revolutionary thinking in Russia: the Moscow Linguistic Circle, presided over by Roman Jakobson; and the *Opoyaz* group, led by Viktor Shklovsky in St. Petersburg. Both groups strongly advocated poetry by the Russian Futurist writers, including Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovksy — whose collective "beginnings" were marked in a 1912 anthology called *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*. In 1919 Jakobson published an essay entitled "Futurism" in which he identified a "new aesthetics" in twentieth-century Russian painting, grounded in Cubist methods of collage, "arbitrary lines" and non-representational "anti-classicism." Futurist art emphasised method, context and materiality; Jakobson called it "the laying bare of the device." Several years earlier in 1913, Khlebnikov had published *Slovo Kak Takovoe* (The Word as Such), which had become something of a "manifesto" for the Russian Futurist poets. Both essays were key points of reference for San Franciscan Language writers who sought to interrogate the how of language: *words as such*, or words as they actively make subjects, rather than operating transparently to express

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126 Roman Jakobson, "Futurism," *My Futurist Years* 146-147.
127 Jakobson, "Futurism," 147.
always-existent and preter-linguistic truths.\textsuperscript{129} As Marjorie Perloff noted in 1985, Language writers followed Jakobson’s directive to “lay bare the device” by using “phonemic play, punning, rhythmic recurrence” and imposed formal structures in order to foreground the constructivist nature of poetic language and the subjectivities of its users.\textsuperscript{130}

*The Cell*’s arbitrary, superstructural constraints and numerical patterns respond directly to key axioms of Russian Formalism. “The word is new for each successive task,” observes Lyn Hejinian in a skew of Khlebnikov’s directives.\textsuperscript{131} She wrote in 1990: “Thanks to the ideas and information I was discovering in Russian Formalist theory and French structuralism and poststructuralism, I made ‘the turn to language’.... These two bodies of theory are of supreme importance to my work.”\textsuperscript{132} I will address French linguistic theory in a moment, but first will examine a poem written by Hejinian during the last months of her collaboration with Robinson. To further her play with “imposed, exoskeletal forms” across *The Cell*, Hejinian undertook an experiment in 1988 entitled “The Composition of the Cell.”\textsuperscript{133} The poem extracts lines from *The Cell* and collates them, with occasional alteration, as punctuated sentences:

\begin{verbatim}
1.1 It is the writer’s object to supply.
1.6 Rocks are emitted by sentences to the eye.
2.13 Circumstances rest between rocks.
2.14 The person of which I speak is between clocks.
3.1 Exploration takes extra words.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{verbatim}

“The Composition of the Cell” is a literal “baring of the device.” It might be imagined as a *metaform*: a form about form, or a poem about poetics. Hejinian performs a Dada-esque cut-up of *The Cell* — much as Robinson made sporadic use of Hejinian’s poems during their collaboration, or as any reader might move through a work and “select”

\textsuperscript{129} See for example Lyn Hejinian, “Roughly Stapled: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian by Craig Dworkin,” Hejinian author pages at Electronic Poetry Centre, 1996. Available at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/hejinian/interview-backup.html>. Citation from page 1 of transcript.

\textsuperscript{130} Perloff, “The Word As Such,” 228.

\textsuperscript{131} Hejinian, *The Cell* 72. This line also echoes Ezra Pound’s often-cited modernist directive to “make it new,” discussed by Hejinian in “Reason,” *Language of Inquiry* 343.


\textsuperscript{134} Hejinian, “The Composition of the Cell,” *Cold of Poetry* 111.
particular phrases. "The Composition of the Cell" embodies rhetorical logics of *asyndeton*: a figure referring to the elision of conjunctions and links from syntactical arrangements. Michel de Certeau argues that asyndeton functions to "cut out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility."¹³⁵ A space that is "shaped by the practices" of (rhetorical) asyndeton "is transformed into enlarged singularities and separate islands," de Certeau writes. (101) Following logics of "the cut out," "The Composition of the Cell" enacts a kind of *de-*composition. Readers are left with a series of 205 statements that are relics of a former work, and that make different sense in their new "circumstances."

Hejinian’s numbering in "The Composition of the Cell" suggests a discrete series, a string of terms carrying no intrinsic mathematical relation.¹³⁶ Each figure carries an empirical link to materials *beyond* the sequence, however. Lines are numbered after their former position in *The Cell* (poem 3 line 1, for example). The pun is double: Hejinian also echoes the structure of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, an aphoristic text that scrutinises links between language and consciousness, read closely by several Language writers during the early 1980s.¹³⁷ Hejinian is drawing our attention toward multiple contexts and possible interpretations for her work. Readers need to "cover the distance" between poetic components, and thus participate actively in making meanings.¹³⁸ Partial readings are stressed rather then narrative "wholes." Moving between *The Cell* and "The Composition of the Cell" to discover conjunctions, a reader observes the first material change at this point:

16.3 In passing between these compounds, the mind will feel shocks of difference.¹³⁹

In Hejinian’s elaborate formal play, *The Cell* is turned out and “undone” by one of its many possible afterimages. Hejinian effectively collaborates with herself, to produce a new work that is strangely familiar to its earlier incarnation. By atomising *The Cell*, Hejinian points with scientific precision to specific valencies of her compositional and language choices, while formally enacting the contingencies of all referential systems. “A cell does not boast stable achievements,” she reminds us.\(^{140}\)

The arithmetic of “The Composition of the Cell” echoes a feature of its forerunner: each poem in *The Cell* carries a date, signifying its moment of composition in Hejinian’s original “sketch” series.\(^{141}\) Hejinian once observed that she “fudged the dates now and then” when reordering and editing — yet this only emphasises their material artifice, and asks that readers look beyond chronological efficacy as a reason for the dates’ inclusion.\(^{142}\) Each marks a specific plateau in Hejinian’s compositional method, a moment of “presencing” that retains particularity while being linked formally to other particles in the series. Dates are local markers *par excellence*. They make *The Cell* into a spatio-temporal sculpture, in which singular units coexist in parallel — somewhat reminiscent of Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of *being singular plural*, a touchstone for this thesis.\(^{143}\) By gesturing toward Hejinian’s scene of writing, dates also admit site-specificity as a critical component. *The Cell* is a workbook of quotidian endeavours, and an experimental logbook in which “findings” are described. Every word (or perception) is mapped into a larger aggregate of specific working hours. This “brings more day into the text,” while preserving Hejinian’s scheme for a scientific approach to the consciousness of consciousness — “to treat the real rather than the ideal, the everyday rather than the unusual, the common rather than the exceptional.”\(^{144}\) The dates identify each poem’s difference from every other in the series, while spacing them “in common.”\(^{145}\) They become traces of material community by working in sequence with dated letters posted between Hejinian and Kit Robinson.


\(^{141}\) Kit Robinson also published his poems with dates. See Robinson, “Up Early,” *Up Late* 541- 543.


\(^{143}\) Cited from title of Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Being Singular Plural*.


\(^{145}\) Jean-Luc Nancy, “Finite History,” 149.
The Cell's cumulative, point-to-point properties correspond beautifully with a textual, epistemological and social model developed by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus, the second volume of work entitled Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Deleuze and Guattari use the highly suggestive trope of "the plateau" to signify a dynamic textual (and libidinal) economy organised around local moments of clarity or intensity — plateaus — rather than monolithic or categorical "wholes."146

A plateau is "a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation towards a culmination point or external end.... Each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau." (22) Plateaus denote multiplicity, difference and linkage. A text comprised of plateaus permits infinite routes between concentrated moments. While retaining singularity, diverse parts can recombine at different interfaces. In an observation that echoes Lyn Hejinian's theories about open forms in "The Rejection of Closure," Deleuze and Guattari argue that formal composition is crucial to thinking in plateaus: "To attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it." (22)

Deleuze and Guattari develop a provocative and useful vocabulary to describe non-linear ways of thinking. Each "plateau" is "a multiplicity connected to other multiplicities... to form or extend a rhizome," a chain of prolific links privileging context over individuation.147 Plateaus gain meaning alongside numerous others, and relations of neighbourhood shift constantly within the contingent matrices of these open systems. Deleuze and Guattari compare rhizomic knowledge production to the "arborescent" model of family trees:

[A]ny point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.... Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centers of significance and subjectification. (7,16)

A little later in A Thousand Plateaus they write: "the rhizome is an antigenealogy." (21) Rhizomic systems privilege contiguity over isolation, fragmentation over completion. "We are writing this book as a rhizome. It is composed of plateaus,"

146 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 21. Deleuze and Guattari take "the plateau" from a study made by anthropologist and philosopher Gregory Bateson entitled Steps to an Ecology of Mind, and reinterpret it in a different fashion (21-22).
147 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 22.
announce Deleuze and Guattari. "Each morning we would wake up, and each of us would ask himself what plateau he was going to tackle, writing five lines here, ten there.... We made circles of convergence."¹⁴⁸ This account of writing methods is uncannily similar to Lyn Hejinian and Kit Robinson's collaborative approach. We might imagine The Cell (and Robinson's twin work) as a text in plateaus — 150 discrete moments of descriptive, spatio-temporal clarity, each related to others in "circles of convergence" rather than via "logical" progression in arborescent narratives. "Concentric circles draw more and more in as they radiate out," observes Hejinian.¹⁴⁹

A Thousand Plateaus proposes "the assemblage" as a trope for rhizomic systems. Assemblages collect component cells without subsuming their different specificities, and are characterised by machine-like interconnectedness.¹⁵⁰ Their logic is and not or. In an assemblage, any part might interact with any other part to form a new, provisional synthesis.¹⁵¹ Brian Massumi suggests that assemblages manifest, and are propelled by, a logic of "nomad thought":

Nomad thought replaces the closed equation of representation, \( x = x = \text{not} y \) (I = I = not you) with an open equation: \( \ldots + y + z + a + \ldots \). Rather than analyzing the world into discrete components, reducing their manyness to the One (=Two) of self-reflection, and ordering them by rank, it sums up a set of disparate circumstances in a shattering blow. It synthesizes a multiplicity of elements without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging.¹⁵²

Links in a rhizomic network are fluid and provisional. Elements co-exist without substitution or cancellation: \( \ldots + y + z + a \ldots \). Metaphoric logics about similarity and equivalence (this = this) are replaced by metonymic, multi-directional shifts along

¹⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 22.
¹⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 7 and 23.
¹⁵¹ This is not a "synthesis" in a dialectical sense, where progressions are binary (i.e. thesis and antithesis combine to form synthesis); but a model for prolific, multidirectional links and transformations, both material and conceptual.
diverse combinational axes. Such modes of thinking seek to preserve both otherness and difference, and reject foreclosure of epistemological and ontological possibilities.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari referred to assemblages as “desiring machines,” stressing the term’s contextual and material nature: “Every machine, in the first place, is related to a continual material flow that it cuts into.” *Anti-Oedipus* aimed to overturn Freudian and post-Freudian discourses that had become mainstays of twentieth-century psychoanalytical theorising. Anti-Oedipus literally means *against Oedipus* — against Western, bourgeois “universals” of subjectivity bound to a triangulated, Oedipal model of desiring relations. Brian Massumi argues that such descriptions limit human experience to imperialist “discourses of sovereign judgment, of stable subjectivity legislated by ‘good’ sense, of rocklike identity, ‘universal’ truth and (white male) justice.” By reading human subjectivity in terms of non-anthropomorphic systems of matter, including “territory and the earth,” Deleuze and Guattari’s “desiring machine” questioned the sufficiency of subject/object as an ontological paradigm. Elizabeth Grosz notes that it was a rhetorical attempt to “denaturalize human bodies and to place them in direct relations with the flows or particles of other bodies or things.” It tried to open subjectivity relations to notions of context, constructedness and site-specific mobility. *A Thousand Plateaus* replaced the trope of “the desiring machine” with “the assemblage” to avoid, in Massumi’s view, “persistent subjectivist misunderstandings” about the role of desire within Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical and material model.

I am mindful of cogent feminist critiques of a Deleuzian framework, and am not making comprehensive crossings between Deleuze and Guattari’s psychoanalytic

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153 Lyn Hejinian discusses Roman Jakobson’s formative distinction between metonym and metaphor in “Strangeness,” *Language of Inquiry* 148-149; my next chapter makes detailed engagement with this idea.
investigations and ideas of poetic form. Rhetorical models of assemblage, however — together with Brian Massumi’s extrapolated “nomad thought” — provide excellent and obvious points of comparison to Lyn Hejinian’s serial poem The Cell, and to “open” forms of epistemological inquiry that Hejinian advances within that text. The Cell collates 150 discrete cells within a larger cell. Each poem is a plateau in an assemblage comprising Hejinian’s writings, Robinson’s texts, exchanged letters, published editions, small presses, and reading venues. Rhetorics of assemblage are applicable also to internal, spatial logics of juxtaposition and repetition that animate The Cell; and to the networked, community-oriented milieu of Language writing that broadly situates Hejinian’s work. We might make a further link to the poetics of consciousness and description examined in “Two Stein Talks”:

Stein wanted to understand things not in isolated rigidity, which falsified and monumentalized conditions which were fluid, but as present participants in ongoing living.... Not chaotic, despite the rapidly multiplying abundance of singularities, by virtue of the differences. Differences keep things separate and distinct.... [Consciousness] often does appear broken up, discontinuous — sometimes radically, abruptly, and disconcertingly so.

As Hejinian describes it, a language of phenomenological perception will exhibit similar qualities to Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblages: fluid sets of differences, in which “plateaus” retain singularity while combining haphazardly with multiple other elements. Organised around non-substitutional chains, rhizomic thinking rejects both metaphor and (mythic) lineage as arbiters of meaning — what Hejinian calls “falsified and monumentalized” narratives of being, including those concerning subjectivity and “social praxis: sex, love, motherhood, etc.” Plateau-like dynamics within The Cell match Hejinian’s sense of cognitive discontinuities, while making lucid, feminist engagement with gendered ontologies and discourses. Hejinian often employs wry


161 Hejinian, “Language and Realism” in “Two Stein Talks,” Language of Inquiry 101-103. Hejinian is contrasting William James’s thesis of “a stream of consciousness” from cognitive experiences that she feels are closer to “a discontinuous consciousness” and might best be explored by an equally disjunctive poetics.


270
humour to destabilise notions of subjective (and descriptive) fixity: "The poem is the becoming / exhibition of its own language / It comes only in part / in parts / Because of what women like / In metonym." At another point she observes: "reality is a process / not an identity." (105)

Hejinian’s analyses in “Two Stein Talks” of Steinian perception appear to share philosophical and syntactical ground with Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomic models of thinking. Her argument in “The Person and Description” that “the personal is [always] already a plural condition” corresponds, similarly, to notions of assemblage. Lyn Hejinian did not read Deleuze and Guattari in any great detail until the early 1990s. Convergences emerge, rather, from something that she calls “a present relativity across the porous planes of the writing.” Chapter three marked the import of French structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics to poetic theories developed during the 1970s by key Language writers — especially regarding the referential properties of language. “In language there are only differences,” wrote Ferdinand de Saussure in 1915. Three years earlier, Gertrude Stein explored a similar philosophy of descriptive language in Tender Buttons (1912):

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

Stein saw language as “an arrangement in a system to pointing,” a diffusion of differences in which “resemblance” was a mobile, provisional relation. Or as Hejinian argues, Stein’s language was “descriptive not with recourse to naming but relationally.”

In “Language and Realism,” Hejinian analyses this same fragment of Tender Buttons. Though she does not foreground her reasons, her choice of poem is canny: it corresponds exactly to the selection of Gertrude Stein’s writing made by Bruce

164 Hejinian, “Person and Description,” Language of Inquiry 201.
Andrews and Charles Bernstein several years earlier when asking seven writers, all men, to respond critically to Stein’s work for \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E \) magazine.\(^{169}\) Bernstein has stressed his own constructive, editorial role in linking Stein’s innovations to Language writing of the late 1970s: “The sort of critical writing that \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E \) was in large part committed to publish very much picks up from Stein’s work in this vein.”\(^{170}\) Hejinian’s reading of *Tender Buttons* in “Language and Realism” doubly overwrites Andrews’s and Bernstein’s circumscribing of a Steinian inheritance. It points out Stein’s disavowal of such linear, sourcing gestures — “she does not trace things back to their origins”\(^{171}\) — while operating as an ironic corrective to the critical status afforded, by Bernstein and Andrews, to seven male writers chosen to wear the \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E \) mantle of a radical literary-historical inheritance. We might remember Deleuze and Guattari’s observation, cited earlier: “The rhizome is an anti-genealogy.”\(^{172}\)

As Lyn Hejinian implies, Gertrude Stein’s descriptive enactments of “difference” preempted a declaration made by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth-century.\(^{173}\) De Saussure’s argument now seems ubiquitous: rather than existing in a unique relationship with the thing it signifies, a sign (word) gains meaning by being different to another thing, such that its valence depends on what it is not. The sign is arbitrary, he proclaimed.\(^{174}\) During the 1970s Jacques Derrida developed de Saussure’s formative study of differences in language, and critiqued its either/or imperatives in favour of endless equations of relational *differdnce* (+ y + z + a +) in which each “sign” gains meaning by virtue of infinite differences.\(^{175}\) These philosophies of language underpin Deleuze and Guattari’s poststructuralist theories of assemblage. And, since Hejinian partly grounds her readings in de Saussure’s structuralist, linguistic models, they might also explain co-incidences between

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\(^{170}\) Charles Bernstein, “An Interview with Tom Beckett,” *Content’s Dream* 400.


\(^{172}\) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 21.


272
Hejinian’s analyses of a Steinian “poetics of description” and Deleuzean “rhizomic systems.” It possibly seems omnipresent and ordinary, in the early twenty-first century, to draw comparisons between disjunctive poetics and theories about linguistic referentialism — as Hejinian and other Language poets did in the early 1980s. Their critical discourses were radical, however, in relation to their own poetic moment; especially considering the “newness” during the late 1970s of key post-structuralist texts in translation.

Gertrude Stein’s “arrangement in a system to pointing” that is “not unordered in not resembling” corresponds with Brian Massumi’s take on Deleuzean rhizomatics in which, to reiterate, a “closed equation of representation, \( x = x \neq y \) (I = I = not you)” is replaced “with an open equation: \( + y + z + a + \ldots \).” Compare this to another of Stein’s short poems from Tender Buttons, entitled “MILK”: “Climb up in sight climb in the whole utter needles and a guess a whole guess is hanging. Hanging hanging.” “Milk” is not a poem of resemblances, but rather an anti-definition; an “open equation” of perceptual instances, where meaning hovers in spaces between words, and “is hanging” upon readers’ inclinations. Moving “whole” through several contexts ironises any closure that we might attach to the word. Like landscapes, Stein’s works are spatial phenomena, argues Hejinian in “Grammar and Landscape.” They contain “innumerable non-isolating focal points” that exist in co-appearance:

Key elements coexist with their alternatives in the work. Nothing is superseded. A phrase or sentence is not obliterated when an altered or even contradictory version of it appears. In this regard, the frequent use of “and” in Stein’s work is an important indicator of inclusion, just as the use of the gerundive is an important indicator of the continuation of anything. One must be careful not to read any sequence of sentences as a series of substitutions or cancellations, not even as a “progress” of thought.

This might apply equally to The Cell, which also uses frequent commas to signify perceptual inclusivity: “Grain and drone, truck and / thorns / Gull, obituary, urine, scope, batteries, watercress / Collaboration / Pasture / Greet and you must be /

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177 Stein, Tender Buttons 9; Massumi, A User’s Guide 6.
178 Stein, Tender Buttons 47.
179 Hejinian, “Grammar and Landscape” in “Two Stein Talks,” Language of Inquiry 117. This passage is edited substantially from its first incarnation in Temblor magazine. “Co-appearance” is Jean-Luc Nancy’s term from Being Singular Plural at 59.
vacated.”

In an essay called “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein described cognition and description in a manner that preempts Brian Massumi’s non-substitutional “nomad thought”: “After all the natural way to count is not that one and one make two but to go on counting by one and one…. One and one and one and one and one.”

Using the signifying properties of language as an exemplar of plateau logic, Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* describe the disjunctive yet combinatory potentials of literary “narrative”:

In a chain that mixes together phonemes and morphemes, etc., without combining them, papa’s mustache, mama’s upraised arm, a ribbon, a little girl, a cop, a shoe suddenly turns up. Each [signifying] chain captures fragments of other chains from which it “extracts” a surplus value…. It is an entire system of shuntings along certain tracks, and of selections by lot, that bring about partially dependent, aleatory phenomena…. The recordings and transmissions that have come from the internal codes, from the outside world, from one region to another of the organism, all intersect, following the endlessly ramified paths of the great disjunctive synthesis.

Compare this to an extract from *The Cell*:

The window stands aimlessly behind
me
The rain smells like steam
rising from cooked rice
Water, pulp, perceptual life span,
reader, body, vegetable, continent, genital,
apricot, number, twig, rice, window,
steam, rain—all neighbors
With and down plus who
many are always by moving
with aim (73)

Hejinian’s poem provokes “an entire system” of perceptual and readerly “shuntings along certain tracks,” to bring about “partially dependent, partially aleatory phenomena” whose meanings reside in contextual linkages and differences between.

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The “outside world,” including the context of a poem’s production, intersects with the “internal codes” of a poem, including language and form, to produce an assemblage: Deleuze and Guattari’s “great disjunctive synthesis.” Throughout The Cell Hejinian collates seemingly unrelated particulars of (described) perception — “reader, body, vegetable, continent, genital” — allowing them to coexist in slippery, proximate relations. Signs, “all neighbors,” gain meaning chiefly in relation to one another. Thoughts accumulate rather than “progressing” in linear form. Hejinian describes this poetic technique in “Strangeness”: “Composition by juxtaposition presents observed phenomena without merging them, preserving their discrete particularity while attempting also to represent the matrix of their proximities.” Hejinian’s last sentence in the above poem comments obliquely on The Cell’s descriptive methods, while providing a tidy version of Brian Massumi’s “nomad thought,” and a poetic revision both of Steinian perceptual language and Derridean differance: “With and down plus who many are always moving with aim.”

Whole sequences of perception like / water sliding in the cold

The Cell enacts a spatial theory of the language of perception, grounded in everyday observations. As a bridge to my final chapter, which studies Oxota: A Short Russian Novel, I will compare descriptive methods employed by Lyn Hejinian in The Cell with a technique of “defamiliarisation” advanced by Russian Formalist writer Viktor Shklovsky. Both are comparable to Gertrude Stein’s thesis on repetition; and both are animated by differences that are given form, scale and presence via the referential and metonymic qualities of language. I want to look at connections between The Cell’s poetics of description and Hejinian’s readings, in “Two Stein Talks,” of a Steinian language for “the consciousness of the consciousness of perception.”

183 Deleuze and Guattari’s “outside world” and “internal codes” are similar to Barrett Watten’s distinction between “exterior” and “interior” poetic syntax: “There is a syntax of construction, ‘interior’ to the work…. There is also a syntax of context, ‘exterior’ to the work, in the way the work makes its statement at a particular point in cultural time. The interior and exterior syntax are not separate; rapidly they merge in [a] vast array of possibilities.” Barrett Watten, Total Syntax (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 68.


In "Grammar and Landscape," Hejinian observes: "One realizes consciousness by positioning sentences in the landscape of consciousness." In other words, perception is a practice of language and spatiality. As my first chapter argued, we might think similarly about knowledge, refiguring it as a contingent process of site-specific knowing rather than a foreclosable "attainment." Descriptive language constitutes one of many contexts for the occurrence and appearance of knowing. A later poem from The Cell begins:

A noise of vicissitudes, of
a remarked gully
It is rolling but not
with speed
I am writing—which takes
the observer's opacity
The room in a cliff
in a coast on the
city
The difference is a sequence
of successive perceptions (205)

What does Hejinian mean by "a remarked gully," and why does she disarrange prepositions when observing "the room in a cliff in a coast on the city"? These torques of description embody an "observer's opacity" — viz., disjunctive experiences of perception — by skewing language at points where readers might expect something else. As Hejinian warns, her poem charts "the noise of vicissitudes," or the changing circumstances of consciousness that guide shifts in her poetic language. These in turn reciprocally animate and alter experiences of cognition itself. A further relation between language and thought, central to Lyn Hejinian's poetic, is implied: writing is "a primary thinking process," and not a secondary charting of "prior" thoughts that can be rendered veritaby by the transparent application of language. If language is a system of differences, it follows that descriptions of cognition itself might formally and spatially reflect these differences; via, for example, disjunction, repetition, haphazard linkage, and opacity. Hejinian gives a sharp, self-reflexive clue to these descriptive methods: "The difference is a sequence of successive perceptions."

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Gertrude Stein argued that a person's descriptions of the act of perceiving are dominated by habits of naming. If words exist in arbitrary relationships with the "things" that they signify, then poetic experiments in perception might explore spaces beyond the "centrality of the noun" to create more palpable configurations of the workings of consciousness. Hejinian advances this idea in "Language and Realism," the first of her Stein talks:

Language, as [Stein] thought and felt it, does far more than simply offer names for our experiences; indeed, a dependency on names (nouns) tends to obscure experience, by replacing what we experience with a preestablished concept, a "simulacrum," of it. It was on this discovery that Stein based her radical challenge to the primacy and centrality of the noun.  

For Stein, describing things and experiences as perceived not only required disjunctive and abrupt switches between words and sentences, but fundamental disruption of mimetic ideals of signification. How might things be described beyond their "proper" names and places in lexical taxonomies? In an essay called "Poetry and Grammar," Stein asked whether there was "a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them." Classificatory naming prohibited, in Stein's view, the more suggestive properties of a language of perceiving: "I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description." By this, Stein means that normalised languages for things might not, in fact, approximate perceptible and describable qualities of things themselves. Once gaps between "sign" and "signified" are acknowledged, language unfolds as a zone of generative contradictions and possibilities. Poetic language might restore the palpability of things by arresting nomenclatures and "the rigid form of the noun," in favour of less "familiar" descriptive methods.

This is exactly Viktor Shklovsky's argument in "Art as Technique" (1917), concerning the properties of poetic language:

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189 Hejinian, "Language and Realism" in "Two Stein Talks," Language of Inquiry 93.
190 Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," 236.
191 Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," 191.
As perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic…. [A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.193

Poetic language can “remove objects from the automatism of perception” by employing techniques of defamiliarisation, argues Shklovsky. By “not naming the familiar object” but referring instead to its surroundings, or to other related objects, or to entirely different things that it might suggest, poetic language can “impede” and “roughen” perception, and thus “impart the sensation of things as they are perceived” and not as they are known in advance. (19-27) Shklovsky calls this “making the familiar seem strange” — a translated extrapolation from the Russian term ostranenie.194 Shklovsky’s argument essentially embodies a theory of description: “things” are not equal to the “words” that we have for them, but are mediated by relations of context in which the (descriptive) language of a perceiving subject plays a determining role. While Viktor Shklovsky here matches Ferdinand de Saussure’s arguments about signification, he moves differently in assigning to poetry a role in recuperating the world from “the automatism of perception” — an habitual closure that is brought about through signifying practices in which “things” only are permitted to correspond to “words” in one-to-one relationships.195

Lyn Hejinian has given a specifically epistemological and ethical spin to a poetics of defamiliarisation and strangeness. In “Figuring Out” (2002), she uses the phrase “the shape of unknowing” to describe one effect of poetical “estrangement”: a formal reluctance to determine perceptions in advance, or to reduce changeable experience to static and finite narratives of “knowledge.”196 In “Reason,” Hejinian links Shklovsky’s thesis to a poetics of worldly affirmation, grounded in the phrase along comes something — launched in context. Her aphorism describes a mutually contextualising

193 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 19-20.
194 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 21; see also Lyn Hejinian, “Forms in Alterity: On Translation,” Language of Inquiry 301.
195 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 27.

278
encounter between a perceiver and a thing perceived, such that the “thing” does not become merely an “object” of anthropomorphic meaning systems, but retains its own specific otherness within the proximities of being-with.¹⁹⁷ The subjectivity of the perceiver is shaped, in fact, by the mobile “objectivity” of the thing “launched” into the space of perceptual regard. These issues of perception and knowledge gain new velocity in context of Lyn Hejinian’s literally defamiliarising experiences in Russia. How to describe something that one perceives “is happening” when knowing only minimal cultural, historical and linguistic contexts for its description? Chapter six takes up this question. To conclude my current discussion, I will show how The Cell explores a merger of Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarisation, Gertrude Stein’s non-nomencultural naming, and William James’s techniques of radical introspection. Lyn Hejinian minimises her use of poetic language as metaphor (“x = x = not y”) in favour of descriptive language as metonym, in which meanings are lateral and contiguous.¹⁹⁸ She thus creates networked grids of poetical strangeness, contingency and paratactic relation — cellular descriptions — that might “approximate consciousness,” or at least stage in writing the generative interactions between cognition, descriptive language, and poetic form.¹⁹⁹

In “Strangeness” (1988), an essay that almost could be subtitled “a poetics of The Cell,” Hejinian investigates a descriptive technique that she terms “a radical method with disintegrating and dispersive effects.”²⁰⁰ “Strangeness” was written concurrently with The Cell and gives a concise appraisal of Hejinian’s thesis of description:

By description I don’t mean after-the-fact realism, with its emphasis on the world described (the objects of description), nor do I want to focus on an organizing subjectivity (that of the perceiver-describer)…. I propose description as a method of invention and of composition. Description, in my sense of the term, is phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency towards effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange. Description should not be confused with definition; it is not definitive but transformative. (138)

¹⁹⁸ Massumi, A User’s Guide 6. I noted earlier Roman Jakobson’s foundational distinction between the metaphoric and metonymic aspects of language.
This compositional strategy is a direct application of Steinian and Russian Formalist innovations. By estranging the familiar, it restores palpability to experience and the world. The act of invention holds potential for transformative intervention: it can "restore" context and history to perceptual processes, and shake things free from habitual regard and dogmatism, by calling particular attention to the ways that words gain meaning — particularly in the animated gaps between language and thought.

*The Cell* marks a major distillation by Lyn Hejinian of key Language experiences and theories. It shows equally the evolution of a poetics of description tied to Hejinian’s own, unique scholarly interests. Let us consider a whole poem from *The Cell*:

The allowing lozenge is not
    akin
Despite sparks, lit by calcium,
    dimmed
After getting somewhere, it (somewhere)
    appears to recede without necessity
Introspection is not a choppy
    narcissism nor a paraphrase
A geranium in its rigidity
Inside the block a dog
    howling from its leash at
    a siren
And ice—
The mind climbs a collision
I can see that the
    mind is glad
Today—that’s an apparent comparison
But it’s difficult to examine
    it
It’s as if it were
    nagging, buoyant, anew, waiting, or
the result of a decision
    not to wait any longer
Flirtatiously grieving, whose ambition is
    thunder
Fulfillment and symptoms
A release between all subjects
It is the instant object
    —for hours in the cold
Hesitation is contorted and memory
is its poor likeness, ribbed
and regular, but unequally confessed
Whole sequences of perception like
water sliding in the cold

October 31, 1987

In this poem Lyn Hejinian does not describe observable things according to their “names,” but relationally, in “sequences of perception” that slide away from reductive signification and crude representation. “The allowing lozenge is not akin,” she begins. Words are not like the things they mean. Hejinian is echoing an earlier, much-quoted statement that she made in “The Rejection of Closure”: “Writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them.” Her poem monitors its own descriptive and cognitive methods: “After getting somewhere, it (somewhere) / appears to recede.” Hejinian is following William James’s directives toward constructive “introspection,” a scientific method by which perceptual processes are perceived closely, as though they were “objects,” and the “results” recorded and examined. Gertrude Stein developed James’s psychological experiments by focusing upon description as a primary problem for “objective” introspection. Hejinian follows Stein in developing a poetic that inhabits an epistemological border between consciousness and written language, in which “vocabulary and grammar” become “an intense examination of the world and of our perceptual relations within the experience of it.” “Introspection is not a choppy / narcissism nor a paraphrase,” Hejinian advises. It yields neither a reflection of its (self-regarding) subject, nor a poor copy of an “original,” but something else: “sparks lit by calcium,” or a dog “inside the block” — “apparent comparisons” that are “difficult to examine,” and that make perceptual processes “buoyant and anew.”

We are witnessing writing about thinking about thinking, set against a backdrop of everyday events: a geranium, a dog, Autumnal cold. Each of those ordinary “instant

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objects" is defamiliarised by Hejinian’s poetic method, which refuses the comforts of conventional observation and habitual naming. Instead we encounter "whole sequences of perception like / water sliding in the cold." A geranium is "in its rigidity," rather than being rigid; it gains sense in relation. Things are placed into strange juxtapositions and are divorced thus from easy meaning: "Flirtatiously grieving, whose ambition is / thunder." Each local instance of description is analogous to "a single moment in the mind, its contents all the thoughts, thought particles, impressions, impulses — all the diverse, particular and contradictory elements that are included in an active and emotional mind at any instant." These impulses are described and produced in the writing, even when conjunctions seem bizarre. Hejinian observes of her "Steinian" descriptive method:

[It] is philosophical, best seen in terms of phenomenology, insofar as it addresses and tests empirically available material — things that can be viewed 'objectively,' which is to say viewed as objects but also viewed in the process of coming into objecthood.

Objectivity itself is under scrutiny; and, especially, the languages that fabricate both subjectivity and objectivity as exclusionary states with stable boundaries. This poetically "objectifying" process corresponds also with Louis Zukofsky's ideal of objectivism: a poetic method that views the poem as an "object in process," that comes into being beside and with the things it seeks to describe. Hejinian calls this "thinking with the things as they exist." While objects "come into objecthood" via Hejinian's descriptions, subjects — particularly the writing subject — simultaneously come into "subjecthood," gaining meaning in proximate "collision" with others, or in the otherness of worldly encounter: "Inside the block a dog / howling from its leash at / a siren / And ice— / The mind climbs a collision / I can see that the / mind is glad." Like Stein and Shklovsky, Hejinian makes frequent use of repetition to effect perceptual defamiliarisation, as per the following poem from The Cell:

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209 Hejinian, The Cell 112.
The rain is falling over,
each rain separately so there
are tangles and therefore puddles
January—given in—is a
relief
The woman gets home before
dark at last
It is far wider than
an egg
Function bends (the heart is
a shell then)
But there’s no time to
divulge
The shock of difference in
rain repeatedly
Discontinuity lets her undo
Over the rain of strings
a thought (63)

Familiar boundaries are established — a wet January evening, a woman’s relief at returning home — and then transgressed through descriptive shifts. Meanings and uses for everyday language and images are skewed, or made strange. “Function bends” as descriptive “discontinuity” lets Hejinian “undo” her thinking “over the rain of strings,” or across a sequence of juxtaposed repeats. Hejinian enacts an idea explored by Stein in “How Writing is Written”: “There is no such thing as repetition.... There is always a slight variation.”210 While we might quibble with Stein’s (strategically) blanket refusal, her maxims gainfully direct us toward observations of difference and incompleteness. Hejinian augments this idea in “The Rejection of Closure”: “[R]epetition disrupts the initial apparent meaning scheme. The initial reading is adjusted; meaning is set in motion, emended and extended, and the rewriting that repetition becomes postpones completion of the thought indefinitely.”211 In the above poem, “rain” exemplifies this postponement of closure. “The rain is falling over, / each rain separately.” While “falling over” could mean falling constantly, a stranger meaning emerges: the rain “falls over” as an object might tumble over. “Each rain” qualifies the previous line while remaining ambiguous. Does Hejinian mean each drop, or each intermittent rain spell? Alternatively, “each rain separately” could refer to Hejinian’s descriptive method, in which every use of “rain” is distinct and different. The rain makes “tangles,” a strangely familiar description of its effects — tangles in

210 Stein, “How Writing is Written,” 158.
211 Hejinian, “Rejection of Closure,” Language of Inquiry 44.
perception, or sheets of falling water, or in wet hair. Hejinian later signposts her strategy: "The shock of difference in / rain repeatedly." Rain is depicted over and over, changing each time to demand a new immediacy.\(^ {212} \) "Such is / the dispersive effect of description." \((\text{The Cell} \ 204)\)

As Lyn Hejinian writes, a poetics of strange description "should not be confused with definition; it is not definitive but transformative."\(^ {213} \) It creates assemblages that move languages of cognition beyond one-to-one correspondences, allowing them to crackle into life in the difficult gaps between prolific local moments. It restores sensation and inquisition, and asks readers to question the orders of meaning and everyday contexts — including language itself — in which we respond to the world. At its most hopeful, as Hejinian observes, a radical poetics of perceptual description might thus engender "a release between all subjects":

\[
\text{Might it come to the} \\
\text{consciousness of unconsciousness} \\
\text{It is good to know} \\
\text{so} \quad ^{214}
\]

\(^ {212} \) Hejinian's technique here also follows Stein's techniques for creating a "continuing present" via repeated, everyday descriptions. See Stein, "Composition as Explanation," 31-34.

\(^ {213} \) Hejinian, "Strangeness," \textit{Language of Inquiry} 138.

\(^ {214} \) Hejinian, \textit{The Cell} 217.
Strange Borders, Double Vision: *Oxota* as a Work of Trans-iteration

*Chapter Six*

Arkadii says that the first sentence of my Russian novel should be “All things happen so often that there is no sense in speaking about them.” Or this should be the epigraph, with attribution to Emmanuel Kant. “Start please with the third chapter,” he says.

— Lyn Hejinian, “Soviet Diary”

I elaborated on the beginning of the novel, which never existed, and I said that I found myself a perpetual participant of the middle.

— Lyn Hejinian, “Language and ‘Paradise’”

The object of contemplation is between profiles
I remember being so
The walls multiply
The skies slide

— Lyn Hejinian, *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*

My previous chapter examined *The Cell’s* radical poetics of description in which cognitive processes are under scrutiny, and relations between “words” and “things” kept in generatively inconclusive states. I compared Gertrude Stein’s desire to find “a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them,” to Lyn Hejinian’s use of techniques of defamiliarisation, repetition and estrangement; often sourced by Hejinian to the innovative methods of Russian Formalist writer Viktor Shklovsky. This chapter continues to study a poetics of perceptual description — *writing about thinking about thinking about writing* — from a different perspective. Lyn Hejinian began *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991) several months after completing *The Cell*, reorienting her sense of “description as a method of invention and composition” toward specific encounters with Russian language, space and culture. Between 1983 and 1991, Hejinian visited Russia at least seven times and spent long periods in Leningrad-St. Petersburg, where she lived and

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1 Lyn Hejinian, “Soviet Diary.” 37 page unpublished manuscript, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 14(U), “Soviet Diary 1989”]. Citation from page 27 of manuscript.


worked alongside experimental Russian poet Arkadiii Dragomoschenko. In a sense, the two poets’ translational and transcultural relationship acts as a “border guard” for this whole chapter; a facilitating, intersubjective encounter that provides a “common spacing of time” in which material and textual events take place. After Jean-Luc Nancy, I am observing community as a happening of togetherness-in-difference that occurs between subjects and can transgress the borders of “language” or “nation.”

Oxota: A Short Russian Novel is a compelling and deft examination of ways in which problems of narration and place might circumscribe one’s experiences of knowing. Lyn Hejinian’s encounters in Russia during the 1980s brought a literally unfamiliar piquancy to her development in poetry of “a theory of a language of the description of knowledge.” Issues of knowing and saying gain particular gravity in the face of linguistic and cultural differences. This chapter asks questions that are phenomenological and epistemological: how to describe things that one perceives are happening when aware only of disjunctive and minimal cultural, historical and syntactical contexts for their description? Developing that inquiry, and after my epigraph, what does it mean to be “a perpetual participant of the middle”? In situations characterised by ongoing alterity or xenia, where might a person locate the boundaries of subjectivity and objectivity; and how useful is that dualism when comprehending place-specific linkages and separations? Recalling the first chapters of my thesis, we might imagine such questions as both “epistemolexical” and “geophilosophical.” Perhaps Oxota best illustrates the dilemma:

It’s characteristic of a Russian novelist to reveal some lack of confidence in the relationship between words and their things
A chair but not sure what sits and what will match it
Noon freezing on the spot we don’t remember
Each action hangs, inconsequentially, over objects
How many alternatives there must be
How many patient comparisons await fulfilling

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Unextracted paradoxes, breathless empty icy streets, anticipated catastrophes with no one approaching...

While objects, events and places are observed with some certainty — a chair, noon, “breathless empty icy streets” — Hejinian is less sure about the relational contexts, including language, in which their meanings rest. She is “not sure what sits and what will match” and unable to “fulfill” comparisons or settle upon linkages, although she is aware of prolific possibilities suggested by each appearance and article. Noon is freezing on the spot we don’t remember. “Words and their things” exist in uneasy rapport, complicated by layers of narrative distancing; Lyn Hejinian professes quite confidently that “a Russian novelist” characteristically will exhibit “some lack of confidence” in the terms and duties of (poetic) representation. How many alternatives there must be, how many patient comparisons await fulfilling. Borders are not void in Hejinian’s scheme, it seems, but maximally occupied.

Hejinian’s attention to a gap between “words and their things” recalls my last chapter’s discussions of a disparity between signs and signified things, as observed by structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Moving beyond binary paradigms, Oxota takes the mobility and contingency of representation as a point of departure, and collates plural sequences of gaps into looping chains of narrative; in keeping perhaps with Jacques Derrida’s notion of perpetual differance, or the suggestive assemblages of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, both canvassed in the previous chapter. “The middle is by no means an average,” write Deleuze and Guattari; “on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but... a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks.” For every thing that Lyn Hejinian observes in a Russian context, there are at least two words, one Russian and one English. This gives triangulated inflections to

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12 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 25.
notions of representation and knowing. The “sign” for each “thing” is skewed again, since every (written) description could appear in Cyrillic or Latinate alphabets. Contextual uses of language provide a third spin as Hejinian realises that transliteration — the direct conveyance of one language into another — cannot possibly preserve the sense of “Russian” expressions and experiences: “Do you know what we say of a clever girl? / She has her own butter in her head.” Hejinian has commented that exact rendering into English of Russian phrases or words can produce highly cryptic sentences, due to the simultaneously metaphoric and metonymic nature of Russian language; what Hejinian describes as its intrinsically “poetic” qualities, if observed from a Western point of view. Across *Oxota*, translation is invoked as a trope for multiple fissures in perceptual processes, and vice versa. How to describe “perceiving of perception” in unequivocal terms if the language of inquiry is multiply unstable? “The excitation of the same experience by two grammars — it’s / not impossible,” Hejinian advises.

*Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* is a work of coded forms in which difference is under perpetual scrutiny. The poem constantly refers to disintegration, dissolve, and predicaments of consciousness: “A place to hear between / A place to unframe.” (220) In distilling washes of detail into crystalline tableaux, however, it is also remarkably exacting: “Two figures on motorcycles going different directions on a / Prussian blue road fading to black having already passed, / factory chimneys on the right, snow and bare trees, the / closer in goggles, the other only a back.” (236) *Oxota* is driven by a dialectics between familiar events that are “made strange” or defamiliarised, and Hejinian’s “familiarisation,” via American poetical languages and forms, of “strange” occurrences and circumstances. Subjectivities and object-apprehension are “unframed” in a zone between: “There’s no a and the there / Not much is.” (270)

This chapter begins with beginnings of all kinds, reading them as indicators of perceptual and spatio-temporal mobility. I suggest ways in which “genre” can provide useful windows through which to read *Oxota’s* thematic and formal rejections of

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13 Hejinian, *Oxota* 218.
15 Hejinian, *Oxota* 63.
epistemic and ontological closure. I then consider the literary friendship of Lyn Hejinian and Arkadii Dragomoschenko and document their collaborative ventures of the 1980s. The second half of my chapter stems from two connotations of the Russian word oxota: hunting and desire. I focus on core refrains within Oxota that suggest an unresolved “hunt” for cognitive and subjective stability: vision, doubling, spatial disintegration, and the paradoxical scarcity and proliferation of “objects.” I close by speculating upon kinds of desire suggested by Hejinian’s play with authorisation and deferral, in light of two concepts underwriting this thesis: otherness and withness.

Beginnings and genres in motion

Where does Oxota: A Short Russian Novel begin? Toward the end of 1984, Lyn Hejinian received a copy of A Hunter’s Sketches by post from Leningrad. It was the year before Mikhail Gorbachev’s election as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, to be followed soon after by the Russian government’s twin implementations of “glasnost” and “perestroika.” It was one year before the first Superpowers Summit in Moscow, at which Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan met to discuss international military and economic issues including the nuclear arms “race,” the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and the technical and rhetorical dismantling of the Cold War. It was two years after Lyn Hejinian and poet Barrett Watten published the first edition of Poetics Journal in hand-printed foolscap format, stapled rather than bound; and one year after Hejinian’s first trip to Leningrad in May 1983. “Improvisation begins at the moment when something has just happened,” writes Hejinian, “which is to say, it doesn’t begin at the beginning. Nonetheless, it is always involved with the process of beginning — that is, of setting things in motion.”

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Writing to her mother Carolyn Andrews on 20 November 1984, Hejinian describes *A Hunter’s Sketches (Zapiski Okhotnika)*, a work by Ukrainian-born nineteenth-century Russian novelist and poet Ivan S. Turgenev, as “ironic, but so tenderly ironic that one wants to weep. It is wonderful.” The Turgenev edition was in English and had been published in Moscow by *Progress Publishers* as one of a series of “Russian classics in translation.” It was both “gorgeously illustrated” and readily available — or at least, officially sanctioned — in Soviet literary-cultural life. Tellingly, Hejinian’s letter of November 1984 also refers to “the Reaganoid years” that she and her American friends are experiencing with critical vehemence and certain trepidation.

*Zapiski Okhotnika* (1852), a cycle of short stories, was a gift to Lyn Hejinian from Leningrad poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko. He posted the book together with a volume of stories by Ivan Bunin, a Russian writer whose classically influenced poetry, novels and plays attracted a Nobel prize for literature in 1933. Bunin was born in the same region of Russia as Turgenev; Oryol in the Ukraine, not far from where Dragomoschenko also spent much of his childhood, in Vinnitsa. One of Ivan Bunin’s best-known works makes a signature appearance in Chapter 116 of Hejinian’s *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, in lines that refer to an “actual” exchange between Hejinian and Dragomoschenko:

Arkadii, I said
What in your opinion is the quintessential Russian novel?
*The Life of Arseniev*
But we can’t decide anything

With more than a little irony, Hejinian names this chapter of *Oxota* “Aesthetic Gratification” and concludes it with the line: “We did not fulfill our obligations.” Nothing can be decided. Things are incomplete or unfulfilled, and the borders of (textual) obligation are blurring. Chapter 117 of *Oxota* (“The Destinies of Observation”) continues Hejinian’s metadiscourse about the instabilities and cultural expectations of genre boundaries and nomenclatures. “A Russian novel should be called *The Adherent,*” it begins. “It is obsequious / It holds / It is opportune.” Hejinian

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18 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 20 November 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 16].
concludes: “With such a phrase one can imagine another world.” (132) Describing The Life of Arseniev (1927-1933) in comparably recondite terms, Russian writer Konstantin Paustovski once characterised Ivan Bunin’s text as “neither a short novel, nor a novel, nor a long short story, but of a genre yet unknown.”

Ivan Bunin left St. Petersburg for Paris after the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917. A whole chapter of Zhizn Arsen’eva: U Istoka Dhej (The Life of Arseniev: The Well of Days) — Bunin’s “quintessentially Russian novel” — is devoted to an encomium for the literary legacy of nineteenth-century Russian novelist and poet Alexander Pushkin. “How many emotions he evoked in me!” writes Bunin. “And how often my own emotions and everything amidst which and by which I lived found a companion in him!” Fifty years earlier in June 1880, to mark the opening in Moscow of a new monument to Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev (A Hunter’s Sketches) delivered a speech that praised Pushkin in similarly elevated rhetoric:

And finally, it was [Pushkin’s] mighty hand which was the first to raise high the banner of poetry on Russian soil; and if the dust of battle which was raised after his death clouded this radiant banner for a while, then it is now, as the dust is beginning to settle, that we see this victorious standard shining once more on high.... Let us also hope that in the not too distant future the descendents of the Russian common people, who today do not read Pushkin, will understand what the name Pushkin means.

Turgenev is reputed to have once commented, with hyperbolic deference, that he would “give both his little fingers for a single line of Evgeny Onegin.” The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky also spoke at Moscow’s Pushkin celebrations in 1880. He extolled the verse novel Evgeny Onegin as Pushkin’s finest work: “Evgeny Onegin [is] a poem which is not fantastic but which has a tangible realism, in which the reality of Russian life is embodied so fully and with such creative force that its like has not been seen before or since.” Evgeny Onegin is a work in 14-line rhymed stanzas that begins beside the “grey waters of the Neva” in St. Petersburg (Leningrad from 1924 to

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24 Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Pushkin,” Russian Views of Pushkin 77.
It develops, as its core narrative conceit, a love relationship between Evgeny Onegin and a singular, literate romance-reading heroine called Tatyana. In a paper entitled “How Russian Is It? Lyn Hejinian’s Oxota,” Marjorie Perloff cites a comment made by Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who held that “Pushkin’s real subject was not the story of his lovers, Eugene and Tatyana, ‘but a game with this story.’”

Lyn Hejinian’s Oxota: A Short Russian Novel was written one and a half centuries after Pushkin’s iconic epic and is set comparably, though somewhat hazily, in Leningrad “against the outstretched water in the Neva.” Turning to the back cover, a reader encounters an attractive and reductive explanatory sentence: “Composed of 270 free sonnets inspired by Pushkin’s Evgeny Onegin, Oxota: A Short Russian Novel is a stunning edifice in language that proposes and enacts an intimate and restive portrait of life in Russia today.” I want to think about the curious term “free sonnets” and to speculate upon links that might exist between Pushkin’s most-lauded text and Oxota’s proposed “portrait of life in Russia.” In a letter dated 4 November 2001, Hejinian directly addressed Oxota’s beginnings and its lengthy serial form, and offered an important qualification to the appellation free sonnets:

I began and failed and began and failed. I am certain that I had told Arkadii that I wanted to write a “Russian novel”; he and our friends found the thought terrifically amusing. Arkadii did say all that I attribute to him in Chapter 89, and he said it before I had begun. Others also made suggestions.... I carried a notebook with me and wrote down everything that people told me to put into my novel. My initial (failed) attempts at beginning were in prose. It was only when it occurred to me to use Pushkin’s Evgeny Onegin “novel in verse” form with its 14-line stanzas (which should not be considered “sonnets”) that I was able to go forward.

Hejinian’s poem had at least three different “formal” beginnings. Evgeny Onegin’s stanzas, however — along with Alexander Pushkin’s almost comically iconic Russian national status — were never far from Hejinian’s mind during Oxota’s devising. Nor were certain archetypal tropes and methods of nineteenth-century Russian novels:

27 Hejinian, Oxota 123.
“Misha should be a major character in the Russian novel / Sasha, too, and Nadia... / There must be a sentence which claims a chapter for itself.”

During a lengthy stay with Arkadii and Zina Dragomoschenko in Leningrad in February-March of 1989, Lyn Hejinian wrote a series of daily, exquisitely detailed notes entitled “Soviet Diary.” Now held in the Hejinian Papers at the Mandeville Library, Hejinian’s “diary” collates dozens of pages of observations and descriptions that were incorporated later, often verbatim, into her “short Russian novel.” Early in “Soviet Diary,” Hejinian writes: “Talk of a Russian novel. Komnata [Komhata] a Short Russian Novel?” And ten pages later: “How to begin a Russian novel? One begins a Russian novel with some confusion along the characters. If the novel is about artists or intellectuals, the confusion is less formal than that among bureaucrats or generals.” Two-thirds of the way through her diarised notes, Hejinian writes: “A novel in verse -- the model of Evgeny Onegin. Poema is a long narrative poem; ctkhi are verses; stikhotvorenie is a single poem, ‘but it is more comfortable to speak of stikki.’” And in the third last line, Hejinian simply writes: “Oxota: A Short Russian Novel.”

In an interview entitled “A Local Strangeness” (1995), Hejinian again emphasised Oxota’s formal links to Evgeny Onegin, and distinguished between Pushkin’s lines and the convenient designation sonnets:

I wasn’t thinking at all of sonnets but of the fourteen-line stanzas of Pushkin’s Evgeny Onegin. To think of the “chapters” as sonnets is very misleading.... The formal structure I ended up using was largely influenced by Pushkin. His Evgeny Onegin is commonly known as “the first Russian novel.”

Evgeny Onegin contains eight chapters of individually numbered stanzas. Oxota follows suit with eight “books” arranged in cumulatively numbered “chapters,” two hundred and seventy in all. Hejinian also adds an eleven-line Coda, a ninth “book” — an echo perhaps of the additional book to Evgeny Onegin that Pushkin omitted during

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29 Hejinian, Oxota 101.
initial publication of his complete work, after re-casting the ninth chapter as the eighth.³²

Lyn Hejinian's oblique "(failed) attempts at beginning [Oxota] in prose" and her disavowal of key formal categories prompt a brief reconsideration of Oxota's back cover descriptors, in which poetic genre is problematised elegantly. Oxota is a "proposition," an "enactment," a "literature brimming with signification," a "restive portrait." The book seems to be a noun-in-process, rather than an identifiable object. It is "a stunning edifice in language," a splendid construction of syntax, rather than a serial poem or a "novel in verse." Critics are confounded and stimulated alike by matters of textual designation when reading Oxota: A Short Russian Novel. Brian McHale calls the work "a postmodernist long poem" that "staves off master-narratives," while Marjorie Perloff describes it as "a conversation whose participants cannot be located," and "one of the most ambitious long poems of the nineties" written "in good epic tradition."³³ Lyn Hejinian refers in Chapter 193 of Oxota to the "first Russian novel" — her figurative exemplar, Evgeny Onegin — via an assemblage of phrases, drawn implicitly from Russian friends, that further complicate the status of her poem:

Evgeny Onegin is a novel of manners (Belinsky called it encyclopedic), a family saga, an autobiography, an aimless plot with the symmetry of time, an impression of philosophy... (211)

Deepening the ambiguity several lines later, Hejinian writes: "conflict is resolved / into vertigoes and spun on perpendiculars." (211)

Aimless plots, symmetrical time, an impression of philosophy. Categorical classification might provide a moment of compelling (and fictive) closure for readers of Oxota; but when balanced against the disciplined and supple constancy of stylistic shifts propelling the poem, it is more likely to "resolve into vertigoes," adrift within its own contradictory logic. Place names, generic temporal cues, Russian-novelistic

³² Pushkin, Eugene Onegin 215. The "missing" chapter later was published separately as "Excerpts from Onegin's Travels," with an explanatory note by Pushkin.
“stock characters” and narrative riffs and developments appear repeatedly in Oxota; but the book is certainly not “a novel.” Rather, Hejinian’s use of that designation works to complicate broader issues of taxonomy and nomenclature, and provokes readers into giving close and skeptical attention to naming, plots, authorial propinquity, and narrativity within the poem. What sorts of specific weight might attach to the word novel in Russian literary-cultural and popular-cultural contexts — let alone a novel in verse? How does Hejinian engage with the highly-invested cultural regard and artistic standing that have been afforded, historically, to novelists and poets in Russia?34 What kind of miscigenated work or hybrid is an American serialised poem that frequently quotes and collages fragments of “Russian” texts, and calls itself a short novel? And what sorts of relationships do we observe when considering poetic genre and formal choices alongside questions of cross-cultural exchange, “appropriate” or contextually-specific poetical methodologies, and cultural “appropriation”? Evidently, to begin with genre — a favourite starting point in almost all existent critical material about Oxota — is as unstable, improvisational and generative a beginning as any.

It seems unavoidable when mapping the “origins” of Oxota to evoke a prolific array of foundations and linkages without coming fully to rest at any of them. It also seems fitting to narrativise without full context and to make abundant sculptures of detail, none irrelevant. Each character enters for a moment — Lyn Hejinian, Viktor Shklovsky and Russian Formalism, the Dragomoschenko family, Ivan Turgenyev, Alexander Pushkin — before melting into another. Say a name and someone appears, someone without the same name.35 “I cannot quote, I cannot get context,” writes Hejinian. “There is nothing to demarcate but all is indivisibly precise.” (Oxota 185)

Prompted by encounters with various kinds of difference, Oxota: A Short Russian Novel reflects a practical turning-out of Lyn Hejinian’s local writing situation — the San Franciscan Language scene of the mid-1980s — toward an altered, stranger


35 Hejinian, Oxota 292.
experience. A literal rejection of closure seems to be taking place. Marjorie Perloff observes that “we notice a gradual transformation in phenomenology” across the poem without gaining any coherent sense of chronology. “Something, we know, is changing” — but it is impossible to know quite what, or to prevent the text from dissolving and recombing as we read.

The parameters of Oxtot, including those we might demarcate by “genre,” remain at all times permeable and mobile. Put differently, the poem is continually self-reflexive about its own status as an object, and about surroundings (including readership) that might change to renew its meanings. Perception is under scrutiny as one process by which “things” gain borders: “We are among things on which reality has been slowly settling / and is then dusted away.” (22) Oxtot’s cover image embodies this motility. Its two main figures cast paradoxical shadows, presumably from two different suns or lights. Hejinian supplements our knowledge of Oxtot’s borders and origins with a temporal clue in its last pages: “December 18, 1989 – February 18, 1991.” (293) This gesture of closure, however, is Brechtian; its formal symmetry merely asks readers to be alert to the constructive presence of an authorial hand. The phrase “a short Russian novel” is open to similar scrutiny, especially considering the 270 “chapters” of Hejinian’s “novel.” “Objects always flicker,” writes Hejinian. So, too, do genres — which gives a lie to their borders. Tzvetan Todorov argues that genres are permissive codes by which reading subjects are able to anticipate and recognise discursive practices that organise and give meaning to their lives. Developed at historically specific moments, they schematise texts according to prevailing ideologies and culturally intelligible categories; which makes them inherently contingent modes of textual classification. We might imagine genres as volatile fictions. Hejinian riffs on these concepts throughout Oxtot: “If there can be socialist realism then there can surely be / bourgeois lyricism” (15); “The exact novel genre — satirical or resonant.” (165)

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37 The painting is by Ostat Dragomoschenko, Arkadii Dragomoschenko’s son.
Between its enigmatic cover image and opaque back cover descriptions, *Oxota* is "a ceaseless consequence," a poem without fixed beginnings and endings:

We blanked at broken gliding ice and pink stripes on the water  
Nothing but always  
It's in passage  
A ball in warning  
Literary rolling  
A woman on a bicycle with warped wheels  
A woman with a birch broom  
I didn't change it (165)

*Oxota* plays constantly with a notion that acculturated reading frames and literary classifications give only fleeting stability to occurrences, objects, conditions and names that appear always "in passage" or *en passant*. Through a series of "blanks," "breaks," and repetitions, things in the poem retain their "literary rolling," and the capacity to transform during subsequent textual and perceptual encounters. Genre commotions within *Oxota* are "representative" of phenomenological and illustrative problems driving the whole poem: how to describe matter that seems to dematerialise constantly under the combined pressures of light, language, and intrinsic difference? And what might this say about "authorial" subjectivity? Lyn Hejinian seriously doubts her ability (and right) to impact upon the scenes and places that she surveys: "I didn't change it." Across *Oxota*, she stresses her own otherness in relation to Russian cultural and linguistic landscapes, hoping to turn her narrative away from "exoticisation" or romanticisation of cultural difference while reflecting upon her own "strangeness" in a Russian context: "I meant to exoticise myself."

Whether *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* succeeds in its professed task of "the complete realization of one's self-unimportance" (*Oxota* 94) is a compelling and vexed question. In 1991, Lyn Hejinian and several other American Language poets wrote a collaborative work called *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union* after attending the first conference on philosophy and poetics to be held in Russia since the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{40} Hejinian, *Oxota* 164.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{41} Hejinian, *Oxota* 165.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{42} Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.} \]
Various observations made in that text by Hejinian illuminate *Oxota*’s study of genre, language, object-apprehension, and subjective disintegration:

But it was dizzying trying to think of the context for meaning, and therefore the context for knowledge (and I’m convinced that poetry participates in the process of knowing), among people who are simultaneously Eastern and Western without resolution, without boundaries, at least not as I feel them. The given that is a poem would be embodied formally, not thematically. …
An array of images without corresponding objects, without correlatives, wasn’t alienating, although I was sad, as if grieving. The images were saturated. And my own ego was disintegrating. (47, 104)

Later, I will address Hejinian’s engagement with authorisation in the face of cultural otherness, proposing that *Oxota*’s poetic of “saturated” description and desire “without corresponding objects” attempts to find respectful ways of “knowing” in a difficult terrain of cross-cultural alterities. First I want to consider Arkadii Dragomoschenko’s important relationship to Lyn Hejinian’s interpretations of, and experiences within, Russian culture; more specifically, the urban cultural space of Leningrad. “Arkadii” appears throughout *Oxota* as a central “character” who often gives vicarious “authorisation” to Hejinian’s observations and descriptions. In a chapter carrying the whimsical and painterly title of “The Doubting Man,” Hejinian writes:

Here, said Arkadii — a letter from Chekov
One must always suspect the beginning and end, since it’s there that the writer puts his lies (141)

*Phenomenal meetings: Lyn Hejinian and Arkadii Dragomoschenko*

Lyn Hejinian spoke of another beginning in April 1984 when writing to Fanny Howe: “I am beginning to translate his letters myself… thus rendering [them] all the more thrilling, as if I had contributed to their composition.” Hejinian is referring to an epistolary exchange that she began with Arkadii Dragomoschenko soon after meeting

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him in Leningrad in May 1983. Hejinian had travelled to the USSR and Poland with the ROVA saxophone quartet, a San Franciscan experimental jazz-influenced group with a dedicated underground following in Moscow and Leningrad. Hejinian’s husband Larry Ochs is a member of the quartet. Officials cancelled ROVA’s Leningrad gig following a very successful and thus potentially destabilising ROVA concert in Moscow, and Dragomoschenko made arrangements for the band to give an illicit performance. He later took Hejinian and Ochs to a meeting of "Club 81," a “non-official” group of Leningrad poets and writers who had begun meeting in 1981 as a necessary alternative to the state-sanctioned and heavily monitored Soviet Writers’ Union.

Arkadii Dragomoschenko was a founding member of Club 81. Its writers shared no common aesthetic programme but felt compelled rather to “deal with a number of common problems, not poetical but societal — regulatory with respect to poetry-writing.” Without “official” authorisation, writers could not publish in Soviet Russia, and thus were considered culturally “marginalised.” They had to devise alternative means of accruing readership and a kind of legitimacy and life for their poetry. Although Dragomoschenko wrote many books of poetry during the 1980s, his first complete work in Russian — Nebo Sootvetstvii (Sky of Conformity) — was not published in Russia until 1990. His poems had appeared during the 1970s and early 1980s in various Russian samizdat journals; street-circulated publications, often in limited-run carbon copy. “The very ownership of a copy of one is officially illegal,” wrote Hejinian in 1985. In 1986, Club 81 published an underground anthology entitled Krug [Circle] that contained the first of Dragomoschenko’s poems to be included in a Russian book, a publication scenario shared by most of the anthology’s participants.

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45 Hejinian first refers to trip preparations in a letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 31 August 1982 [74, 1, 14].
50 Kates, In the Grip of Strange Thoughts 265.
Writing to her mother after a second trip to the USSR in July 1985, Lyn Hejinian depicts a fascinating scenario of open closure in the “non-official” Leningrad writing community. She sketches one moment from an interval of Russian poetical history that might be marked as the post-Brezhnev and pre-glasnost years, roughly 1970 to 1986.\(^51\)

The difference between Leningrad (which has a reputation of being politically very conservative but which is artistically bohemian and free) and Moscow (where all the artists + writers + musicians were very paranoid and secretive) was more noticeable [than in July 1983] -- it was in fact an endless subject of discussion and it influenced artistic style to some degree. In Moscow we attended two secret concerts -- they were both given for us privately, one in a sculptor’s studio... and the other in a classroom of a music-school. At the second concert we were told to say nothing and that we were to be introduced as Estonians. ...

The openness of the Leningrad situation is largely a strategic ploy on the part of the artists + writers + musicians. Arkadii, who is one of the principal engineers, encourages everyone to be direct and overt about their projects -- “We do nothing wrong. We are not political. Tell them everything and more than everything.” It is in the “more than everything” that he is a strategist -- they have concocted a cultural situation that is so baroque and that changes so frequently, no one can possibly keep up with it. My relation with the writers, by the way, is now “official” -- I received a letter from VAAP (part of the Writers’ Union) giving me status as a translator, at least of specific works by specific writers.\(^52\)

According to Hejinian’s depictions, state-patrolled tolerance in mid-1980s Leningrad — or perhaps a kind of ignorance — is calibrated against official “illegality.” Traces of these scenarios animate Oxota: “So why have you been whispering, I asked in Ilya’s ear / It’s about paper, he said — we wonder how much paper a San Francisco-St. Petersburg anthology would be allowed.”\(^53\)

Hejinian’s letter to Carolyn Andrews also marks the beginning of her own authorised “status” as a translator of specific Russian texts, still a necessary formality in 1985. Prior to this official juncture, Hejinian had already begun a prolific correspondence

\(^{51}\) John High’s introduction to Crossing Centuries gives a good account of periodisations of late twentieth-century Russian poetry (xxv-xlivi). Jim Kates’s less detailed introduction to In the Grip of Strange Thoughts marks 1986 as a specific cinamen; see Kates, Strange Thoughts S.


\(^{53}\) Hejinian, Oxota 37. This comment has an additional context; in 1988 a Russian-American anthology entitled Double Rainbow was published. “We [Dragomoschenko and Hejinian] were both in it I believe, but I never got a copy and don’t know for sure,” Hejinian wrote to me in a letter dated 11 November 2001.
with Dragomoschenko. Hejinian paid someone to translate Dragomoschenko's letters, during the first year of the poets' friendship; but her own "devoted interest" in the dialogue soon inspired her to undertake "the exhausting work of many hours" and make her own translations of his "vivid, charming, beautiful and eccentric" letters. Describing her encounters with Russian language to Fanny Howe in April 1984, she wrote: "It is absurdly difficult.... My sense is that it is close to a practical application of poetic language, based in metaphor and wildly, extravagantly resonant." Hejinian enthused to her mother: "My correspondence with Arkadii Dragomoschenko is developing into a major literary project, one on which I spend a great deal of thought and time. I often write two or three drafts of my letters to Arkadii and still they don't satisfy me."

Only months after her first Leningrad visit, Hejinian realised the artistic significance of her correspondence with Dragomoschenko, and began to observe shifts in her own poetic that were a consequence of her new, intense relationship with (written) Russian language. In December 1983, Hejinian wrote to poet Clark Coolidge: "My correspondence — or the world created by my correspondence — with the Russian writers (but, in particular, with Arkadii Dragomoschenko)... has put letter-writing into a new and major place in my literary life, and it is there that I have begun to be able to articulate (and even to discover) what might begin to be my own 'poetics.' In wonderfully visceral terms, Hejinian explains her early translations:

I think of my correspondence with Arkadii -- a world almost entirely in language. And, especially for me (he knows English better than I know Russian), the language itself is especially physical, and the process of my translating his letters is tactile (you know, finger on word while I try to find the same word in the dictionary and then the case ending in the grammar book). And then the subject of at least some of our correspondence has been the relationship of desire to language -- more spiritual than physical, but it is uncertain how completely one can separate them.

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54 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews dated 6 May 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 16].
56 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews, exact date unknown (c. late 1983), Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 15].
57 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 15 December 1983, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].
58 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 7 July 1984, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2, 21].
Hejinian’s literal search amidst the materials of language and her reflections upon language and desire are key refrains that will re-emerge in later discussions of *Oxota*. As described to Coolidge, Hejinian’s early experiences of poetic compatibility with Dragomoschenko were wholly over-determined by letters, which presented “a world almost entirely in language.” Letters became a vehicle for philosophical dialogue, exchanges of poetry, administration of projects and travel plans, negotiation of cultural and linguistic differences, and poetic “discoveries.” Hejinian’s assessments of the collaborative nature of translation are revealing; in translating Dragomoschenko’s letters, Hejinian feels she is creating entirely new works by generating a band of second, parallel texts. “I am not a translator,” she wrote to Coolidge in 1989.\(^59\)

Equally significant in these letter extracts are references to “a major literary project” taking shape between Hejinian and Dragomoschenko. Assisted by an interpreter upon meeting, the poets recognised a joint fascination with epistemologies of poetic language and constructive links between description and perception.\(^60\) Their entry into sustained correspondence was undoubtedly a product of shared ideational and poetical imperatives, as I shall discuss later; while conversely, letters enabled both to develop projects and philosophies that were independent from their co-respondence, and differently “local” in effect. When Hejinian encountered Dragomoschenko in 1983 she had just written “The Rejection of Closure” and was making multiple drafts of “The Guard.”\(^61\) On return from Leningrad she began to use fragments of Dragomoschenko’s letters in that poem, including descriptions of Russian “words” for particular sounds:

Still I hesitate to risk the miscarriage of my dreams
(plans) with an unnecessary verisimilitude.
But I tell you that cats “say” *mya-ew, mya-ew*
dogs *gav-gav*, trains *sheex-sheex-sheekh*
(while whistling *ta-tooo*), roosters cry
*coo-cah-reh-coo*, frogs croak *kva kva*, birds
in a flock sing *fyou-eet*...\(^62\)

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\(^{59}\) Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 29 March 1989, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 3(U), “Clark Coolidge”].

\(^{60}\) Scholar and translator Michael Molnar was an interpreter at Hejinian’s first meetings with Dragomoschenko. Discussion of Molnar’s work to follow.


Before travelling to Russia, Hejinian had been working also on a sound poem called “The Corresponding Sky” in which she planned to “write a sentence a day describing a sound [heard] at the time of writing.” She observed in 1986: “In some respects, the descriptions are ‘translations,’ at least when I am trying to imitate in language, however neologically, the non-verbal sounds around me.... It is impossible to spell most of these sounds; one can only refer to them.”\(^{63}\) Several critics, including Michael Molnar and Jacob Edmond, have written recently of “The Corresponding Sky” as a “collaboration” existing between Hejinian and Dragomoschenko.\(^{64}\) Although Dragomoschenko took Hejinian’s title “The Corresponding Sky” for a poem series of his own, the different works were not a collaboration in the conventional sense. Hejinian’s “part” of the project eventually dispersed into other poems including “The Guard,” The Cell and new sections of My Life.\(^{65}\) “There never was a Corresponding Sky project as such,” writes Hejinian, “unless Arkadii’s and my hundreds and hundreds of pages of letters can be considered a ‘project.’”\(^{66}\) The parallel texts that began with similar names are related primarily by contiguities of subsequent translation, a collaborative transfer with significantly different borders.

Dragomoschenko’s several lengthy works of poetry, including The Sum of Description, remained unpublished in the USSR in 1983. They were read mostly within close literary-artistic scenes (including Club 81) as privately distributed manuscripts. Upon meeting, Hejinian and Dragomoschenko began planning a cultural exchange that would take several San Francisco poets to Russia, to be mirrored in reciprocal US visits by Leningrad poets. The crossings could not begin until 1988 when Dragomoschenko was finally given a visa by the USSR government.\(^{67}\) The two poets did begin, however, extensive translations of one another’s poetry facilitated by


\(^{65}\) See for example Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 7 July 1987, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 3(U), “Clark Coolidge”].

\(^{66}\) Hejinian, letter to author, 4 November 2001.

letters — though this was not always a “private” or trouble-free method of conversing: “I have to be careful not to write anything that might cause him [Dragomoschenko] problems — even to write too often could cause difficulties to these people.... I am learning to be ambiguous.”

Working for over a decade with Elena Balashova, a Russian-born Berkeley woman, Lyn Hejinian has produced numerous US-published translations of Arkadii Dragomoschenko’s poetry. A group of “Elegies” appeared in Clayton Eshleman’s *Sulfur* magazine in 1985; they are reprinted as part of “Summa Elegia” in *Description* (1990), the first of Dragomoschenko’s books brought out in English translation. *Xenia*, a second book-length poem — also translated by Hejinian and Balashova — was published in 1994; and a third translation, *Phosphor*, is currently in progress. The first of Hejinian’s works to appear in Russian was a long poem entitled “Redo,” translated by Dragomoschenko and published in Leningrad in the mid-1980s in a samizdat paper called *Mitya’s Journal*. Dragomoschenko also has translated much of *My Life*, parts of *Gesualdo*, and several essays including “Strangeness” and “The Rejection of Closure.” During the 1980s, translational and epistolary communications between Hejinian and Dragomoschenko yielded a marvellous array of texts, and gave both poets reciprocal access to new readerships and community formations.

My fourth chapter argued that letter exchanges imply specific modes of collaboration structured around dynamics of reciprocal absence and otherness; a kind of difference experienced in common. I characterised Hejinian’s letter writing as an extension of guest/host thinking, in which a community-oriented ethic acts as a prepoetical reason for writing. Chapter two charted Hejinian’s exploration of “neighbourhood” and

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68 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Carolyn Andrews, exact date unknown (c. late 1983), Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 1, 15].
69 Born in Moscow, Elena Balashova works currently at the library of the University of California, Berkeley, California, where Lyn Hejinian now holds a chair in literature.
"xenia" as key tropes for a poetics of encounter, in which otherness and withness are mutually prevailing conditions. The friendship between Arkadii Dragomoschenko and Lyn Hejinian is a literal event of guest/host relations. It enacts a neighbourhood that "passes over intervening nations, intervening borders," as Hejinian writes. In November 1987, Hejinian and Dragomoschenko began a series of letters as a script for a film entitled Neighbor, proposed by documentary-maker Jacki Ochs. For two years the poets wrote to one another on the 29th of each month about the cultural connotations of a specific word: neighbour, blue, nation, gender, patience. The eventual film, Letters Not About Love (1999), contains fragments of the letter correspondence juxtaposed against disjunctive cinematography shot in Leningrad and Berkeley. Although Hejinian and Dragomoschenko have considered publishing the whole of their correspondence in another form alongside the film, the project has stalled — partly due to changes in their relationship brought about by cultural shifts that followed the dispersal of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

I have given a detailed account of exchanges between Arkadii Dragomoschenko and Lyn Hejinian to help build a genealogy of cross-cultural poetics, and to exemplify community as a phenomenon that supersedes "nation" — a "communionless communism of singular beings," in Jean-Luc Nancy's terms. While subverting American and Soviet political and cultural rhetoric of the 1980s, the remarkably productive literary trade between Hejinian and Dragomoschenko has negotiated spaces neither individuated nor collectivist. "Without looking at a map, a person has made a real journey," writes Hejinian in Oxota. (104); "And I'm not the follower of an opposition between inside and out." (265) "I give you this city, since it's time to give it away," echoes Dragomoschenko in Xenia. (65) Though less active now,

76 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Clark Coolidge dated 16 May 1988, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 3(U), "Clark Coolidge"].
79 Hejinian, letter to author, 11 November 2001; also Hejinian, "Roughly Stapled," 1.
collaborative encounters with Dragomoschenko remain a serious influence upon Hejinian's thinking.

Before returning to Oxota: A Short Russian Novel, I want to make two further brief observations. Although critical parallels have been drawn between Hejinian's involvement in the Language School and Dragomoschenko's contemporaneous participation in Club 81, the comparison is limited, obviously and necessarily, by serious economic and cultural-historical divergences.\(^{80}\) Samizdat publications are not small-press chapbooks. Or as Hejinian writes, how to compare apples to oranges, except metonymically\(^{91}\) In conversation in 1998, Hejinian distinguished between locales: "Participating in the Club 81 scene wasn't voluntary in the same way that one could decide to go to a poetry reading here. If you didn't do the Club 81 scene, you really were a non-writer, because there was no-one hearing your reading, or commenting, responding. So it was more of a coercive situation, even though it was sort of anti-establishment."\(^{92}\) She outlines a more formal and philosophical difference in a 1990 interview: "Soviet poets do not situate a politics within the writing, while the Language poets do intend one... a result of our different historical conditions and cultural traditions."\(^{93}\)

There are, of course, notable formal and epistemic similarities between the specific projects of Dragomoschenko and Hejinian that encouraged poetic compatibility and ease of interested correspondence. During the early 1980s, Hejinian argued for a perceptual and epistemological recuperation of the terms of "literary realism." She distinguished a lively and language-oriented poetics of worldliness, grounded in perceptual activity, from an aesthetic and representative "realist" framework in which perception is "calcified" and meanings foreclosed.\(^{94}\) Hejinian now prefers the terms worldly and phenomenological to realist, as recent essays show:

\(^{80}\) See for example Thomas Epstein, "Metarealism," Crossing Centuries 87-88; also Lyn Hejinian, "Materials (for Dubravka Djuric)," Language of Inquiry 172-173.
\(^{81}\) Hejinian, "Strangeness," Language of Inquiry 149.
\(^{91}\) Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
\(^{94}\) Lyn Hejinian, unpublished draft notes on "American Literary Realism," Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 11(U), "American Literary Realism 1981 talk at New Langton"]. Hejinian's essay "Language and Realism" is an excellent exemplar of Hejinian's inquiries into a "perceptual" realism. See Language of Inquiry 83-105.
The writings of Gertrude Stein have provided me with a demonstration of the fundamentally phenomenological, and thereby mobile, character of perceptual, articulable reality. The entirety of what’s available to the senses is phenomenological in character. Everything that is happening is happening phenomenologically, as something appearing, that we appear to experience; something that we sense, coming to be sensed. This by its nature involves motion. Something’s happening, something’s taking place, something’s taking time.85

English critic Michael Molnar, who has lived for many years in Leningrad, observes similar preoccupations at the heart of Arkadii Dragomoschenko’s poetry. He evaluates Dragomoschenko’s densely phenomenological work alongside Hejinian’s “Language School [rejection of] psychology in favour of perception through language,” arguing that both writers “disrupt a certain type of unified discourse on which, for many, our social order seems to be founded.”86 By focusing on a perceiving subject’s active constitution of consciousness via apprehensions of matter, objects and occurrences — “all there is,” as Hejinian says, or “reality” — such poetry implies “a new basis for subjectivity,” at once mobile and contextually-anchored.87

“This is a poetry of relationships not essences,” writes Molnar of Dragomoschenko’s work; “consequently there are no incidental descriptions of anything as such. The objects sketched into the schematic landscapes are mathematical symbols defined by the way they counterbalance other figures on the page, not self-sufficient concepts.” (84) While Dragomoschenko continually surveys actual or “real” perceptions and worldly encounters, he refuses to organise subjective experience into finite, authoritative narratives about “truth” or “knowledge.” Xenia is characterised by deferrals, linkages and allusions:

...once again in the rippling wooden eyes
an accumulation of space, like air in the lungs,
or thought (not yet through the throat),
will pass through increments of consciousness, azure and arched,

imperceptibly joined in a free spark
swimming on the retina in the trace of a trace,

87 Molnar, “Vagaries of Description,” 78 and 87; “reality is all there is” cited from Lyn Hejinian, Preface to “Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking,” Language of Inquiry 8.
in the tender ochre of heat. “You” and “I”
in hollow honeycombs
of words,
in one sentence—

Like Hejinian, Dragomoschenko is writing about the perceiving of perception itself, and the ontological and descriptive frames by which we interpret experience; “you” and “I,” those “hollow honeycombs of words.” Things are “imperceptibly joined” in “accumulations of space,” within “azure and arched” intervals of the poet’s consciousness. Molnar observes of Dragomoschenko’s poetic: “Such an idea as ‘the true nature of the world’ is either unknowable or irrelevant here; what is in question is the nature of perception, whether of language or any other phenomenon.”

We might fruitfully compare this with Peter Nicholls’s recent readings of Lyn Hejinian’s “phenomenal poetics,” weighted similarly toward linkage and contextual knowing rather than a telos of causality and completion. Nicholls reads Lyn Hejinian beside objectivist poet George Oppen, and notes their comparable use of “an open syntax which constantly proposes relationships and shared experiences without formulating them absolutely.” Such syntax articulates its diffidence “through ambiguity and apposition — through devices which evoke relationship without reducing it to two terms, to a subject-object dualism.” (246) Oxota: A Short Russian Novel is perhaps Hejinian’s most accomplished study of a phenomenal poetics in which relationships — between subject and object, person and culture, poem and world — are anticipated constantly without finding resolution:

Someone tells a long anecdote binding some condition
Its irrelevance is as inevitable as a fog at noon
The competence of pink shadows, ungeneralized and ungeneralizing — the old pause
The city is spread by nature, fits in light
It’s light that waits, the reserves of dispersal

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83 Dragomoschenko, Xenia 112.
89 My close readings of Dragomoschenko’s poetry are subject, of course, to the immeasurable drifts of translation. Critics Michael Molnar and Jacob Edmond read Dragomoschenko’s poetry in its “original” Russian state, which lends a different and advantageous perspective. See for example Molnar, “Vagaries of Description,” 79-85; and Jacob Edmond, “Locating Global Resistance: The Landscape Poetics of Arkadii Dragomoschenko, Lyn Hejinian and Yang Lian,” unpublished draft essay posted to the author by Jacob Edmond, September 2001.
91 Hejinian, Oxota 282
Subjective perception is kept in ambiguous mobility through vertiginous object-apprehension. After Hejinian, we might call this a state of "local strangeness." Oxota is about contexts, correlations, and dispersals; and not about psychological generalisations or "essences," as Molnar observes of Dragomoschenko's work. (84) This is a radically different poetic, or poetical philosophy, from one in which totalising knowledges are proclaimed or sought, or in which subjective "authority" — condensed perhaps around the Poet's I — goes unquestioned.

Arkadii Dragomoschenko has been called a metarealist poet, notably in Crossing Centuries: the New Generation in Russian Poetry (2000), an important and unprecedented anthology of Russian poetry in English translation. Lyn Hejinian's perceptual sincerity toward "reality" and its descriptive frames, realism about the constituting conditions of reality, might be considered in similar terms. Michael Molnar however disputes the label "metarealist" on substantive grounds, beyond broad limitations of category descriptors. He argues that it incorrectly characterises the role of the "problematic constituting subject" in Dragomoschenko's work by assuming stable distance between a coherent subject and an objectified "world." Although "there is definitely a sense of some real object of perception" in a Dragomoschenko poem, the work "is too much in or of phenomena to be about things "as objects," writes Molnar: "[Metarealism] can hardly be applied to flickering fragmented perceptions in which sensations cannot be separated from effects of language." (87) Dragomoschenko's work turns back to the difficult subject at every juncture, and allows the apprehension of objects recurrently to destabilise the borders of subjectivity.

After Louis Zukofsky, we might relate this to the practice of objectification or objectivism, in which a poem formally and thematically emphasises its own status as a "context based on a world" and an "object in process." It thus inexorably foregrounds the subjectivity of its writer, and calls attention to trans-active borders.

94 Molnar, "Vagaries of Description," 86-87.
between a world of phenomenal happenings and a perceiving, describing subject. Lyn
Hejinian consistently performs the same manoeuvres in *Oxota*:

Subjects separate into themselves and then come out again
Four padded apertures round a sour air
The canals cannot tower
Subjects (that is, all of us — and we speak for ourselves) have
the thirst of our finitude and we hoard unsatiated
elaborations why...
A man on the roof points toward a gap in the tower at the
corner of the inactive church
Optical reality and uncertainty around (102)

By emphasising the movement and separability of “subjects” in relation to a world of
“objects,” Hejinian encourages readers to imagine the object status of subjectivity
itself, and to place *subjectivity* and its constitution under intense scrutiny. “Optical
reality” and “uncertainty” with regard to objectification become tropes for “apertures”
in subjectivity. I return now to *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, keeping in mind
Michael Molnar’s notion of “real” perceptual processes that refuse to stabilise
“objects” or “subjects,” and Peter Nicholls’s complementary account of Hejinian’s
“phenomenal poetics.”

*Images without corresponding objects*

*Already here at the beginning we need the word mirage, in which
undoubtedly (or, more precisely, predoubtedly) consciousness foresees a
self-replicating doubling.*

Thus observes Arkadii Dragomoschenko in “I(S),” an essay translated by Hejinian and
Balashova for the June 1991 edition of *Poetics Journal.* A notion of twinned
beggings applies beautifully to *Oxota*, which occupies formal and phenomenological
midpoints between now and then, here and there; and which crosses between
languages and alphabets, Leningrad and Berkeley, translation and mistranslation,
quotiation and mediation, memory and improvisation. Dragomoschenko’s tropes of

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96 Arkadii Dragomoschenko, “I(S),” trans. Lyn Hejinian and Elena Balashova, *Poetics Journal* 9 (June
1991) 127. A serendipitous link can be made to Louis Zukofsky’s poem “I’s (pronounced eyes).” See
*mirage* and *doubling* are comparable to Hejinian’s frequent use in *Oxota* of figures for impeded sight — including myopia, estranged observation, and peripheral vision:

And now the sun is so bright on the street that it seems to shatter everything — the shops in the neighbourhood are in splinters, fragments of cars fly by, arms and legs flail along the sidewalk, shards of coloured stucco catapult past my face, blue rags flutter in my peripheral vision — my myopia has increased and the wind blows my hair in my eyes (53)

Sight is an obvious figure for perception. It implies a threshold of transaction between subject and object, or between cognition and space. Across *Oxota*, “sight” is kept in ambiguous and hindered states. Objects are “shattered” by brightness or relegated to “peripheral vision,” producing intensified “myopia.” Troubled vision is Hejinian’s marker for indeterminate relationships between language and consciousness, and a sign of authorial hesitancy in formulating links between syntax and substance: “There was no describing horizon.” (185) More importantly, it speaks of perceptual and hence subjective volatility. The “splintered,” soluble nature of objects in *Oxota* reflects Hejinian’s inability to stabilise her own constituting subject: “I was a mere observer at my vanishing post” (199); and “Slowly facing and then dissolving the subjectivity with which we / think we’ve always been precise.” (250)

References in *Oxota* to impeded sight also imply an allegory of translation, both cultural and textual. “Stains of splattered cherries in the stairwell — throat / Rain — the window shut / It all originates in a mistaken sighting,” writes Hejinian.97 Readers who move between *Oxota* (1991) and Dragomoschenko’s *Description* (1990) will recognise this last line as a variant of a key phrase in Dragomoschenko’s “Accidia.” Dedicated to Hejinian, that poem carries an exegetical note taken from one of Dragomoschenko’s letters to Hejinian:

> “Everything begins as an error of vision…” Just imagine, I somehow read this in I don’t remember which of your letters, transmuting a simple phrase into a ridiculous one. 98

97 Hejinian, *Oxota* 84.
98 Dragomoschenko, “Accidia,” *Description* 89.
Hejinian’s “original” line transforms again within “Accidia” to become “first an error of vision.” Quixotic and self-actualising, the phrase begins in an English letter, “transmutes” into Russian, returns to Hejinian in a letter that she must translate, and moves back into a Russian poem that she translates again. A “simple phrase” is literally handed back and forth, born across (trans-latus) in numerous incarnations — English to Russian and back to English. As a result, it begins to embody not only the animating and skewed spirits of translation (language-to-language) and transliteration (Cyrillic-to-Latinate alphabets), but of difference itself. With Hejinian’s inclusion of the expression in Oxota, the sources of this well-travelled phrase become even more confused. What was the original utterance, and who can possibly remember it?

“It is a negative dialectics,” writes Hejinian of translation, “since between the original and the translation the tension remains unresolved.... The original, ‘the work disposed in front of ‘you,’’ will always demand another translation. ‘No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’” All translations are “mistranslations” by Hejinian’s account, “tantamount to invention.” They are destined to miss their subject and object. Rather than fashioning one-to-one correspondences or finding exact “solutions” for antecedent texts, translations produce an assemblage of differences: “It’s not about solving anything.” Despite their “negative dialectics,” they are prolific and generative:

I think it is important that Arkadii and I often misunderstood each other, but in ways that furthered our respective ideas. That is, I sometimes understood Arkadii to say something “better” than what he had actually said, something he liked better and took as what he had indeed said. I did the same with things he had thought I had said but which I only wished I had said after he said them.

Dragomoschenko’s phrase “a sheep thriller” appears as an example in Oxota (183); along with the evocative “This time we are both,” which begins the poem (11), re-emerges midway through in another form (93), and concludes the final chapter (290). That expression was Dragomoschenko’s “mistranslation” of the title of several

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102 Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.
paintings by his son Ostap (including Oxota’s cover image). “The proper translation,” writes Hejinian, “should have been ‘Now We Are Twins.”’

If consciousness can be experienced doubly across two languages — “this time we are both” — then the same might be said of subjectivity, via the perception and description of phenomena:

The object of contemplation is between profiles
I remember being so
The walls multiply
The skies slide (Oxota 97)

Hejinian and Dragomoschenko each have characterised their mutual encounter with cultural and linguistic difference as a kind of disappearance leading to re-emergence in a space “between profiles.” “We have been very diligent explorers of disappearance,” offered Dragomoschenko to Hejinian in a letter. “It is the task of the translator,” Hejinian responded in a later essay, “to preserve this disappearance, and she must do so by sustaining the visibility of the poem — or at least of a poem, since a too casual reference to ‘the poem’ begs the question, ‘what is the poem?’ And to answer that we must know where is it — in Russian (let’s say) or in English? Can it be in both places? Is ‘the poem’ an immaterial entity that can be in two places at once?”

What and where is the poem, asks Hejinian; in other words, where are its borders? Where does Oxota: A Short Russian Novel begin, and can it exist in two places at once? The answer is yes, da, in origination and translation. This time Hejinian is both: a poet who acknowledges phenomena and experiences as they appear to happen, and a person who describes, in meticulous detail, something of her own disappearance across transcultural borders. “Here — there’s a feeling of snow near the eyes / Two suns would form / …They had no secrets, they were lost in the comparison / Highly significant, filled with sense, centrifugal symbols swirled.” I propose the term

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104 Hejinian, letter to author, 4 November 2001. Poet Clark Coolidge also has used the phrase for a book title; while Hejinian’s husband Larry Ochs and the ROVA quartet have a CD named “This Time We Are Both,” recorded live in the USSR. “We three agreed that the confusion caused by our all using this notably odd phrase was delightful and appropriate,” writes Hejinian in her letter.


106 Hejinian, Oxota 85.
trans-iteration for the linguistic doublings and perceptual skews that occur across Oxota: an attempt to synthesise the local difficulties of translation and impossibilities of "sensible" transliteration, while stressing both the mobility (transit) of the poem and its objects, and Hejinian's willing inability to describe (iterate) without generative interference at various levels. Trans-iteration also implies the collaborative milieu situating the poem — prior texts, translations, epistolary exchanges, and intimate friendships. "[Dragomoschenko] was actively contributing to Oxota," writes Hejinian, "as were many of our mutual Russian friends."  

Oxota's play with beginnings and object-perception suggests a poetics in which temporality is a phenomenological function of place and spatiality ("this time we are both"). The poem studies "time as it takes place in a landscape," an observation Lyn Hejinian has made of Gertrude Stein's dramatic "landscapes" and their temporal organisation. Hejinian's poem "The Guard" puts it differently: "The landscape is a moment of time / that has gotten in position." Hejinian argues that Stein's compositions of the "synchronous present" explore an "existential density in which present relationships and differentiations... are the essential activity." She typifies Steinian grammar as an unsolvable dialogue between spatial and temporal elements: "What occurs as time and what occurs as space, the movement, have grammatical value and can be understood as such at least incompletely — by which I mean that it is likely that the understanding remains unfinished." How could we ever finish what we never started, asks Oxota. (94)

If we make a descriptive riddle of beginnings we scrutinise, most obviously, our notion of temporality. We also witness time in and as its inhabitation of space and language: as a discrete series of local, spatialised events, rather than a chrono-logical progression. Throughout Oxota, the perceivable borders of things and materials are Hejinian's plane of chronic significance. She provides an important clue in the poem: "By thing I mean object, subject, event, scene, situation, or even milieu, like the numbers 202 or 17." (220) "Time" is indicated principally in Oxota by spatial

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movement and change. We observe things and objects in difference or transformation — at a border or beginning — and thus gain a sense of spatialised time, or time 
passing in place:

Not the one with not the other in the very place around the 
        stairwell or onion 
Not waiting 
The thousand tints for difference 
Hints 
Milks 
Pinks 
Procrastinations will gleam, yearning for keeping 
The arrival of disappearance — awake, in sight 
Everything was before — returning our famous glasnost 
        metaphor 
The light ground, what’s seen in its grains 
The old grannies were out, conspiring over space (272)

“Arrivals” are marked by the presence and absence of objects, which become 
cognitive negotiations of space and language. *Telos* is without teleology; hence 
Hejinian’s frequent use of “suspension” and “procrastination” as terms of experience. 
Time resides, rather, in “conspiracies of space” — a fold of linkages between everyday 
things and events: milk, light, the grannies. “A thousand” differences and links are 
acknowledged and embodied in language. “Tints” becomes “hints,” then “milks,” then 
“pinks.” These progressions are spatial rather than temporal, and give an exemplary 
description of Jacques Derrida’s formative notion of *differance*, as discussed in my 
previous chapter. Each sign gains meaning in a relational chain of infinite and 
transformative differences.112 Borders between consciousness and substance, including 
poetic language itself, are prioritised as *Oxota*’s temporal markers: “No form at all — 
it’s impossible to imagine its being seen from above / Nor sense of time.” (12)

Writing about “The Guard,” her first “Russian-influenced” work, Hejinian observes 
that “the poem throws time into space” — a valuable description of *Oxota*. She 
continues: “In thinking about time and space, I’m thinking about the non-isolability of 
objects and events in the world, our experience of them, and our experience of that 
experience.”113 Frequent use of repetition across *Oxota* is one means by which

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113 Hejinian, “Language and ‘Paradise,’” *Line* 87. The first section of this passage does not appear in 
Hejinian’s revised version of “Language and ‘Paradise’” for *The Language of Inquiry* (67).
Hejinian stresses the "non-isolability" of things, while preventing readers' appraisals of "objects and events" from stabilising. Snatches of conversation, images, narrative hooks and characters repeat in circular patterns: the colonel, Misha, Gavronsky, the city, the saturated light. "More than once as I write you'll find yourself reading of the weather and Leningrad light," writes Hejinian. (14) Refrains appear always with different spatial horizons. True to her critique of genre, Hejinian is playing with the temporal schemes of conventional "novels" in which things develop or "progress," including, and especially, the various subjects of the novel. While we recognise each "character" or figure of Oxota as it re-enters, we don't necessarily gain a coherent sense of plot. As Brian McHale notes, this "proliferation of 'minor' narrative forms" works across Oxota to "inoculate against master-narratives." We might think of Cartesian time as one of these disrupted "major" narratives.

Perhaps we could argue that Hejinian is trying to "objectify" a subject's perceptual grasp of time. She withholds "the subject" from linear development, while simultaneously placing it in a spatial carousel of local objects, influences, and effects. Chapter Two offers a good example:

No form at all — it's impossible to imagine its being seen from above
Nor sense of time because work is only done discontinuously
I had no sense of making an impression
The blue shadows of footprints and a diffuse pink or green
light between them on the saturated park were soaking
the snow
A reflection of the violent word MIR painted green was
mirrored warped on a stretch of deserted ice
All my memories then as Leningrad lay like the shallow streets
of water banked by rubble and melting snow which
covered the field in a northern housing district of the city
across which we were often walking toward the housing
blocks in winter, its surface wildly broken by the light
Something impossible to freeze, or the very lack of thing
Dusk as it continued to be
In the evenings particularly we made notes and took dictation
in anticipation of writing a short Russian novel, something
neither invented nor constructed but moving through
that time as I experienced it unable to take part
personally in the hunting
Taking patience and suddenness — even sleeping in

preparedness, in sadness
No paper for books
I had lost all sense of forming expressions
No paper at all in the south, and the butcher stuffs pieces of
greasy black beef into the women's purses
Other links exist, on other levels, between our affairs (12)

*Chrons* is observed as a series of repeating, situated events: nightfall, a stroll toward
the housing blocks in winter, a field in the city "across which we were often walking."
Duration becomes a medium of linkage that operates "between affairs." Although
living is felt to be "discontinuous," something phenomenological and actual ("neither
invented nor constructed") is occurring; "dusk as it continued to be," for example, or
the paradoxical "something impossible to freeze." Things are not stable, however.
Objects are "wildly broken by light" or simply absent: "the very lack of thing / ... No
paper at all in the south." Despite witnessing an elaborate series of occurrences and
links, Hejinian's authorial "subject" struggles for integrity. "I had no sense of making
an impression," Hejinian muses. "I had lost all sense of forming expressions."
Juxtaposed against this continual "melt" is Hejinian's contradictory hunt for
descriptive precision: "The blue shadows of footprints and a diffuse pink or green / light between them on the saturated park were soaking / the snow." Familiar
description is calibrated against strange dissolution; and both require each other as a
border of aesthetic and philosophical differentiation. Despite avowed disintegration of
authorial stability, Hejinian keeps a careful record of matter in constant change: streets
of water, banks of rubble, liquefying snow. She leaves a gate open, however, on the
epistemological finity of objects and moments.

Following Lyn Hejinian's readings in "Strangeness" of Roman Jakobson's theories on
the metonymic and metaphoric (or horizontal and vertical) properties of language, we
might think of *Ozota* 's spatio-temporal design as *metonymic*:

Metonymy moves attention from thing to thing; its principle is
combination rather than selection. Compared to metaphor, which depends
on code, metonym preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship. And
again in comparison to metaphor, which is based on similarity, and in
which meanings are conserved and transferred from one thing to
something said to be like it, the metonymic world is unstable. While
metonymy maintains the intactness and discreteness of its particulars, its
paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points. Deduction,
induction, extrapolation, and juxtaposition are used to make connections, and “a connection once created becomes an object in its own right.”

Both The Cell and Oxota make extensive use of metonymy, stressing the linkages between things as “objects in their own right.” Metonymic logic generates a balance between “multiple vanishing points” or a sense of disappearance, and precise description, where “the intactness and discreteness of particulars” are preserved. Oxota is full of moments that “foreground interrelationship” and descriptive particularity, while simultaneously deflecting coherent “knowledge” of experience: “The words are like drops in long rains / Flashing and rolling / I cannot quote, I cannot get context / But today, on the 18th of the month, a vast transparent cold / seemed at times to be drifting down out of the sky or at / times instead to be pressing up from the frozen ground toward it.” (185) Oxota’s metonymic calibrations of lyrical “realism” and cinematic dissolve are illuminated by another clue from Hejinian’s “Strangeness.” “Ultimately,” writes Hejinian, “conditions are incomprehensible without the use of analytical conceptual structures, but an initial, essential recognition of difference — of strangeness — develops only with attention to single objects, while others are temporarily held in abeyance.” Those “single objects” include the perceiver’s own perceiving consciousness, held at interval “in abeyance,” along with the linkages between things and spaces that are “objects in their own right.”

Lyn Hejinian’s use of metonymy, inconclusiveness and repetition within Oxota, then, makes formal engagement with philosophies of foreignness. An “initial, essential recognition of difference” is Hejinian’s ontological and epistemic “reason” for writing:

When I started writing Oxota, I wanted to recreate in writing the Russianness of what I experienced as a kind of strangeness and to experience it again but intentionally. Wanting to understand what I’d experienced better was the real origin of the book — not just understanding what I experienced in Russia but also the profound sense of being creatively estranged.

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Ambiguous and richly connotative, the poem’s title marks this difference. It is sourced by Hejinian to Zina Dragomoschenko, Arkadii’s wife: “It was Zina who called it *oxota* / The hunt.” (278) *Oxota* is the Russian word for hunt, and much of Hejinian’s poem is devoted to what she calls “a hunt syntax” (267) — a language of scarcity that describes an endless (or beginningless) search for food and goods, literal “things.” Hejinian genders the hunt: “No paper at all in the south, and the butcher stuffs pieces of / greasy black beef into the women’s purses.” (12) *Oxota* is a daily necessity for people of Leningrad, and especially the women. In her own hunter’s sketches, Hejinian undertakes a second hunt, twinned to that of Leningrad women but markedly different — “moving through that time as I experienced it unable to take part personally in the hunting.” (12) The experience robs Hejinian of authority while providing a certain purpose: “Describer’s hunter, narrator’s hunt / Half-visible, emerging, merged.” (292) *Oxota* also carries a second meaning, *desire*. Hejinian longs to understand “what she has experienced in Russia,” including the vertiginous and charged sense of estrangement that accompanies her perceptions and descriptions. She is hunting for phenomenological stability in the face of cultural and linguistic difference: “I dreamed of hunters / One night I dreamed of the concentration that is haunted / Each hand seen, and the objects of momentum thicken.” (174) We might make this observation differently; Hejinian is seeking, in language and ideation, to comprehend her own profound experience of otherness.

**Desiring strangeness**

Lyn Hejinian returns often in *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* to the melancholic exhaustions and elations of yearning. She describes a desire without solution, referring at one point to “this strange process of humble poetic longing.” (145) Writing through the romance theme of its formal model, Pushkin’s *Evgeny Onegin*, *Oxota* narrates “a love intrigue” whose only tangible object is its own inconclusiveness. “I did load the text [Oxota] with the erotic feeling of my being in such a constant milieu of otherness,” wrote Hejinian to Marjorie Perloff in 1991. “I did feel (when I introspected in the Wm Jamesian sense) ‘in love’ -- in a turmoil involving identity, involving a willing to give up what had previously seemed important, with a disintegrating and
reforming ego, with a sense of warped priorities. But it was (I mean, what I wanted to convey was) being in love with Russia. Or rather, surrendering oneself to Russia -- no longer being a Westerner, was to be in love. That is, to be unbounded."  

Perloff had speculated that Oxota's "romance" plot was a cathexis of desiring relations existing between Hejinian and Dragomenschenko: "Is 'Lyn' falling in love with Arkadii or is theirs primarily a literary friendship?" Hejinian's reply was direct: "I didn't intend such a reading and there isn't such an involvement.... [though] you are free to have such a reading." Oxota begins with a provocative "warning" to readers:

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We must learn to endure the insecurity as we read
The felt need for a love intrigue
There is no person — he or she was appeased and withdrawn
There is relationship but it lacks simplicity (11)
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If we reduce Oxota's desiring stories to material possibilities, we miss the depth of Hejinian's ontological engagement with "the erotic feeling of... being in such a constant milieu of otherness" — one effect of her trans-iterative and cross-cultural encounters. While a more conventional "Russian novel" might satisfy readers' expectations of "a love intrigue," Hejinian asks her readers to embark upon a less "secure" path of subjective introspection in which "there is no person": neither coherent love "object," nor stable desiring "subject," both gendered ambiguously. How are strange desires mobilised within Oxota, and why does Hejinian seem to desire her own estrangement? "She longs for something whole, complete, entire, but when she / encounters disintegration she greets it like her lover." In a letter to Charles Bernstein dated 28 February 1987, Hejinian depicts her "narrator's hunt" (292) as a kind of haunting: "As for loving the utter otherness -- I can't say why I do, but I do. Sometimes I think I'm haunted by Russia -- but it may be a functioning somehow for something else in my psyche."  

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118 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Marjorie Perloff dated 23 September 1991, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 8(U), "Marjorie Perloff"].
119 Perloff, "How Russian Is It?", 223.
120 Hejinian, letter to Perloff dated 23 September 1991 [74, 8(U), "Marjorie Perloff"].
121 Hejinian, Oxota 97. Marjorie Perloff also complicates desiring relations in Oxota when discussing the poem’s repeated trope of a “love intrigue.” Perloff, "How Russian Is It?", 236-237.
122 Lyn Hejinian, letter to Charles Bernstein dated 28 February 1987, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74, 2(U), "Charles Bernstein"].
I want to read Hejinian’s figure of “otherness” as a cue to considering specific and vexed ideas about the author; and especially, the “Western” author in a Russian context. Signs of authorship in Oxota are site-specific and contingent, as suggested by the poem’s elusive beginnings and collaborative milieu. The poem draws its “authority” from diverse and vicarious sources: quotations and anecdotes from Russian people, scatterings of cultural and political history, snippets of overheard conversation, observed incidents and places, and an extraordinary array of Russian proper names, “stock-types,” and the Leningrad equivalent of urban myths. Authorisation often takes the form of artistic suggestions, evidence of other (Russian) people’s direct compositional involvement with the poem: “You will start with the third chapter, Arkadii said.” (101) The physical city itself, and its infrastructures, become gravitational sites of authority: “Steaming bus / Things bringing our being into proximity with themselves,” or “Leningrad was made of light and my eyes were moths.”

For Lyn Hejinian, relinquishing poetic and subjective authority in the face of Leningrad life is not only an aesthetic refusal, but a cultural and ethical necessity. How to “say” what cannot be “known”? I was feeling an inferior weakness, an inability to acknowledge anything. (263) Amidst “the constant change of detail,” Hejinian returns frequently to a “complete realization of... self-unimportance.” I had no sense of making an impression / I had lost all sense of forming expressions. (12) Hejinian describes her experience of object-apprehension in Russia as “strange work” that engenders “the present incorporeality of one’s self.” Making no claim, she feels “free to signify place but not to represent it.” (93) Although she describes places in detail, she questions her acculturated, Western interpretations of the epistemic “order” of things:

I didn’t change it...
It is fascinating to be afraid and not to possess it...
I could only move, even naming in place...
Nobody’s business, nobody’s narration

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123 Hejinian, Oxota 24 and 268.
124 Hejinian, Oxota 161 and 94.
125 Hejinian, Oxota 65 and 266.
126 Hejinian, Oxota 165, 168 and 205.
Hejinian is determined, even while “naming in place,” not to speak about Russia from an anthropologising or appropriative distance. What is “known” is always under erasure, and doubly so. While she might acknowledge a local crisis of representation in language — a gap between “words” and “things,” as per “The Rejection of Closure” — the effect is magnified in a Russian context, where Hejinian has little knowledge with which to describe (or objectify) locations and events, and feels her epistemic and ontological horizons to be under constant, mobilising pressure.\(^{127}\) Instead, somewhat anxiously, she stages her own objectification and stresses her incapacity to fully comprehend or translate her experiences: “The idea of *in Russia* was dispersed into rain.” (134) While problematising poetry’s relationship to “knowing” in more general terms, *Oxota*’s dislocations and redistributed authorial subjectivities are a bid to offset culturally inappropriate or disingenuous representations.

Hejinian’s strategies are not trouble-free. In conversation, Hejinian described a university discussion of *Oxota* that she facilitated in the early 1990s:

One [student] was himself a Russian émigré, and fairly recently.... He didn’t like the book at all. He thought that I was exoticising Russia. So I came back and I said that was something that I very particularly wanted to avoid doing. And my attempt was to exoticise my own self at the same time, if we’re going to use the word “exoticise.” And everything ended up being strange, I didn’t even know my own self, and had a very strong sense of an almost pathological disintegration of personality. I had no idea what I did, or what I wore, how I spoke. *I was gone.*\(^{128}\)

Hejinian is developing Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s directives toward *defamiliarisation* — “making strange the familiar,” or *osstranenie* — in which things are described “out of their normal context,” in disordered language and unusual juxtaposition, to remove them “from the automatism of perception,” and thus to revitalise perceptual processes themselves.\(^{129}\) Within *Oxota*, defamiliarisation and estrangement are not “about” the object as such. They perform a drama of subjective perception; a moment of impeded cognition in response to Hejinian’s *own* otherness. Is “Russia exoticised” in the process? The question cannot be answered simply. Hejinian certainly attempts to contextualise her own lack of authority, and the


\(^{128}\) Hejinian, interview with author, 3 August 1998.

contradictory nature of romantic-cultural intentions, by dramatising her own
differences in the face of Russian encounters: “I have my experience but I do not give
it / It requires a high level of consciousness along with a loss of self / The authority of
waking is lost.” (168)

So where does “desire” figure in this scheme of strange facing? “Since we absolutely
know that in fact we are always dealing with mediation in language, desire [in writing]
is never effaced; there’s no ultimate satisfaction,” remarks Hejinian. “So writing is
always full of desire; it is completely cathedected in complex ways: around power,
around sex, around possession, around wanting certainties, around flirtations with
uncertainties, with unknowing, approaching death and pulling back. All of those
metaphysical and theoretical aporias are part of the desire system.”\textsuperscript{130} We might add:
around encounters with cultural difference that require one’s own estrangement, a case
of the “flirtation with uncertainty” that Hejinian identifies. “That hunger had no exotic
antecedent,” she observes in Oxota; “And I trust this lust.” (150) In Oxota’s multiple
deferrals of authorial “right” and substance, Lyn Hejinian perhaps is making an
approach toward \textit{the death of the author} and then “pulling back,” in favour of the
author’s generative dispersal.\textsuperscript{131} “Death” offers one solution to longing — especially
within the “conventional” temporal scheme of novels, where it provides an isolating
horizon:

Novels commence at closure — they are written in the past tense, after the
death of the characters and after the completion of the events. Death in the
novel results in isolation — in the isolation of the novel reader.... I would
speculate that death in poetry takes the form of absence rather than
isolation, providing rather than cutting off the space into which desire can
turn its longings.\textsuperscript{132}

Although tropes of “death” surface frequently in Oxota — a critical “element” of a
\textit{Short Russian Novel} — they follow Hejinian’s proposal for “death in poetry,” a
generative “absence” in which desire can flourish without foreclosure. Oxota makes

\textsuperscript{130} Hejinian, “Roughly Stapled,” 2.

\textsuperscript{131} I am citing Roland Barthes’s famed essay of 1968, “The Death of the Author,” which concludes:
“The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” The terms of Barthes’s
challenge have been much disputed during the past three decades of literary criticism. See Roland
142-148.

\textsuperscript{132} Hejinian, “Roughly Stapled,” 3.
death a site of anticipatory longing, a prolific border giving ongoing meaning to the
liveliness to life: "Does death bring us thousands of omissions? / ... The emotion
struck away which I felt with a sort of sobbing / ... Death is more / More — nothing
else / Before the times move forward and we too must move, but by / no means to
depictions of reality / The resolution leaves no space in consciousness." (289) And
several pages earlier: "Pushkin the person is dead but the novel won't come to that /
end." (279) Death has metonymic presence within Oxota; it is not deployed as a
metaphor.

By keeping "resolution" in a state of strange deferral across Oxota, Hejinian
maximises potential for readers to cast their own longings between the poem's lines.
Where resolve offers a logic of sameness, or a balanced and exclusionary equation, the
pleasurable confusion of Hejinian's "novel" offers something irrepressibly copious,
anchored in multiple meetings with difference and "disappearance":

   It is passion to provide, it is passion apart
   Long, lagging, your known appearance lost — you have an
   inconceivably instant shadow
   The longevity of weight, the velocity of anticipation...
   It is passion to cross\textsuperscript{133}

Desiring relations within Oxota revolve around "the velocity of anticipation." It is
passion to cross, passion to engage in intersubjective facing where difference is a
primary condition. When Hejinian compares her encounters in Russia to "a turmoil
involving identity, involving a willing to give up what had previously seemed
important, with a disintegrating and reforming ego, with a sense of warped priorities,"
she is linking otherness and desire through a philosophy of being-with, in Jean-Luc
Nancy's terms.\textsuperscript{134} In a state of being-with, singularity and difference are preserved,
while the boundaries of "subject" and "object" are abandoned in a stranger plurality
("your known appearance lost"). Being singular plural is a state of togetherness in
otherness, an encounter marked by manifold difference.\textsuperscript{135} For every dislocation in

\textsuperscript{133} Hejinian, Oxota 285. "x = x = not y" cited from Brian Massumi, A User's Guide to Capitalism and
\textsuperscript{134} Lyn Hejinian, letter to Marjorie Perloff dated 23 September 1991, Hejinian Papers, Mandeville [74,
8(U), "Marjorie Perloff"]; Jean-Luc Nancy, Being Singular Plural, trans. Robert D. Richardson and
\textsuperscript{135} See for example Nancy, Being Singular Plural 37.
Oxota, Hejinian describes a linkage or connection, a precise moment of facing — the strange made incompletely familiar — that conjoins differences, singular pluralities, over a common spacing of time: “We sat in the common abstraction / Hulls of two halves of a Cuban grapefruit lay on one white plate / What does it mean? / Changing rice / ...Lifting dishes / The future — we agreed absolutely.” (136)

Strangeness within Oxota is not a messenger of alienation, but a navigation of productive shocks of encounter, where differences are acknowledged as a point of intrinsic commonality. Arkadii Dragomoschenko describes this ontological state as xenia: a similarity experienced between radically dissimilar parts, such that “estrangements” are not resolved or easily domesticated but allowed to remain active and generatively mobile.136 “Meeting balances wandering,” writes Julia Kristeva. “A crossroad of two othernesses, it welcomes the foreigner without tying him down, opening the host to his visitor without committing him. A mutual recognition, the meeting owes its success to its temporary nature.”137 Oxota explores a series of transitory meetings with Russian language and culture. Under the lasting auspice of a guest/host poetic, in which being-toward-the-other starts with recognition of one’s own otherness, Lyn Hejinian gently suggests that we question our response-abilities toward our many different neighbours; “all the others,” as Emmanuel Levinas writes.138 Returning to Oxota’s opening lines, we recognise such reciprocal facing as one guiding premise for the poem: “But here is a small piece of the truth — I am glad to greet you.” (11)

This critical oxota, a hunt for significance, began with the question of beginnings; and more especially, the stormy question of where Oxota begins. Perhaps we are closer to an answer. Oxota: A Short Russian Novel begins with “an initial, essential recognition of difference.”139 It employs xenia, the scrutinised experience of mutual strangeness, as its core formal, perceptual and narrative trope. To begin in otherness permits a kind of

136 Hejinian includes Dragomoschenko’s definition of xenia in “Soviet Diary” at pages 8-9.
withness, as Lyn Hejinian implies: “This time we are both.” (11) Our shared and different beginnings and endings might illuminate a new commonality, experienced in and as the crossing passions of a radical strangeness:

The like is not the same. I do not rediscover myself, nor do I recognize myself in the other: I experience the other’s alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that “in me” sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits it. Community is that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike: that is to say, in the sharing of identity. The passion that is unleashed is nothing other than the passion of and for community.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{140} Nancy, The Inoperative Community 33-34.
No synopsis is possible, both origin and outcome remain unknown: a runner begins to run, a singer begins to sing, the shapes of the dry beaches of the pure sea are susceptible to the slightest breeze.

One cannot dream until one begins.
But then, as Rae Armantrout says, just as awake, we light sleep, so asleep, we light wakefulness, with this she explains “the moon — none of our doing!”

The windows are open.
We live in a temporal sequence that consists entirely of beginnings.
Then didn’t anything come first?
No, nor anything second; the things we’re talking about — they’ve existed always.¹

No synopsis is possible, writes Lyn Hejinian, but the windows are open. Such exquisite reflections are a fitting “close” to a thesis about refusals of epistemological and ontological completion, and the privileging of particularities and local contexts over whole readings. A runner begins to run, a singer begins to sing. Things are happening in the spatialised “temporal sequences” of worldly occurrence, and their actuality depends upon encounters with other things that give borders to their presence: “the shapes of the dry beaches of the pure sea are susceptible to the slightest breeze.” In conclusion I want to speculate briefly upon several “windows” of encounter that my discussions have opened.

One of my principal aims in this thesis has been to reassess the importance of community to Lyn Hejinian’s poetical and philosophical writings. Much of Hejinian’s communitarian thinking has evolved in context of “actual” or material friendships and locales — especially those associated with American Language writing communities, as they emerged on a cusp between the 1970s and 1980s, and those arriving for Hejinian during the 1980s within differently-scaled spaces of specific Leningrad experimentalisms. Collaborative practices are undeniably at the heart of Hejinian’s poetry. During the mid-1970s, Hejinian established Tuumba Press as “an extension of

[her] aesthetic responsibilities,"² intuiting that such responsibilities necessarily involved acts of reciprocal reading and the establishment of shared contexts for writing practice — literal performances of the guest/host poetic, or poetics of encounter, that characterises Hejinian’s work. Numerous projects sustained within the orbits of Language communities, including Poetics Journal and assorted collaborative textual adventures, demonstrate the centrality to Hejinian’s thinking of being-toward-the-other or facing one’s neighbours as a primary context of meaningful life practice.³ In recent years Lyn Hejinian has adopted philosopher Hannah Arendt’s concept of the space of appearance, recasting it to explain the intersubjective ethics of her own (poetical) practice. To Arendt, “reality” is intrinsically a state of being-in-common: “Without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt.... The only character of the world by which to gauge its reality is its being common to us all.”⁴

Lyn Hejinian’s communitarian philosophies and ethics have developed in mutually constituting relations with her material experiences of community. They are not a secondary “writing-up” of actual events and circumstances — as though philosophies of practice were an adjunct to actual practice. Following Hejinian’s ideas of reciprocally transformative links existing between poetry and poetics, and practice and theory, I have tried to show how Hejinian’s writing exists in continuous encounter with states of “being in common” that Hejinian courts and inhabits. After philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, I have examined community as “the happening as it comes of a ‘we,’” or a “common spacing of time” existing between different beings and things.⁵ My intention is to depart from critical readings of Lyn Hejinian that, by favouring categorical identifications anchored in “sameness,” elide the specificities of her project. Under the sign of Hejinian’s poetic of encounters, I have been looking for different meanings and methods that “community” might inspire. By focusing on the writing of Language writing, my third chapter stressed a need for genealogical

particularity and readings that prioritise local contexts over "diffuse generalities." In a sense I have been responding to a provocation posed by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: "What meaning can community take on in difference without reducing difference?"

Possibly the most fascinating thought-lines emerging from these inquiries concern poetic form and composition. Poetry is an art of linkage and separation, as Lyn Hejinian argues; a mode of thinking that keeps relations between perceiving subjectivities and perceived objectivities under constant and generative pressure. Hejinian’s "epistemolexical" descriptive methods move outward from properties of language itself — including its tendencies toward referential volatility, and prolific generation of new contexts. Hejinian investigates description as a place of conjunction between a perceiver and an "actual world" of (phenomenal) things, or between consciousness and the appearances that constitute a person’s perceived experience of consciousness. She writes into a border between cognition and worldly occurrences, while interrogating the role of language in mediating and producing those spaces of encounter. Borders distinguish things from one another while bringing them into shared contexts. At a border, a moment of commonality is transacted within and as a matter of difference. To a perceiving subject, the actualness of something — its phenomenological presence — depends on differentiating boundaries, which are formed in the strangely-familiar presence and company of countless other beings and things. A poetics of worldly appearances, as George Oppen also discovered, must place the descriptive meanings of "commonality" and "particularity" under perpetual scrutiny.

In responding via poetic language to "a real world," Lyn Hejinian develops techniques and methods that keep commonalities and differences in constant view. She rejects formal, ontological, and epistemic closures, in favour of local details, particular distinctions, and borders as dis-closures.

7 Levinas, Otherwise Than Being 154.
It is only when differences emerge, making differentiation possible, that perception, observation, and making sense can occur. A world in the state of chaos is one that remains closed to us. Chaos, the state of undifferentiated everything, is a state of sameness. It is eventless.9

Hejinian suggests that poetry might preserve the “otherness” of worldly existence by beginning with “respect for particularity” and “an initial, essential recognition of difference — of strangeness.”10 This moment of recognition, a xenia, is also an experience of withness.11 Hejinian’s compositions explore and preserve this meeting of commonality and difference. Her serial poems and amplified sentences produce “shapes of unknowing,” in which non-authoritarian processes of coming to know and be are transacted within the spatial arrangements and paradoxical openings of formal methods.12 As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write: “To attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it.”13 Hejinian’s border poetic is a way of “attaining” the multiple. It shows that commonality and difference are inter-active entities, each impossible without the other. Our acuities of differences among things are also principal moments in which we recognise otherness as a shared experience, a condition of commonality.

Critical readings of Lyn Hejinian’s poetry are beginning to move beyond Language, as Hejinian does, and to address ethical and ontological effects of Hejinian’s formal choices and methods. Future work might continue to problematise the starring role that “community” plays in Hejinian’s poetical life, while comprehending communities as material and conceptual entities dependent upon myriad differences. Detailed readings of key poems and submarginal texts are a necessary starting point for this work, as my thesis suggests. Comparative genealogical readings that bring Hejinian’s methods into close conversation with other contemporaneous pocteries are an obvious “next step.” As I have argued, genealogies about texts rather than authors might thus emerge to

extend the terms and traditions of literary-historical practices, and augment terrains of critical-poetical encounter.

I will suggest one further "step," involving possible future directions for Lyn Hejinian's poetic of encounters and guest/host relations. While Hannah Arendt's philosophies of community focus upon the space of appearance as generated between human subjects, Jean-Luc Nancy differs in suggesting a role for non-sentient things and materials within community formations, as I argued earlier:

Yet it is precisely the immanence of man to man, or is it man, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community. A community presupposed as having to be one of human beings presupposes that it effect, or that it must effect, as such and integrally, its own essence, which is itself the accomplishment of the essence of humanness.¹⁴

Nancy's philosophies of being-with make room for communities grounded in proximity and local spatial scales, including relations between terrains and things that move beyond "subjectivity" and "objectivity" as limiting poles of actuality. These are conceptual tools of course, fathomed and fabricated within a sphere of human-subjective perception and description. But Lyn Hejinian's poetic has turned increasingly toward extra-subjective planes of thought and encounter between things, such that poetry might investigate ways of "thinking with the things as they exist."¹⁵

My second chapter asked several questions of Hejinian's guest/host reasoning: how can states of objectivity be involved in ethical thinking, and to what extent are "subjectivity" and "objectivity" limited terms of address? When space and place are included in an ethics, how might obligations and responsibilities begin to involve terrain? "Geosophical" thinking is one of the most stimulating directions suggested by Hejinian's poetic of worldly appearances and encounters.¹⁶ Her writings about happenstance and context suggest exciting ways of imagining being that challenge the centrality of human subjectivity in conceptualising relations between worldly things.

I will close by returning to Lyn Hejinian’s most enduring and endearing wish for poetry: to discover modes of “vulnerable, inquisitive, worldly living”17 in which differences provide evidence both of shared locations and phenomenally different habitats. She remarks: “Eudaimonia is the joy one experiences in the mattering of life — in the sufficiency of its matter. It is pleasure in the fact that it matters. It is matter with history, not so much because it has a past but because it cares about a future…. As writers we care for and about the future; we make it matter.”18 The point is not to find solutions, but to make engagements with presence in light of futurity, and to scrutinise the terms of knowing while taking “pleasure in the fact that it matters.” In this, poetry might bear witness to its material time, and to the different spaces of our being-in-common, our intrinsic encounters with otherness and withiness. Oxota: A Short Russian Novel writes the hope of such inventions:

Truth is not a likeness — not of depicted sense
Crystalled, syncretist, scoped, in synthesis, blotted, novice, at
nights, mixed — I’d need in origin
I’d say in reference
What truths there are in detail have divisions into
circumstance
I’ll thank the truth
Maximum of distant light and preference for difference rather
than capaciousness
A true history will enter sleeps, each change taken partly,
wishes obliged
And a true person (shouldered, mound) should rise but not
immortalized
Expanse by mound
Truth after use
Impatience of the usefulness
It’s true to experience
Truths in actualities, truths left by practice
The truth to be as we remembered it19

A certain truth or sincerity resides in “actualities” while “not in likenesses.” Hejinian expresses a “preference for difference,” rather than the monolithic expanse of “immortalizing” stories. We “say in reference” to “detail and circumstance” — or

from the specific contexts and localities of our shared dissimilarities. These are the contingent, ethical discoveries that Lyn Hejinian desires of poetry, and affirms within her philosophies of worldly acknowledgement:

It's true to experience
Truths in actualities, truths left by practice
The truth to be as we remembered it.
Thought's Kilometre

Coda

Make your study the unregarded floor.
— Seamus Heaney, *Squarings*

Our desire to confine meaning knows itself impossible but this cannot arrest heat and wanting
Blue time continues, placement in sensual flux
We insist upon intervals that give stillness to dispersal and watch the running window as it catches the exact turn of an afternoon
To observe, letting words write us, embodied in every nerve
Space is clouding over and we fall in

A bird fossicks among toxic remnants of shell with certain density and distance buckles up beside an image of duration
What does it mean to ask if light is receding
I have never seen a rain arrive ahead of its vast sound
You talk of music that emanates first from the heart, modernly offering the word 'transcendent'
Language resurrects beauty and sites it in muscle

In sleep my fingers find chromatic scales on close and ordinary frets, timing your neck and spine
Objects scatter our vision
Between cells we encounter pleasure, unafraid of knowledge while demanding its defection
They had been speaking of public works when a book flew across the room, knocking petals to the drifting floor
This doesn't make sense he apologised
As a displaced eight-year-old I began to navigate the corridors at night, following council heating pipes to a yellow sink in a narrow room where I would wake myself by switching on an electric light
I had been delivered into total consciousness, even in dreams
I memorised space: steps clocked along fences, red door before the crossing, coils of skin hooked at a sleetly ledge
No other side, a cemetery disordered over walls
That came later with luminous shock

Witness and designation are appalled
Death takes a newly just position, art realigns itself with love
On the close heel of a century the television war transforms into a supernet spectacle of Cultural Facts available to online subscribers
Baffled again by taboo
People reach for description

Language and its limits do not mean our world, no more than rivers only mean their names
Fortune spilling in links
A wanted tide empties into alphabets and moves on, filling and refilling, comfortably elusive
Games were different as they happened after pallid sun had set upon the early afternoon, leaving us to recreate dailiness from memory, starred by night and impossible to verify
We learn to trust our inky borders
Questions in report
Archaeologies of a quiet real
A line must tell a story moving sideways, grasping for a second at
    a second, a lyrical unfolding of attachment and romance
An anchor falling first across the page then down
Balancing the gap

Accepting a part in the carnival I notice a purple portrait fixed to
    one wall of a schoolhouse where we rehearse near casements
    of gloss enamel
I walk from the room and meet a man who carries two bins
He is hurrying to leave before dusk
The ghosts have already started he says, and motions quickly to
    a low table and chairs
The chairs are moving out from the table and back in

Time without narration revolves and tells itself
Loose at a fringe collecting incidents
Captivities made gentle or surreal as sea
The human body becomes momentarily and actually illegal
Responses hang as unquiet banners in doorways, absurdly
    national
Descriptively
Eloquent bones
A dream of broken detail
Radio announcers conjoin ‘fresh bombs’ and early snow over
      rubble, the deepening fall
Urban sentiment and laptop letters, my sweetest sweetest starlight

Each clear and sudden drop is itself
Perception coheres in scrawls, great mediation, a bridging construct
      of clouds, the height of a storm passing to leave an echo in
      substance here without wording
Ideas in form, restless as a sky
Longing without solution
Ever situated

He disappears
I leave the building alone and turn to see a ghost that follows
      throwing empty shells out the door
As each shell hits the ground it becomes a wild bird, an owl with
      lettered markings, small falcons whose wings row beside rust
      underbellies
I am sitting on a wooden bench holding two china bowls the first
      with floral patterns the second in fifties pink a cup with roses
      car lights perhaps a person, no arrival
Bird upon bird melting
Footsteps sound endlessly outside the window
They could be a lapping dog
Something clings to consciousness, departs and then persists
    forgotten and loose so that awareness is a nervous imprint
    of partial knowing
The window sounding endlessly
A body roping in the skipping night

Morning repairs continuity
Sense at every aperture and light
Independent throats turn in upper gables
Bottles tumble and clink beyond the gutter where a single tree,
    generous harbour, numbers a resilient sky
Strewn and touching in succession

To begin again at this desk of cuts and lines, the way light appears
    to expand walls, joining the roof to sounds of stapling and
    sawing from next door’s theatre
Or again with inconsolable want, response disintegrating to reform
    in place, bright looping branches or the leaking room
Nina Iskrenko wrote: the world tumbles and is caught
In consciousness a blazing future is predicted
A koel, the vertical air, a series of summers
At the edge of a globe we risk mindful care
Poetry sparking thought
Stories step up to receive guests, to ask about power drawing
inconclusive ends, marking slow time
A white poem a blue poem a landscape poem
History stations us, our real regard for presence accepted in
tomorrow’s tongue

Every change is a boundary
Made whole as a sign
‘Roots and leaves and rain’ find their difference in repetition
though each is irreplaceable
Direct in lust and words, lips give form to skin
Hope resting with invention

*Make your study the unregarded floor*
Seamus Heaney, Part ii of “Lightenings” in “Squarings,” *Seeing Things*
(London: Faber and Faber, 1991) 56.

*It sounds as though the world tumbles, and I catch it*
Nina Iskrenko, “We Are The Children of Russia’s Dull Years,” trans. Patrick Henry
and John High, *Crossing Centuries: The New Generation in Russian Poetry*,

*Roots or leaves or rain*
Judith Wright, “The Harp and the King,” *Australian Poets: Selected Judith Wright*
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for Lyn Hejinian
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356


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